

“Turning to God”

Jonah 3:1-10 Mark 1:14-20

Whales make a BIG story. Just consider how fascinated the people of London and the world have been by the wayward whale seen this weekend. It was first spotted by Tom Howard-Vyne, who saw it swim under Westminster Bridge. He said, “I saw it blow. It sparkled in the air. It was an amazing sight!” London police had to close a nearby bridge as crowds swelled to watch the whale. The RSPCA estimates 23 million people watched worldwide. A heroic effort was made to save the whale but all to no avail, as it died at 7 p.m. Saturday while being transported back toward the ocean on a barge.

The book of Jonah is a whale of a tale, not just a tale about a whale!

I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist that little play on words! So called biblical literalists love to argue that Jonah really was swallowed by a whale and then deposited on the shore to go preach in Nineveh. Somehow they seem to think that for this story to be true it has to be factually true in every detail. The story of Jonah is a whale of a tale in the same way that the parable of the Prodigal Son is a whale of a tale. In fact both stories are about the same incredible thing, the whale size grace of God, and human beings minnow sized understanding and acceptance of that grace. They are both about God’s relentless attempt to turn us around, cause us to repent, to not only accept God’s whale sized grace for ourselves but to share that whale sized grace with the world, even with those we despise.

The book of Jonah begins a vision of judgment against “that great city Nineveh.” Now it is not surprising that God would judge people. In the Hebrew Scriptures this happens all the time. What is surprising here is that

the people being judged are not even part of the “Chosen People.” They aren’t Jewish! In fact, not only are they NOT Jewish, they are the Jews mortal enemies! Imagine this, imagine that during the Cold War between the United States and the Evil Empire, the USSR, that Rev. Billy Graham had received a vision to go to Moscow, that great city, to proclaim God’s judgment against that people. If you can do this you have a feel for the book of Jonah.

So far so good, our enemies are about to get their comeuppance! Yea God! Go get them! We love the vengeful God, especially when we have “enemies,” or even people we dislike or even disagree with. We love it when other people’s sins are being judged. Perhaps, it makes us feel more righteous. Jesus knew this too, advising us to “take the log out of our own eyes, before we take the speck out of our neighbor’s eye.”

Jonah fully reveals his attitude, when after Nineveh repents and God relents, Jonah says in 4:1, **“O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish 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.”** When it comes to dealing with these gentile enemies Jonah doesn’t want a merciful God who judges but then changes his mind when people humble themselves and ask for forgiveness.

But let’s not get too far ahead of our story. Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches a message of utter doom for the city, **“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** (3:4b) No, ifs, ands, or buts are proclaimed. No mention is made of the efficacy of repentance and the possibility that God will change his mind. It is straight out message of final judgment. It is essentially a death sentence, with no possibility of appeal.

Surprisingly, it is not the man of God but the King of the gentile sinners who posits the possibility of a God of mercy and grace! The king humbles himself; he repents, covering himself in sackcloth and ashes. This is an amazing thing! Kings and presidents do not often humble themselves and repent!

With his personal repentance already underway the king sends out a proclamation to all the people that the whole city, from the lowliest cat or dog or song bird to the highest noble and every one and everything in between shall engage in a fast of repentance! **“They shall not feed nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”** Walt Brueggemann in the Lectionary Commentary based on Year B says, *“The king of Nineveh entertains the daring theological option that human action can impinge on God and cause God to alter the terrible decree, that God has freedom to act in an alternative way. . . Yahweh is not a closed principle of fate, uncaring tyrant, or an automaton, but a live subject who can and will engage in freedom as Yahweh’s partner in judgment (Nineveh) repents and changes.”*

As we move into the closing section of the sermon let’s take a moment and consider the sins of Nineveh. The king calls on the people to **“turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”** The Hebrew word for “violence” here is “hamas.” Generally, Jewish people used this word to refer to the kind of abusive exploitation that the strong inflict on the weak. In a dog eat dog world the strong usually do all they can to ensure they do the eating and are not eaten! The whole system is rigged

to ensure their survival and to produce the greatest possible benefit for them. We all know this don't we. Just consider the recent Jack Abramhoff lobbying scandal in Washington!

The king of the gentile sinners, not the prophet of God, calls for the creation for the creation of a community of grace and mercy, a community of justice, where all, both weak and strong, can enjoy the benefits of shalom. He also rightly intuits that such a community of grace can only be created by "turning" away from our sins.

The Bible declares that creating such a community of grace will require, not just a one time act of turning, repentance, but an ongoing turning, a constant turning toward a God who judges us, but whose judgment is ever ready to give way to mercy and grace.

I love the story the Dr. Richard Scheef, my old Pauline professor at Eden Seminary, use to tell. I live in dread of having someone next to me on a plane ask me what I do for a living. I often feel like telling them I sell encyclopedias! It saves a lot of grief. Dick Scheef had this happen to him while on a plane. The person asked him what he did for a living and when he told him that he was a seminary professor the person next to him cheerfully said, "Then you must be born again!!!" Dick Scheef didn't bat an eye, he said, "Indeed yes, many times!" In a way there is not such thing as "being a Christian," the best we can do is constantly try to be a Christian. We never fully arrive. It is a journey that requires constant turning and returning to God.

By the end of the story everyone has repented, everyone has turned towards a gracious God, everyone EXCEPT Jonah, the prophet of God! This is particularly amazing because not only has God been merciful to Nineveh, but God has been exceedingly patient and merciful towards Jonah

and his own recalcitrant sinfulness. When Job runs away the first time, God judges him but sends a whale to save him. God even offers Jonah an object lesson, causing a small tree to grow and give him shade, while he waited to see what God would do to Nineveh. God then killed the tree and Jonah starts whining about the tree. Of course, what he is really whining about is the loss of shade! God offers one final lesson in compassion, **“You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who did not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals.” (4:10-11)**

At the conference Lenten/Easter workshop for pastors this week Dr. Clint McCann introduced the group to the thoughts of a modern theologian, Bono, from the U2, the Irish rock group. He sings a song called “Grace” that contains the words, *“Grace, she takes the blame, she covers the shame, removes the stain, it could be her name. Grace, it’s the name for a girl, It’s also a thought that changed the world and when she walks on the street, You can hear the strings, Grace finds goodness in everything. . . . What once was hurt, What once was friction, What left a mark, No longer stings, Because Grace makes beauty, Out of ugly things.”* Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

In an interview Bono said, “So much of religion teaches karma [you reap what you sow] [you get what you deserve]. Even Christianity which is suppose to be about grace often turns redemption into good manners. I just can’t get over grace. It’s so hard to find!” Amen to that!

Bono seeks to live out his experience of grace by working to address the Aids crisis in Africa and debt relief for poor nations. He spends

considerable time, talent and treasure working with anyone he can find to try and solve these tragedies that affect millions of God's children.

May we like the Ninevites, turn away from our sins and work at creating a community of grace and may we extend that grace to others whenever we have the chance. We seek to serve a God that cares for all people, for every living thing. The God we seek to serve is a God of compassion. Amen.