

“Fishing For Faith & Freedom”
A, Pentecost 5; 10:00 am
Jonah 1-3; July 9, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

I. RUN, JONAH, RUN!!

You heard the story. What all happened with good ol’ Jo, Jo, Jonah. How he had a “close encounter” with the Big Guy, got his marching orders, and promptly turned tail and ran! In the *other* direction!

You heard it. How he headed for Tarshish (TARshish) —as *far* away from God as he could possibly get! Or, so he thought.

“Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.”

God said. But *Jonah* said, “Those Ninevites OUGHT to be ignored. And worse! Have you *noticed*, God, that Nineveh is part of Assyria? The Evil Empire? Have you *not* noticed how they been making our lives a living *something* for a long time now?!”

II. TROUBLE AT SEA

Remember from last week’s message about Noah and the flood, how storms and floods and earthquakes were absolutely thought to be proof that the gods were mad? That the people must have messed up somehow to have brought down such wrath?

Well....that’s *obviously* what’s going on here, too. There’s a terrible storm—life-threatening, in fact—and they can’t figure out why they’re in this predicament.

So—get this! The sailors—those pagans—start praying of all things!—asking the gods for help. And Jonah, our devout hero? He goes downstairs and takes a nap! The sailors also do the

logical tactic of throwing the heavy stuff overboard, and when they look around to see if Jonah is pitching in to help? Well. You got it. Napping in the basement! And not a cat nap either. It’s in the bible! “He was sound asleep.”

Well, the Captain—good guy or not—is *not* impressed!

“Jonah, wake up! Get *up* here! We need you to ring up YOUR people! Your god! Ours aren’t answering, obviously! Get on the horn, Jonah! It’s worth a crack.”

III. WHO’S TO BLAME AND WHY?

And then: what does a group of people *invariably* do when there’s trouble? They start looking for who’s to blame! Right? Of course. It’s human nature, and you know without a doubt that we humans *always* do it, don’t we?

These guys are no different. “Let’s draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who’s responsible for this disaster. ‘Cuz it’s obviously somebody on the ship, right here among us!”

Well.....I don’t have to tell you. It’s a pretty *predictable* plot: Jonah draws the short straw. Then he gets the grilling of a lifetime!

And when he identifies *his* God—“the God of Heaven who made sea and land—” (Oh. THAT God.) then they *really* want to know what horrendous thing Jonah has done to tick off THAT God!

And Jonah fesses up to the Sneak that he’s pulled. Admits that he is in fact running *away* from God ‘cuz he doesn’t want to do what God wants him to do.

IV. TROUBLE AT SEA

This leaves the guys at a bit of a loss. “We’ve got the interrogation done. The story clear. But, the *story* hasn’t done a thing to solve the #1 problem. Hello! Remember the storm?! In fact, while we’ve been standing here talking, it’s gotten

worse!”

“What are we going to do?! Or, more to the point, what are we going to do with YOU, Jonah the Hebrew?”

So, Jonah, only slightly put on the spot and in an *awkward* place, does the only right thing and offers to haul off.

¹² Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It’s all my fault. I’m the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you’ll get rid of the storm.”

But now, the guys are *basically* decent folks, and they don’t *want* to take such drastic measures. Just yet anyway. So, they row and row and they bale and bale, and they huff and they puff, and.....

The storm gets worse!

Okay, Plan B. Go ahead and throw this curiously odd guy off! Overboard. Not sure what else we can do. Desperate times call for desperate measures!

¹⁴ Then they prayed to God, “O God! Don’t let us drown because of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best.”

¹⁵ They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down.

And then, their following of protocol is confirmed when God assigns a huge fish to Jonah. That’s right. The Almighty God puts out a casting call. In case there were any big fish or whales looking for *work* that day!

V. 3 DAYS AND 3 NIGHTS!

Close curtain. Act II opens with Jonah clambered down, or probably “curled up” in the belly of the just mentioned “Big Fish.”

I bet you’re probably thinking the story is getting awfully fable-like right about now. I know, I know. People *don’t* just hang out inside a fish and live to tell about it! Three days, no less! (You know what they say about “people and fish begin to stink after 3 days!”)

But.....have *you ever been* “in the belly?” Wallowing, sliding around in the depths, unable to get your footing? Get grounded? Get a grip? Have you ever been tossed about by unseen forces; swallowed up by circumstances out of your control?

For 3 days? Or maybe 3 months, or even 3 years? What about three *decades?!*

And what do you do? What did Jonah do?

Well, Jonah prayed: from inside the fish, to boot!

He prayed:

“In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God.

He answered me.

From the belly of the grave I cried, ‘Help!’

You heard my cry.

I was in the ocean’s depths,

in a watery grave,

With ocean waves, ocean breakers

crashing over me.

And on and on he prayed, and God did hear. And Jonah *bargained* with God. He promised to do what God asked in the first place!

VI. Act III

After Intermission, as the curtain rises on Act III, God *again* speaks to Jonah:

“Up on your feet and on your way! To the big City of Nineveh. *Preach* to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer!”

And Jonah obediently programs his GPS for the Big Bad City of Nineveh, determined to follow God’s orders to a T.

And the plan goes swimmingly! They repent. God changes his mind about these people on a grand scale, and they all lived happily ever after. Hallelujah!

The curtains close and the audience erupts into *thunderous* applause! Jumping to their feet for our heroes: Jonah—the Prophet and Faithful Servant, and God—the gracious and merciful, slow to anger and swift to forgive Deity. (PAUSE)

Except.

Except there’s a Chapter 4. **Act IV**, if you will. A whole ‘nother thing. “The Rest of the Story.”

You would *think* Jonah would go *dancing* back home. Star in a Victory Parade as he’s welcomed a hero. Get his picture on the box of Wheaties, or at *least* on a deck of cards for “Go Fish!” His mission is accomplished, and was hugely successful. He might be up for a promotion!

VII. ACT IV—NOT HAPPILY EVER AFTER

But that’s *not* what happened. Not what our hero did. He. Was. Furious! **What?**! Yep. He lost his temper. He yelled at God! *Not* like a prayer this time either. “Why have you left me here in the belly, Big Guy?”

But, “Darn it, God! There you go being all merciful again! Geez! I *knew* it! He moans quite loudly—for all to hear:

“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

And God replied. “Say WHAT?! Huh?” You are angry with ME? And on what grounds, Mister? (Oh, and by the way, you really need a bath! Starting to smell like a whole lot more than fish here....)

You see, Jonah doesn’t like it, that after those evil Ninevites *listened* to him and put on sackcloth and ashes, and said they were sorry and repented of their evil ways, that God bought it! They turned down a new path, and God had compassion on them and aborted the mission to destroy and Jonah is jealous! Torked!

Why should *they* be shown such mercy and grace?! They’re *still* not nice people! They’ve still been part of the regime that has been oppressing his Hebrew people for a *good* many years!

And furthermore, are you sure, O Mighty One, that their “sorries” are sincere? They just don’t deserve this! They haven’t done their time; paid their dues! You can’t just go around *forgiving* people just ‘cuz you’ feel like it!

VIII. WHAT IS THE POINT?!

And thus ends the Book of Jonah. So. What is the point of this story? What does it tell us about God? Why would the people in *that* day have told this quirky, fishy story about a man running the other direction from *God’s* direction, who gets scooped up by a fish, and *then* decides to follow orders and his mission is successful, but then he *still* mad at God in the end—when all has been said and done?

This odd episode where the good guy does the bad things and the bad guys do the right things. And God does what we don’t think God should do! And even weirder (did you catch this?) Animals put on sackcloth and repent!

This is NOT a predictable Hollywood script! Just sayin.

Jonah is *angry* that God is kind. Jonah isn't just angry about that for himself, but on behalf of his whole nation! These are the occupying, oppressing Assyrians, after all!

If you need a point of reference, think about how you would feel if God rang you up one day (or sent a text or a tweet) and said, "Hey, I've got a job for you. You need to go have a word with the Taliban. Or, how about Al Qaeda?"

And maybe, for some quirky reason, you obeyed, and did what God asked.

And suddenly, they had a change of heart, listened to your warning, quit committing acts of terrorism and were sorry. End of story!

And God said, "Okay then. I have heard their cry and I forgive them. I am slow to anger and swift to show mercy, and I think we can wipe the slate clean and start fresh here."

WHAT?! Yikes, God!

Anyone feeling like they can relate to Jonah in Chapter 4 pretty well now?! Really, God?! You've got to be kidding!

Rob Bell suggests if we really *live* this story, we can **mature** in our faith, push *through* our dualistic beliefs, where we keep labeling each other and putting people in categories—the good and the bad; the sinners and the saints; us and them.

Bell says this story "blasts to pieces our biases and labels with the declaration that God is on everyone's side, extending grace and compassion to everyone—*especially* those we have most strongly decided are *not* on God's side.In this story, the dude who sees himself as *Us* is furious because of how chummy *God* and *Them* have become. He's so furious, he'd rather die than live with the tension."

If we take this story too literally and get arguing about the improbability of whether fish can swallow people and hang out together for three days and then spit them out unharmed, then we miss the Point, capital P.

"The point about allowing God's redeeming love to flow through us with such power and grace that WE are able to love and bless even our worst enemies." (p. 104)

It's a subversive story, as *many* stories in the Bible are. It's subversive because it insists that **your enemy may be more open to grace and love than you are!**

Yikes is right!

IX. INVITING US TO?

What is God inviting us to? Niggling at us to do, to learn, to accomplish, in this Jonah Journey? What is God suggesting about a change in the direction of our journey? Where do *we* need to get swallowed up, so we have to sit and think and pray for awhile? For a few days, or maybe awhile longer?

Where does *our* story with God, our walk, turn in ways we're not *crazy* about? What does God ask us to do that sends us running the other direction—even *into* the storm?

When does God show up slow to anger, full of mercy, and unbelievably, unconditionally loving toward those we don't think deserve it, and we get a little (or a lot) hacked off? Think that's fishy, and we're not afraid to tell God how the world oughta be run?

X. IN THE BELLY

Ever feel like you're drowning?

I did this week. Anyone else? Not in literal water, but in the turbulent waves of life's circumstances that crash over and threaten to capsize our life boat.

It's hard to breathe. There, in that place.

You know you should just pause, take a deep breath, pray and find your rational self again.

But, when you feel like you're drowning, you do anything BUT breathe correctly from your diaphragm as you've been taught to do. Keep calm and enjoy a nice swim while you wait to be rescued.

You gasp; might even find yourself wallowing in the belly — where it's slippery and slimy; hard to get your grip—or get A grip at all!

We've all been in the belly! At some point.

You thought you were going *one* direction, and suddenly life, or a stormy sea throws you a whole new way. Unexpected events pile up and toss you about. Threaten to overturn your boat. Up-end whatever sense of equilibrium you'd established.

I was in the belly the other afternoon. Trying to work, trying to write a memorial service and a sermon and prep worship services and conference calls and agendas for meetings I was in charge of.

And the storm waves kept crashing in, and pummeling from every side, and underside and over-side. News I didn't want to hear. Situations *not* getting resolved in positive, healing ways like I'd hoped and prayed they would. Why, oh Lord?! How long, oh Lord?!

Why am I cast into the deep, into the heart of the seas, where the flood surrounds me?

Why am I far from your sight?
With weeds wrapped around my head?
"O Lord my God!" I called out in my distress.

Have you ever had a day like that?

Or a week or a season?

Well, on that stormy afternoon, I didn't get a gentle "spitting out" onto a nice, warm sandy beach to recover and get a grip once again.

But, I DID get a kind of deliverance. Pulled up from the depths for a little while anyway, by the hand of God.

And by some other hands, as well!

You see, Teresa was here at church, preparing for the Celebration of Life service that evening for Judy Polenek.

And as I wrote and prayed, words and notes in soul-grasping beauty came and found me where I was wallowing in the belly, struggling to find my footing.

(sung)

"When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul

It is well (it is well)
With my soul
It is well, it is well with my soul

XI. FISHING

When we are in the belly. When life's storm threaten to toss and unseat us, it's time to go fishing. Not for something to eat, to nourish us for a day. But, to cast our line and our lives into the depths, where God is there.

Where, in faith, we let God scoop us up and hold us tight—even if we have to stay in the belly awhile longer.

Fishing for Faith and freedom
Freedom to be ourselves and free to keep seeking God's help to love our enemies like God loves.

Where we can say, It is well, with my soul. Even when outer seas are rough, when the storm still rages. God doesn't calm the storm, but God most definitely comforts the child. Amen.