

Jonah and the great fish
Epiphany3B, Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Grace Church Newton
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In weeks when I have the chance to spend time, to dig in, to let my mind and my curiosity roam through my bookshelves and the vast library that is amazingly at my fingertips through the keyboard and screen of my computer, I never fail to be amazed at what a stunning collection of literature this – the Bible, our collection of sacred scripture – how amazing it is.

- In our prayers and readings for today, for example, I could spend an entire sermon – or more - on the collect – our plea to God that we might answer readily Jesus’ “call.” What is a “call”? What does that mean, through the centuries, to those of us who try to follow Jesus even today?
- Or, we could linger in the beauty and comfort of the Psalm that was appointed for today. It begins: “For God alone my soul in silence waits” (Psa 62:6).
- Or, as the children did in their church school activity this morning, we could spend time exploring the gospel passage: thinking about fishing, and boats, and nets, and Jesus’ invitation to his early disciples to become ‘fishers of people.’
- And then there’s today’s reading from Corinthians – one of a series of readings we’ve had recently.... Don’t worry. We’ll get to that in a few weeks...

Just from the glimpse today we see that the Bible is full of beautiful, surprising, challenging, reassuring, sometimes really funny stuff. It features poetry and prayers and songs and history and prophecy and teachings about how to live a good life. We could spend time on any of those topics.

But today...this sermon is actually more for the kids. So, kids, today I’m gonna face a little more toward you, because I’d like to talk about a story in today’s readings that you may have heard of before. You know that first reading we heard today – that Mary read for us? Mary was reading a little piece from the story of Jonah and the great fish. Have any of you heard that story before? It’s sometimes called Jonah and the Whale? Or, sometimes it’s called the story of the “Backwards Prophet”?

Today's part of the story that Mary read happens *after* the part about the big fish. So, let's go back and remind ourselves of the story. [Godly Play kit.]

The book of Jonah begins like any other book in the bible about prophecy. Books about prophets were written by or about people whom God specifically called to share an important message – often a message for kings or powerful people who weren't following God's way. So Jonah begins like the others: "The word of God came to Jonah, son of Amittai..." (Jonah 1:1). When we hear those words, we know to expect something of Jonah. In these stories, every other prophet who is introduced this way follows God's instructions and goes and shouts God's word – this message from God – to the people around them. Now, the *people* who hear God's message from the prophets – they may or may not respond the way God hopes – but the *prophets* – they always do as God asks.

Except Jonah. Do you know what Jonah does? He literally does the exact opposite of what God has asked. God says to Jonah: "Go at once to Ninevah, the great, really big city, and cry out to them, and tell them that they have been wicked." And Jonah, instead of going to Ninevah, runs in the exact opposite direction. And even that isn't far enough for him. He makes it to the seashore and then hops on a ship so he can get even farther away from what God has asked him to do.

So in our story, this is a way of telling us that Jonah is trying to run away from God's goodness and God's love. And for Jonah, that doesn't turn out so well. While he and the other sailors are on the boat, a big storm blows in: giant winds, tons of rain, huge waves, and the ship is about to break up into pieces. They're all really scared. And they're trying to figure out why such a bad thing is happening. Jonah tells them that he has been trying to run away from God. Maybe that is why the storm is happening. This is a clue in the story. You see, in bible stories, stormy water is a symbol of chaos and disorder. So we might interpret the storm as Jonah running away from God's goodness, and ending up in a scary place...

So Jonah volunteers to be thrown over the side of the ship in hopes that the storm might go away and the other sailors could be saved. He's going even deeper into the chaos and disorder. Even farther away from God. But even there, even in the deep stormy waters, even though Jonah was running away, God's love stays with Jonah. How do we know? Because God sends a giant fish to rescue Jonah! The fish swallows Jonah whole and keeps him safe in the fish's belly for three days and three nights.

And then, while he was in the belly of the big fish, Jonah started to pray. He talked to God: "The water is closing in all around me," he said. "The deep surrounds me, there are even

weeds wrapped all around my head. But I know, God, that you can still hear my prayer.” And, after three days and three nights, the great big fish spits Jonah out onto the seashore.

So here we have Jonah, once again safe on shore, and God tries again. This is the part that Mary read today: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go at once to the great city of Nineveh,’” God said, “and cry out against it. Tell them they need to change and start being good to each other and to the people around them.” *This* time Jonah did as God asked. He went to Ninevah, this great big city. He shared God’s message with the people, and they heard him, and they told God they were sorry, and they changed to be better.

That’s where we’re going to end of the story for today. There is one more chapter in the book of Jonah, one more act to our drama, if you will, with a magical bush that grows up overnight – sort of like Jack’s magic beanstalk, if you know that story – and a worm that comes and causes the whole great bush to wither away almost instantly. We’ll save that part for another day.

So, stories like this can often have a special meaning for us. We might call it the *moral* of the story or the *lesson* of the story. I see a few lessons in this story. You may, too. One lesson I see is that God continues to love Jonah, even when Jonah doesn’t want to do the things that he knows are right God still love him.... Another lesson I see is that even though *Jonah* didn’t care about people from another country – the people of Ninevah – they were all still *God’s* people and *God* still cared about them, enough to send Jonah to help them grow closer to God. The third lesson this story teaches me is that God was there for Jonah when he needed God. And God is always there for us, too. It may not be like we expect – for Jonah, a giant fish was sent to save him – he probably didn’t expect that – but in God’s way, God is always there for us.

So this morning – in addition to talking about how amazing these stories from the Bible can be, and all the different things we can learn about God and about ourselves from them – this morning another amazing thing is going to happen. Do you know what happens over there? That’s right, that’s is where people are baptized. This morning baby Suguru is being baptized! This morning we will affirm that Suguru is part of this amazing tradition, this amazing history, filled with stories and prayers, and people who can help him and all of us come to know God more and more and live lives that follow the way of Jesus.

So welcome, Suguru, to this beautiful, surprising, challenging, reassuring, sometimes really funny and thrilling life in the church. May you always know that you are God’s beloved.

Amen.