

Jonah 3:1, 5-10; Ps 65.5-12; 1 cor 7.29-31, Mark 1.14-20 - Jervis

Jonah is a Jew whose story is set during the period of the great Assyrian Empire – an empire that lasted from the sixth to the fourth century before the common era. The story is only four chapters long. The editors of the Bible placed it among the twelve prophetic books that close out the first testament.

The story opens with “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah;” The same words that begin the reading we heard today from chapter three.

If you are familiar with stories of other prophets, that seems *de rigueur*. A prophet is someone to whom the word of the lord comes. God speaks, and the one who becomes a prophet hears.

In Jonah’s case, God commands him to go at once to Nineveh – the capital of the Assyrian Empire and cry out against it – telling the people of Nineveh that God has seen their wickedness. This might have made a certain sort of sense to Jonah: the Assyrians had been brutal to the Jews and Jonah’s people knew that they were corrupt and sadistic and evil.

But as other Biblical stories of prophets show, a prophet was usually asked by God to speak to his *own* people.

What is strange about God’s commission to Jonah is that God tells Jonah not to his own people, the Hebrews – what prophets usually did – but to the oppressors of the Jews – the Assyrians.

All of this is told to the reader in the first two verses of the first chapter. By the third verse the writer says: ‘but Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.’ Tarshish was a city in the western Mediterranean on the outer edge of the then known world. Clearly, Jonah didn’t like the word that had come to him.

By now in the story we know that though Jonah can’t make sense of God’s word, neither can he deny that he heard it; so, Jonah determines that his best strategy is to run away.

Throughout the book of Jonah, Jonah and God have a difference of opinion over what God should be and should do. The tension in the story is not over whether Jonah actually hears God’s word, or whether he hears it rightly; and it is not over whether Jonah can in fact run away from God’s – he comes to understand that even in the depths and darkness of the ocean God is there.

The tension in the story is over whether God should care about the Assyrians – Israel’s oppressors; and the tension is about what a Jew like Jonah should do if in fact the God of Israel does care for the people who are the Jews’ enemies.

The story has two main characters – God and Jonah. It begins with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh and declare to the Ninevites that God has seen their wickedness. It continues with Jonah trying to run away from God, fleeing to the coast and boarding a ship heading for Tarshish, thinking that by getting out of Israel he might be able to escape God’s demands. But, no such luck.

God creates an immense storm which threatens to destroy the ship. The ship’s crew are not Jews and they start crying out to their gods and hurling the cargo overboard.

Meanwhile, Jonah is asleep down below. The ship’s officer finds him and says – how can you be sleeping; come and help us call on divine help. We are calling for help from our gods; call on yours.

Up above, the sailors are casting lots to see who on board is to blame for the life-threatening storm. And the lot falls on Jonah. They come to Jonah and point a finger at him: you are the cause of this catastrophe; where are you from, what people are you from?

Jonah tells them that he is a Hebrew and that he worships the Lord, the God of heaven – who made the sea and the dry land.

And the men respond: what have you done? What should we do with you so that the storm will stop?

Jonah says ‘pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the storm will stop. I know that it is my fault that the storm is raging.’

Jonah recognizes that he can’t run away from God. So, he hopes that he can just die – fade into death’s oblivion. Get away from this demanding, strange, crazy God of his people – this God who wants him to go the centre of the cruel Assyrian empire.

Just throw me into the sea he says to the sailors – better for you and better for me.

Most of us know the story. The sailors are reluctant because they don't want to offend Jonah's God who seems to be exactly what Jonah described – the Lord who made the sea and the dry land. They think about trying to make it to land to dump Jonah off there, but the storm is too strong. So, they pray to Jonah's God, asking that the Lord won't blame them for innocent blood, and then they throw Jonah into the raging sea. Immediately the sea is still, and the writer says, "the men worshipped the Lord with a profound reverence and made sacrifices to the Lord."

Meanwhile, Jonah, who thought he might have found a way to escape the Lord the sailors have just found; who hoped that by drowning, the craziness would be over - instead, Jonah gets swallowed by a great fish. A fish that the Lord who made the sea and the dry land had ready and waiting for him when he was thrown overboard.

In the belly of the fish Jonah starts talking to God. Jonah realizes that he wants to live; and that if the Lord would deliver him, he will spend his life worshipping God.

At this point, the Lord speaks to the fish and it vomits Jonah onto the dry land.

That is the background to the portion of the story that we hear today from chapter 3. Today's reading begins with a repeat of the opening of the story: the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh, that great city and declare God's word. This time Jonah does exactly what the Lord commands.

Jonah has come to see the impossibility of running away from God or ignoring God's word. Jonah has repented, turned away from his sense of autonomy and independence from God. He has come to see the uselessness of that. He might as well do what God asks because God is going to get God's way; and, besides, he wants to live, and the God who made the sea and the dry land holds life in her hands.

So, Jonah walks into the great and mighty city of Nineveh – the headquarters of the oppressors of the Jews – and declares that Nineveh only has 40 days until it will be destroyed unless the people stop their evil actions and turn to his God.

And, Jonah's declaration is met with a stunning response. The people and the king and his officials believe Jonah. And God decides that because the people of Nineveh have heeded Jonah's warning, God will spare them.

We might think that the next chapter, the closing chapter, would show Jonah praising and worshipping God; growing into a peaceful, blessed old age. But instead, the fourth and last chapter of Jonah begins: “Jonah thought this was utterly wrong and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘Come on, Lord! Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in Israel? This is why I fled to Tarshish! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, full of faithful love and not willing to destroy. You might as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.’”

Jonah is furious with God - and he wants out; he wants to die. He thought that if he finally did obey God and go into Nineveh that God would reveal Godself to the despicable Assyrians by destroying them, and that then he could contentedly worship God for the rest of his life.

But instead Jonah finds out that God is a merciful and compassionate God, full of love and not willing to destroy. Well, enough of that!

Jonah feels used and betrayed by God. He was willing to risk his life for God so that God could show God to be who Jonah thought God was, a God worthy of worship: a God of judgement and righteousness; the God of Israel, of the chosen people. His God. Instead, God acts as if God is everybody’s God; and cares even for the people who have hurt and abused the Jews. Jonah sees that God has turned his life upside down; – for nothing.

What is the point of Jonah’s bravery and obedience? If God already loves everyone, what is the point of being a prophet, of telling people about God? Why bother? God already loves them, they are already saved – God is not going to destroy them.

The story ends without the tension between God and Jonah being resolved. The last word is God’s. God says “Can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

These words end the story.

You can almost hear Jonah shouting from the wings. So, then, God of Israel – the one who created heaven and earth – what was all that about? If you were going to save Israel’s enemies anyway, what did you need me for? Why did you put me through so much trouble? Why did you turn my life upside down?

Sure, you got the evil Ninevites to recognize you and to repent of their evil deeds – but you didn't punish them, did you? There was no consequence for their corruption; and, about recognizing you as the Lord – well, you let them live even though they have been ruthlessly cruel to your own chosen people.

And, look at what you put me through in order to do so little. What is this about? And, God, I suspect that even if the Ninevites had not repented you who are so gracious, so merciful, so slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, so ready to forego punishment – that you would not have destroyed them anyway. Your weakness has betrayed me.

The book of Jonah closes with unresolved tension between what Jonah wants God to be and how Jonah wants God to act; and who God reveals Godself to be and how God chooses to act.

Jonah wants a God worth his worship and his efforts – a strong-handed, righteous-minded defender of a particular people – his people; a God who responds appropriately to lack of knowledge of Godself and to evil deeds – responds with vengeance and punishment.

But instead, Jonah hears God saying these weak words: “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand person who do not know their right hand from left, and also many animals?”

This is the season of Epiphany in the church year: a season when our scripture readings focus on being disciples, evangelizing, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. The focus in the season of Epiphany is on inviting Christians to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

If we choose to accept that invitation, Jonah's story might nudge us to ask ourselves what news we are to spread. And what it might mean for *our* lives if we do share our faith.

Jonah, translated into a Christian context, challenges us to ask: does spreading the gospel means telling people that they are facing punishment unless they know Jesus Christ?

As we all know, that is a prevalent form of evangelism. Threaten hell in order to get people to pay attention and to accept Jesus as Lord.

Or, do we think that evangelism means what Jonah couldn't wrap his mind around: the news that God wants to be known because God – who made all there is, loves all there is; and God wants humanity – all of humanity – to see that cruelty and corruption and violence only weaken us.

Is the core of the evangelical message a message energized by fear of punishment, or by wonder at the stunning acceptance of God, and at God's desire to be known and to heal humanity's delusional draw to evil.

Today our reading from the gospel of Mark is a classic Epiphany reading featuring Jesus' call of the first disciples. Jesus' word to them is presented as being impressively authoritative. Simon and Andrew and James and John seem unable to resist or escape Jesus' word. Jesus says, 'follow me' – literally 'get behind me' - and immediately these pairs of brothers do.

Like Jonah, they are going to be thrown into deep waters. They are going to be confused and bewildered and angry at the one who called them. Especially when after a period of following him he tells them that yes, he is Israel's Messiah, but that they are not to tell anyone AND that he is going to be killed and spend three days in the depths of death; then rise again.

At the midpoint of Mark's gospel; when Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus' response is to tell his disciples not to tell anyone and that he is going to be killed and then rise again, things change with the disciples. Until this point in Mark's gospel the disciples have come off as obedient wonderworking heroes. But then Peter responds to Jesus's words about keeping silent and about his impending death and resurrection – responds by rebuking Jesus.

This is not the portfolio of a Messiah; this is not how God works. And then Jesus rebukes Peter – 'get behind me Satan'. As the gospel story unfolds, the disciples increasingly disappoint Jesus, until the tragic scene when Peter denies Jesus three times just before the crucifixion.

Though Mark's gospel doesn't describe it, church history reveals that it is only after Peter experienced Christ' death and resurrection that he becomes an effective disciple, and that he is free to openly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

As the gospel writers tell it, Jonah is the prophet that Jesus invokes by name. Jesus doesn't explicitly highlight the parallels between his story and Jonah's, but clearly there are significant ones. Most obviously, the centerpiece of both stories – three days in the depths and then escape. Jonah being vomited up by the great fish; and Jesus rising from among the dead ones.

Jesus calls his disciples to walk behind him. And, as post-resurrection disciples came to see early on, that means walking into his death. Paul puts it that believers in Jesus are baptized into his death; and prays that he might be conformed to Jesus' death.

If we choose to say yes to the church's encouragement to share our faith we will need to decide what it is we are sharing; and be prepared to have our own lives changed. Do we offer a message wrapped in a threat, or a message enveloped in profoundly accepting love.

And, if we do decide to share our faith, we will find that the word about Jesus Christ doesn't just have potential to change others, it will change us. Like Jonah, like Jesus, like Jesus' first disciples, and like all faithful disciples since, spreading the gospel will take us to the depths, will require us to participate in Jesus' death.

But, our faith is that the life that matters and the life that lasts is only available by means of and through Jesus' death.

Of course, the claim that Christ's death creates true life is a fish story to most people. And perhaps to some of you it is hard to fathom. But, for those of us who want to trust it, God calls us into the heart of the gospel; into the depths of death and the light of the resurrection.

As we get behind Jesus, we will come to be in awe of – even worship - the beautiful weakness of God; in awe of the quality of life that God gives by means of that weakness; and we may well be willing to have our lives turned upside down for the sake of sharing God's life with others - in word and in deed.