



Jonah and the Whale



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

August 11, 2019
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio recording of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019-08-11-AAC.mp3>.

Jonah and the Whale

Jonah 1:1-3:10

Psalm 62 Mark 1:14-20

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell
Grace Episcopal Church
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 11, 2019

The book of Jonah is one of those stories from the Hebrew Bible that easily translates to a child's tale. After all, it includes a journey narrative, an anthropomorphic deity, a raging stormy sea complete with superstitious sailors, and of course, a great fish which devours the hero only to "spew" him back up safely on dry land. All of these pieces make the storyline engaging and contribute to the association of this tale with Sunday School lore. The real message of Jonah, though, is more complex. The story is much more than a whale tale. In fact, the book of Jonah never mentions the word "whale. It does mention "fish" a total of only 4 times. "God" is mentioned 14 times; and "Lord," 21 times. At the heart of this story is God. And the story itself is designed to stretch our understanding of God and God's mercy.

In order to understand the depth of this tale, it is helpful to take a closer look at the narrative. Our story begins with God instructing Jonah "to go to Nineveh... and cry out against it." This command, in and of itself, is loaded. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah as a vassal for almost one hundred years. Assyria was an enemy and more than that; it was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fortunes. This is the place that Jonah is commissioned by God to go and prophesy to. It's hard to imagine a worse proposition! Jonah is told to go into the citadel of the oppressor and announce God's judgment.

But Jonah is no Peter, Andrew, James, or even John. He doesn't leave what he's doing and immediately follow God's call. Actually, he jumps on the first boat going in the opposite direction and he hides in the hold of the ship, hoping that somehow God won't notice. It's as if Peter, Andrew, James, and John, upon encountering Jesus in our Gospel narrative, jumped into their fishing boats and rowed like madmen for the opposite shore, putting as much distance between Jesus and themselves as they could.

Jonah did just that. He tried to get as far away from the Lord, and the Lord's bizarre instructions, as he could. Go to Nineveh – the capital of the Assyrian Empire, that destroyer of Israel, that brutal occupying force? It was unthinkable.

So Jonah ran away, but God sent a storm. The sailors on the ship with Jonah reluctantly threw Jonah overboard, superstitiously believing it would appease God. And it appeared to have worked because the sea calmed down immediately. Then God appointed a big fish to swallow Jonah.

Jonah, totally immersed in sea water and fish blubber, prayed. The sea in the ancient Near East, was a symbol of chaos, danger, and wildness. But even in the heart of the seas, God hears Jonah's prayer. God spoke to the great fish, and the fish vomited Jonah out onto dry land.

Then, "the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, "Get up and go to Nineveh." And, this time, still covered in sea water and fish vomit, Jonah obeyed. He walked into the city and warned that their destruction was near. The people's response was electric. Immediately, the people of Nineveh believed Jonah. They declared a fast, cried out their repentance to God, and God changed God's mind about the punishment, deciding against it.

A fascinating tale! For tale it is. If Jonah is a historical figure, the telling of his story is not for historical purposes. The story of Jonah is a moral tale, much like Aesop's fables, and is designed to teach us something about God and our relationship with God.

When hearing the story of Jonah, it's human nature to put ourselves in Jonah's shoes. We reflect on how we have responded to God's call, or how we might respond were we in Jonah's position. Studying scripture compels us to personal application, but I want to focus our attention on a different question. Not what does the book of Jonah teach us about us, but what does the book of Jonah teach us about God?

My first takeaway is that, God calls us to surprising, even ridiculous things. To Jonah, the call to travel to and prophesy in Ninevah was outlandish. Why would God care about the people of a city that subdued, murdered, and oppressed God's chosen people? And yet, that is exactly what God did. God didn't seek Jonah's approval, rather God invited and instructed Jonah to be a part of God's work, to partner with God in doing a new thing.

My second takeaway is that, God journeys with us, even when we are stubborn and rebellious. Jonah clearly didn't want to do God's will in this specific situation. He literally went in the opposite direction of the place God called him to. Jonah described himself to the sailors as, "fleeing from the presence of the Lord." In short, he rebelled against God, he turned from God. And yet, God never turned from Jonah. God journeyed with Jonah, speaking to him, providing for him, saving him, all because of God's great love for him.

Which brings me to my final point, God's love is extraordinary. God acts with compassion and mercy to both Jonah, as a representative of the Hebrew people, and to the people of Ninevah. Despite what Jonah thinks, despite what the two peoples think of one another, or have done to one another; where there is repentance, God's mercy is there. Mercy is pure gift and grace and Jonah's story reminds us that we do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish. God will be merciful because mercy is at the very heart of God's extraordinary love; it is at the core of God's being.

Jonah's story reminds us that God is God and God does not act as humans act. As the book of Isaiah puts it, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is. 55:8). God is full of surprises. God is always with us. God is in all things and loves all things, with a love that is incomprehensible. And God calls us to partner with God in this improbable and incredible work of compassionate love – back in Jonah's time, and even more today, in our time.

For our time that is riddled with division. We are part of a culture that wakes up to news of mass shootings, raids against immigrants, and racist tweets. Someone here at church reminded me a few weeks back that our nation, our people, are not only divided, but we are fractured and broken. It is into the very middle of this brokenness that God calls all of us, like Jonah, to partner with God in doing a new thing. We are called to actively share God's mercy, that we like Jonah have received, with others, whether we like them or not, whether we disagree with them or not, whether they look, think, love, express themselves like us, vote like us, or not. We are called, like Jonah, to be God's agents – to bring a deeper awareness of God's presence into our world.

If the story of Jonah tells us nothing else, it tells us that God calls us to difficult work. And in that work, God is with us, behind and before us, guiding us, stretching us and growing us in God's grace and love. Amen.