

A Proper 20
18 September 2011 St Michael's Studio City
RCL Jonah 3.10-4.11

Jonah

"Brimstonnnnnnnne! Fire and brimstone. Sulfur and brimstone. Volcanic ash and hydrogen sulfide. Lightning and thunder. Tempest. Earthquake, fire, and flood. That's what I want. That's what they deserve, those miserable sinners. They're not worthy of mercy they're so sinful. They don't believe in God, they ignore right and good, they're gluttons and drunkards, they lie, cheat and steal. Blow the beggars off the face of the earth. That's what they deserve. [pause]...

What duya mean? What do you mean, you're going to forgive them? What do you mean, you're going to be merciful. Dagnabbit, I knew it, I just purely plain knew it. I knew you wouldn't blow 'em away. I knew you'd be kind. Why did you send me all across that god-forsaken desert, just so You can show mercy on them. I won't have it, you hear? I won't have it. I'm outta here. It's all Your show now."

So we might paraphrase what Jonah says to God.

I love the book of *Jonah*. I love the book of *Jonah*, because it is so miserably misunderstood in the Christian community. I love the book of *Jonah* because, Jesus-like, it turns everything upside down. I love the book of *Jonah* because its main message – not the survival of a man in a whale – its main message is God's mercy and love shown forth in a startling fashion. I love the book of *Jonah* because the main character is so lovable. I'm not talking Jonah the prophet here – he's sullen, bigoted, narrow, and repellant. I'm talking God here; the main character of the book of *Jonah* is God, and He is marvelously full of mercy and love. I love the book of *Jonah* because it has the shortest, most powerful sermon in history: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's it – that's Jonah's sermon to the city of Nineveh. And they all believed and repented from the king on high to the pig in the sty – they all repented, sat in the mud in sackcloth, and waited for God. Lord, I wish I could preach like that! I love the book of *Jonah* because its cautionary message to those who belong to God is every bit as true now as it was then.

I love the book of *Jonah* because Jesus seemed to love it; He refers to the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12.38-42; Luke 11.28-32). Matthew reports Jesus alluding to Jonah's three days and three nights in the darkness of the fish's belly and His own three days and three nights in the darkness of the tomb. Luke omits this reference and both Luke and Matthew report what Jesus probably really meant. Luke writes it this way: "The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!" The people of Jesus' generation do not repent, so they will be condemned. The One greater than Jonah is present to *us*; what will be our response?

The book of *Jonah* is an elegantly composed short story that illustrates the mercy and power and love of God. It did not historically happen, but its truth is just as strong as if it had. It is an Old Testament parable. I hope you are relieved that you don't have to defend the historicity of a man living for three days inside a whale. That's an incidental part of the story, though you'd think it was the main point the way we use the story in Sunday School and other places – over and over again.

The book of *Jonah* consists of two parts, joined by the same theme, and the same two main characters, God and Jonah. In chapters one and two, God commands Jonah to preach repentance to the *pagan* city of Nineveh. Jonah refuses and takes ship in the nearest opposite direction. God causes a storm to which Jonah pays no attention and goes to sleep. The *pagan* sailors pray to their gods for mercy to no avail; Jonah does not pray at all. When the sailors finger Jonah as the problem, Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea and they will be safe. The *pagan* sailors don't want to do that and try to get to land without killing him, but the ship is still in danger. Now listen to the scripture: "Then [the *pagan* sailors] cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (*Jonah 1.14-17*)

Did you catch what is going on here? The *Hebrew* prophet is still recalcitrant. The *pagan* sailors are merciful and try not to kill him. The *pagan* sailors respond to the power of Jonah's God and they pray to Jonah's God. The *pagan* sailors ask to be innocent of the death of Jonah when they throw him into the sea. *And God answers the prayer of the pagan sailors by providing a fish that keeps Jonah alive, relieving the pagan sailors of responsibility for Jonah's death.*

This anonymous author of the parable of Jonah is telling the narrow-minded, xenophobic Hebrew people of his day, who thought that God only cared about them and not the pagans, the sinful gentiles, that there is something worthwhile in these sinners that the Hebrews have missed but that God has not. God listens even to those sinners outside the upstanding church of fifth century Jewish religion.

The second part of the story, in chapters three and four, is even more powerful than the first part. Sullen Jonah treks to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria, the nation which had destroyed the ten tribes of Israel living in Samaria in earlier centuries), walks into the sinful city, says his piece, that wonderfully short sermon: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown", and, wonder of wonders, what God wants to happen happens: the sinful, *pagan* people believe God and repent. You'd think Jonah would be overjoyed. You would be wrong. Listen again to scripture: "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled... at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4.1-3)

Did you catch that? Jonah became angry at God’s mercy! He had more testosterone than I do.

Jonah leaves the city for a hilltop and sits down to watch and wait, hoping that God will relent of His mercy and destroy those sinful heathens. God causes a vine to grow miraculously quickly and shade Jonah and then just as miraculously causes it to wither and die. Jonah is incensed once more. God asks him if he is concerned about the vine. Yes, replies Jonah, walking into the divine trap. Well, says God, don’t you think you’re being a little unreasonable. You are concerned about a paltry vine, here today and gone tomorrow. Why are you angry at Me for being concerned about a great city, concerned with thousands and thousands of children and women and men and dogs and cats and hamsters and gerbils and cows and goats and parrots and ... Here the story ends abruptly. The writer has made his point: the inscrutable, unpredictable, freely offered mercy and love of God. That is the point of the book of *Jonah*. That is why I love it so much. The truly chilling detail is that the writer does not tell us how Jonah replies to God’s question. Does God’s prophet remain angry, sullen, bigoted, narrow, and repellant? We are not told.

What can we learn from the story of Jonah? We can learn not to be a Jonah. Be, instead, a *true* prophet of God, the God who in Jonah’s story showed such compassion and mercy and love. Be open to wherever God will send us in the spiritual landscape, though the trip may be arduous and confusing. Be willing to find God where at first we thought He was excluded. Be obedient to God’s commands to proclaim His love and mercy, and, of course, His chief love and mercy is Jesus Christ. Let us be expectant of good results from our what we say about God and Her Christ. Let us be brief in our proclamation, for the power is not in the length and multiplicity of our words but in God’s amazing grace. Let us be humble in our teaching, for there is always the possibility that we are being a false prophet rather than a true one. Let us open our arms even to those we deem sinners, for God would have it so, and in that openness and love we may win the repentance of those we are at odds with – or perhaps our own repentance. Be merciful and accepting, as God had mercy and accepted the people and even the animals of Nineveh. Be not afraid; speak the truth in love as God gives us the perception; have faith that God will make it possible for all of us to hear the old truths in a new way. Be moderate; it is the Anglican way. Let us be moderate in our theologizing, teaching, preaching, and living; when we go to extremes, we cannot avoid falling into error. My mentor in learning to be a priest taught me a precious truth: love your people. Let us love the people God has entrusted to our care in whatever capacity. Let us bear one another’s burdens and share one another’s joys, with acceptance and respect and love and empathy. Would God in His Christ ask any less of us?

May God bless our work and increase His harvest. In the name of Him who was and is and always will be greater than the sign of Jonah, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.