

CREATED ANEW: Being the Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/created-anew-being-the-epiphany/

I.

None of us wish to be known for our worst moment. Buffalo Bills kicker Tyler Bass doesn't want to be known for last Sunday's wide-right field goal attempt in a playoff game against the Kansas City Chiefs. There is more to the story of Tyler Bass than one playoff game.

The disciple, Thomas, would be rightly upset that his nickname for all time is Doubting Thomas because he struggled to believe Jesus was resurrected from the dead until he could see and feel the wounds of the crucifixion himself. There are more scriptures about Thomas expressing a believing heart than a doubting one, but that isn't what we remember. There is more to the story of Thomas than a moment of doubt.

When one mentions the story of Jonah, whether in or outside of believing circles, we nearly all think of one thing: "the Whale." The story about a large fish swallowing Jonah is mentioned in only three lines in all four chapters of Jonah. It is like .006% of the story. But I get it. It's a whopper of a fish story. Perhaps Jonah's tale is much more than a whale tale.

II.

For those not familiar with the story of Jonah or those who may have forgotten, the Lord tells a prophet named Jonah to go to a large city called Nineveh. He is to preach to the people there, warning them that their sinful behavior is known to God, and they are to repent or turn from their sinful ways.

But Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. And with good reason. Nineveh was the capital of the ruthless, cold-blooded Assyrian empire, an empire that had violently terrorized the Israelites. These were the Israelites' sworn enemies, Jonah's sworn enemy.

So, instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah runs from God in the opposite direction via a boat. Jonah soon learns it isn't easy to hide from God when a vicious storm comes upon the sea and threatens to break up the ship. To save the ship and sailors aboard, Jonah fesses up to what he has done and tells them the only way to calm the storm is to toss Jonah into the sea. The sailors, looking for other options and finding none, reluctantly tossed Jonah overboard into the sea, begging God for forgiveness. The storm ceased, the sea calmed, and a big fish swallowed Jonah.

With three days and three nights to think long and hard about his choices, Jonah repents and prays from the darkened belly of a smelly fish. And then, the fish vomits him onto dry land. Covered in muck and desperate need of a shower, Jonah hears from the Lord again with the same message as before – Go on, now. Go to Nineveh and tell them what I told you to say to

them. Having been given a second chance, Jonah reluctantly agrees to announce a second chance to the people of Nineveh.

Like a teenager being forced to do his chores, Jonah stomps his way into the city and delivers the shortest sermon ever. Eight words in our translation, five in the original Hebrew – “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” v.4 That is all he says. (Don’t get any ideas about me preaching eight-word sermons.)

After thinking he could run away from God, tracked down by a storm, swallowed by a fish, puked up on dry ground, and gifted with a second chance, you’d think Jonah would have lots to say. You would think he would be bursting at the seams to tell the people of Nineveh about the grace that found a wretch like him and saved him. About grace that is greater than all our sin. About how God is steadfast in mercy and abounding in love.¹

Yet, when he opens his mouth to say it, all that comes out is, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” After receiving grace upon grace, chance after chance, Jonah obeyed God, went to Nineveh, and did as little as he could possibly get away with.

To Jonah’s surprise and great disapproval, his sermon works. The people of Nineveh believe in this foreign God; they fast, and they repent. They turn from their sinful ways – even the King of Nineveh himself, saying, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish.” (v.9)

God did change God’s mind. “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.” (v. 10)

And everyone lived happily ever after. The end.

But that isn’t the end There is one more chapter to this narrative that tells the rest of the story and reveals perhaps the central point of the story.

III.

Jonah is angry at the Lord for changing his mind and admits this is why he never wanted to do what the Lord asked to begin with, saying in chapter 4, verse 2, “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 and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.”

Second-chance Jonah, with the stench of the fish’s belly still on him, is angry God has granted a second chance to his enemies. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. What is a chorus of praise found repeatedly in the Psalms is the very thing Jonah complains about. We say thank God this is who God is until

God is that way with those we don't believe deserve it. But we don't get to receive second chances from God and rebuke second chances for our enemies.

After his rant, verse 5 begins, "Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 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?" (Jonah 4:5-11)

This is the ending of the story of Jonah. It is open-ended, leaving the listener to answer for themselves. Should God not be concerned with Nineveh? Should God not be concerned about our enemies, the ones who hurt us, the ones who have oppressed us, the ones who have caused us pain?

We don't hear Jonah's reply to the Lord's question. We don't know if he had a change of heart or if he continued pouting under that withered bush. We're not supposed to. Like the big fish, Jonah's answer isn't what matters. What matters is our answer. Should God not be concerned about our enemies, the ones who hurt us, the ones who have oppressed us, the ones who have caused us pain? Should God not be who God is - gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment? Should God not be this for them just as God is for us?

IV.

We are in the season of Epiphany in the church calendar. The Greek word for epiphany means "appearance" or "manifestation." It refers to the appearance of Jesus to the world at his birth. Epiphany officially begins on January 6 as we recall the Wise Men arriving to find the Christ Child. In yet another creative twist to the Christmas story, it was pagan astrologers who were among the first visitors to the manger. Although their occupation was expressly forbidden in Jewish law, they were welcomed, and their gifts were received.

The season of Epiphany continues until Ash Wednesday as we reflect on how God continues to reveal God's self to the world and us. The season of Epiphany is about the revelation of God's presence, often to unlikely people in unlikely places, even to our enemies.

The story of Jonah is full of surprises: a surprising storm, a surprising fish, a surprising deliverance. But perhaps the most surprising are those who end up being the epiphany, the ones who reveal something of God to Jonah and us.

Attempting to flee from God, Jonah encounters foreign fishermen on the stormy seas who respect God more than Jonah does.

After God uses a fish to rescue him and Jonah begrudgingly goes to Nineveh, it is the people of Nineveh, a pagan nation, who show Jonah and us what it means to hear from God and truly grieve and turn from the ways you are bringing harm to others and yourself. They are far more grateful than Jonah for their second chance.

And, yes, even Jonah, with his reluctance and resentment, gets to be part of the epiphany as he proclaims God's message to the Ninevites, who hear, grieve their sin, and change their ways. God can still work through us, even when we struggle to extend to others the same grace God has offered us. The Ninevites are not punished or left out of God's mercy because of Jonah's judgment and condemnation. Jonah punishes himself by not allowing the wideness of God's mercy to set him free, too.

The message of Jonah seems to be that God's love and concern for the world is much broader and wider than some of us would like to think. All around us, we see a world that encourages division and demonizing. We pit people and nations against one another, assigning God's favor to one person or group over another. The story of Jonah reminds us that God refuses to be owned by any group or owned by our good behavior. This is not the heart of God. God is relational, not transactional. God is just, not fair. God is redemptive, not retaliatory. God wants to change lives and wants us to help in that process. God wants us to help in the healing of our enemies and our world. God wants us to break down the walls that divide. God wants us to be the epiphany and reveal God to our world.

V.

An old Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

"Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

"Then what is it?" the pupils demanded.

“It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”ⁱⁱ

For most of us, me included, day has not come. It is still night.

God chose to love Jonah in his sulky anger and the Ninevites who persistently violated God’s ways.

God chooses to love us, even when we rush to judgment, withhold compassion and mercy from others, and, yes, even when we bring harm to the world like the Ninevites.

In this time of Epiphany, we need continual reminders of who we are to God and one another. As God sent Jonah to Nineveh, God sent us an announcement. God sent us an announcement of not just word but of Word made flesh. God sent this embodied announcement in Jesus Christ to remind us of who we are to God and one another.ⁱⁱⁱ Compassion comes when we set aside judgment and focus on what we have in common: our God-given identity as beloved children who have discovered in Jesus that we are beloved not because of who we are or what we’ve done, but simply because we belong to God. May the light of Christ illuminate us so we might see the face of the other as our sister and brother for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-01-15/jonah-31-5-10-4/>

ⁱⁱ Found in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Frederick and Mary Anne Brussat. NY: Scribner, 1996

ⁱⁱⁱ *A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C: Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2019, 92.