

What's Next?

Selections from the Book of Jonah NRSV. Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah...saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee...and found a ship going to Tarshish... But...such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up... [Jonah] said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down...." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging....But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days....Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God....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?...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 the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah...sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

I have an acquaintance from an online bulletin board who reported to the group that her laptop computer suddenly stopped connecting last week to her home wifi network. But it would still connect at the public library, a few blocks away. So she went there to get some urgent work done because, of course, Murphy's Law dictated that this problem would occur the week she had an extremely important presentation to make. Then her computer stopped connecting at the library and would only connect at McDonalds, several miles away. Very frustrating, but at least her Kindle would still connect to her home wifi and she

could use it to respond to emails. Until it suddenly stopped charging. So she bit the bullet and ordered both a new Kindle and a new laptop from a company that promised two-day shipping. The Kindle indeed arrived in two days – and it was broken out of the box. The laptop shipped immediately, was shipped to another state entirely that begins with the same letter as hers and ended up a thousand miles away. The company she purchased it from got involved and had the carrier ship it back to her, but it once again was mis-routed and ended up one-hundred miles away. Whereupon she decided at that point just to drive the hundred miles and pick it up. She alerted the shipping company to hold it and she got in her car and drove there, where she found – you guessed it – that the company in the meantime had once again sent it to her home address. Except she discovered that they had put the wrong state abbreviation and in the new shipping label and so her new laptop was now on its way to Mississippi instead of Michigan. At this point, she wrote, she could do nothing else but shake her head and cry, saying “What’s next? What’s next?”

All of us have had those days, those weeks, where nothing went right, where life was just one frustrating, maddening thing after another, and where we too could only mutter “what’s next, what’s next!” I also think that that must have been something like what Jonah felt like at the end of his story, for what a week he too had had: First God appears to him and tells him to make a journey to a place he didn’t want to go with a message he didn’t want to deliver. So instead, Jonah gets on a boat headed as far in the opposite direction as possible. That would have been enough for one day all by itself, but like my acquaintance with her laptop, things are far from over. Because, the story tells us, the ship runs into a monster storm, and Jonah ends up getting pitched overboard – even though those sailors really didn’t want to do it. And it’s not over yet (or this would have been the last we heard of Jonah). The story tell us that Jonah gets swallowed by a “big fish,” stays inside for a few no doubt not-very-pleasant days and then is deposited back on shore not far from where this whole thing started.

So God tries again, and tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach a message of repentance to them. This time he goes. But he's not very excited and I suspect that when he got there this was perhaps the most un-enthusiastic preaching ever. But, nonetheless, Jonah preaches his half-hearted homily and – of all things! – the people listen, pay attention, and do exactly what he says! They repent of their sins and they make amends for them. Things turn out just as God hoped they would. And now Jonah is annoyed: He tells God in a rather pouty way “I **knew** this would happen! Why did you make me go through all this?” And then he goes outside of town to sit and sulk. But his week has one final jab in store for him: all of a sudden a tree sprouts to give him shade and then, a few hours later, just as suddenly it withers and dies. And that is where the story leaves him.

But I have to confess that I'm left with a question: what is this story, this book, doing in the Bible? For while there are certainly characters in the Bible whom we admire and whom we might try to model ourselves after, Jonah is not one of them. Instead we have a cranky, cynical, pouting, self-pitying know-it-all. We have all known Jonah-types, but they are not folks who we want to be like. So what do we make of this story? Why is it in the Bible? What does it tell us about faith? What does it tell us about God? I think we can begin to answer those questions, though, if we see that in a sense, this book is actually mis-titled – because the main character of this story is not, in fact, Jonah, but God. This is a story about God and, I believe, it tells us four things about God and our relationship to God.

First of all, it shows us that you and I ignore the promptings, the lures, and the nudges of God at our own peril. Now of course you and I never seem to get those messages from God quite as directly as Jonah did. God doesn't send us an email or a text saying “Do this!” We all probably wish it were that way sometimes. At the same time, I also think that every one of us has had those deep stirrings and promptings and nudges from God about what we should be doing with our lives, what our purpose is. We are not

at peace. They nag at us. Every one of us has know people who have a little quiet sadness inside, a little quiet regret that they didn't do what they were truly being called to do and that they let other things – the to-do list, the urgencies of day-to-day life, conflict, or fear – keep them from doing what they believed that God was calling them to do. And while those in such a position will probably not get swallowed by a big fish, they will be nagged by the thought that they lived a life less purposeful than it could have been. One of Barbara's and my seminary professors once told me of one of his students that "she was doing less with more than anyone he'd ever known." But that is not something God wants for any of us! He didn't want it for Jonah, and he doesn't want it for you and me. So the first thing that the story of Jonah tells us about God is that God indeed is always trying to communicate a purpose, a call, a mission to us and that we need to do our very best to discern and then follow it.

There is a second thing that this story tells us about God: God can and will make use of even the most flawed, even the most reluctant, of witnesses to seek to accomplish God's purposes. Because think about it: What less likely character can you imagine than Jonah to be the one who causes a whole city to recognize its sins, repent, and be transformed. But this is a theme throughout the Bible: what less likely character than Peter could there be to become the head of the first church? The man who constantly misunderstood Jesus and even denied knowing him. What less likely character than David who could be both brilliant and passionate and God-inspired, but who could also commit a terrible crime against a friend? While some folks say that a good craftsman never leaves the marks of his tools on his work, we know that's false. There are always marks. And sometimes the marks on us are too much pettiness, or bitterness, or self-absorption, or cynicism, or fear, or narrowness. But the marks of God's craftsmanship are always there as well – the marks of a lure toward love, a lure towards always widening our imaginations beyond what we think we can do, a nudging towards never letting conflict get

in the way of the mission and purpose God has for us. Because the good news about God is that God doesn't need unblemished surfaces to work with – thank goodness! And even the most rough-cut – like Jonah or Peter or David, like you and like me – can become the instruments of God's transforming power and love. So, ask yourself this week: where can God use you – flawed, imperfect you – to accomplish some good thing?

A third thing the story tells us about God and about how God works through us is that sometimes the results of our actions can be surprisingly all out of proportion to our own sometimes too small and too puny hopes for the way thing will turn out. The story of Jonah reminds us is that we can't and shouldn't measure possibility only with our own sometimes too-tiny yardsticks, by our own sometimes too-puny expectations, by our own sometimes too-narrow hopes. For if we do we will surely underestimate what God can do through us. In one of my former jobs many years ago, I was in charge of the computer network in the office, and when things were going badly we had to call in the service company. And I always dreaded hearing the following words from the technician's mouth: "Oh, that should be no problem at all to fix. Probably won't even take me half an hour." Whenever I heard that phrase I knew we were in trouble, because it usually turned out that it was in fact many hours before the problem that would be no problem turned out to be fixed. Human beings, left only to their own devices, are just naturally prone to underestimate things. But the story of Jonah reminds us that that is not true and that while both every human life and every church have their problems and their challenges, when focused on God the results can be all out of proportion to what we ever expected. The story of Jonah reminds us that God can and will seek to use even small and half-hearted efforts to do great things – and how much more can God accomplish, indeed, when those efforts are focused and "fully-hearted."

There is a fourth and final truth that the story of Jonah points to about the nature of God: God doesn't want to give up on anyone. I would have given up on Jonah. I would

have found myself a more enthusiastic ambassador. I would have consigned Jonah to that part of my mind where I keep those who I think are unreliable. But if God doesn't give up on Jonah, I daresay God gives up on no one. In fact, Jonah does one thing right in this story when he describes God in this way; hear his words again. "I know," he says, "that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." That is the truth of this story, even on the lips of one such as Jonah. God indeed didn't give up on Jonah or Peter or David. God didn't give up on the possibility that Paul could be transformed with a new purpose. God didn't give up on that early church in Corinth, fractious and fighting though they were. God didn't give up on any of them and God doesn't give up on you or me either. God's love and care, God's attempt to communicate God's purpose and mission and passion that we might be transformed, never ends either. God's tenacity will not let us go. God doesn't give up on us. And so we dare not either. For too much is at stake, too many lives that don't know the gospel surround us, too many hearts that are empty are nearby, too many lives that are beaten down are right outside our doorsteps. We dare not give up either.

Those of you who read a lot of fiction know that some stories conclude, with all the plot lines nicely wrapped up and resolved – and some stories just seem to stop. The Book of Jonah is one of those stories that seems to just stop – the ending is not neatly packaged, with all the loose ends tied up. For there sits Jonah, pouting by that now-withered tree, waiting for the next shoe to drop. The book just stops; the story simply ends, it doesn't conclude. *But that is because the conclusion is for **us** to write.* Think of how much more God could accomplish through you and me if we were able to be less reluctant, if we expected more, if we tried consistently and constantly to measure things by God's possibilities instead of our worries or our failings. Think of what God could do with us, in our world, if we heeded that call. So, as we leave Jonah outside of that unexpectedly transformed city, let us each ourselves: what Nineveh are we being called

to? What word of hope are we being challenged to share? I hope and trust and pray that you and I will continue to find out, continue to listen to God's nudges and lures and promptings, continue to be excited and amazed and enthusiastic about what God can and will do through us, even us.¹

¹I know that when I was in seminary I read a sermon about Jonah that made use of some of the organization and motifs in this sermon. I wish I could remember it so as to give a more appropriate citation! But in any case I am appreciative to that preacher for some of the genesis of this sermon.