

Discovering God's Presence in the Tough Places
The Story of Jonah
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Some time ago I ran across an article about Hollywood movies where somebody wanted a certain ending but it didn't happen that way. In *The Return of the Jedi*, the first script had the death of Han Solo as they attacked an Imperial base. George Lucas thought that it would affect merchandising, so he jettisoned that idea. In the movie *The Birds*, the last is of countless birds in the front yard of the house. Hitchcock actually wanted to end it with the Golden Gate Bridge covered with birds, but that was too expensive.

The prophet Jonah wanted a different ending to the script he was in! Jonah says: Wait a minute, God! I don't like the way you're directing this movie! I want my Hollywood ending! I want the bad guys taken away! I want Judgment Day!

You only heard part of the story today. God taps Jonah on the shoulder, and says, Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to go tell the people of Nineveh that they need to shape up. And if they don't, it's curtains.

Jonah doesn't like Ninevites. In fact, nobody did. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which controlled the ancient Middle East at that time, and nobody liked the Assyrians. Maybe because the Assyrians loved to kill everybody else. There is a relief in the British Museum that shows Assyrians doing all kinds of gruesome things to Judeans. So put yourself in Jonah's sandals. I might easily have headed in a different direction.

So Jonah travels south to Joppa, which is a seaport, and buys a boat ticket to Tarshish. We're not sure where Tarshish was, but many scholars think it was a seaport in Spain, which, coincidentally is in the opposite direction of Nineveh. He decides he wants to get away from the presence of the Lord. Well, good luck with that...because God has decided to be in all of creation. Where can I go from your Spirit, the psalmist asks. God decides to get Jonah's attention by sending a storm. Does God ever get your attention that way, through the storms of life? The illness, the heartache, the protests over racial injustice? God has our attention right now as we discern God's call for justice for all people. This is a whirlwind time.

So as the winds howl, the sailors begin to pray to their gods. And Jonah goes down below deck to sleep. The sailors say, Somebody on this ship has done the wrong thing, the gods are angry, and they cast lots and figure out that Jonah is the reason for the storm.

They're really afraid now because he tells them he's fleeing from his God. They don't want to do this, but he tells them to throw him overboard to calm the storm. And when the seas calm down, they offer a sacrifice to the God of Israel. God is such a creative God that God can use Jonah's disobedience to bring these sailors closer to the God of Israel! When the seas calm down, they offer a sacrifice to Jonah's God. Even in Jonah's disobedience, he is being used to bring people closer to God.

God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah (notice the story says a fish, not a whale) to keep him safe in the water and to give him space to think about things for a while. Jonah did not ask for three days of isolation, but that's what he got. I don't know what this isolation during this pandemic has done to you or for you. Some of you in retirement homes have really struggled with loneliness. Maybe some of you introverts haven't minded it. You extraverts are going crazy.

I am intrigued by the psalm that Jonah recites while in the belly of the fish. By the way, this is probably a psalm that was added to the story afterwards, an existing psalm that was inserted by the storyteller. You would think the psalm would be about a prayer for salvation. But it really is a psalm of thanksgiving. I called to the Lord out of my distress, and God answered me. I went down into the depths, but you brought up my life from the Pit. I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you...deliverance belongs to the Lord! He declares this from the belly of the fish!

We were discussing this psalm in Jonah at our Bible study Wednesday, and I said, Isn't it interesting that in the story, Jonah is still in the belly of the fish, but he is offering a psalm of thanksgiving? And Bonnie said, There is a type of guided meditation that uses this spiritual discipline. It involves envisioning a different future, naming a different future. We can imagine a new outcome. We are in the middle of a conversation where many are reimagining the future. Part of that conversation is that we need to listen to the hard truths. We need to realize the reality for people on the margins so that we can create a new future together.

When I thought about isolation time for Jonah, I remembered this Howard Thurman poem called, How Good It Is to Center Down!

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment
and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense
of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion
and bring meaning in our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment –
the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? –
what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
there is a sound of another kind –

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being.

Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

Jonah is given some time to center down.

At the end of three days, God tells the fish to spew Jonah on the beach. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...” That is good news,

siblings. Jonah gets a second chance. God comes back to Jonah and says, Let's try this again.

By the way, if you have trouble believing the details of this story, many scholars believe this was a popular legend that was adapted by a Hebrew writer to tell a story about the wideness of God's mercy. The point is, What does this story teach us about God's judgment and God's mercy?

One of the most important things I want you to hear today is that God doesn't give up on us. God is the God of second chances. God doesn't say: Well, that Jonah blew it once, and I'm moving on to somebody else. No, God gives Jonah another chance.

Maybe you've heard this quote about the people God uses: "Jacob was a cheater, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, (I would actually call it sexual abuse, because how do you say no to the king), Noah got drunk, Jonah ran from God, Paul was a murderer, Gideon was insecure, Miriam was a gossip, Martha was a worrier, Thomas was a doubter, Sara was impatient, Elijah was moody, Moses stuttered, Zacchaeus was short, Abraham was old, and Lazarus was dead.... Now, what's YOUR excuse? Can God use you or not? - ~~~ God doesn't call the qualified, God qualifies the CALLED!" I feel called to be a white ally with black and brown siblings, and I don't feel very inadequate. And if that's you too, God is looking for our availability and our willingness to listen to hard truths and to learn our history and to get off the sidelines, whatever that means for us.

Jonah finally arrives in Nineveh, this huge city in Assyria, the enemy of the Israelites. He travels a day's journey into the city before he begins preaching. I think that's incredibly important. The Jewish people hated the Assyrians. I'm sure Jonah had his prejudices towards the Assyrians. But God didn't let him stand on the edge of the city and shout: Hey, Ninevites! Turn or burn! No, God had him go a day's distance into the city, so that he could begin to see these people as fellow human beings, to watch their children play games, to enjoy the aroma of their cooking, to listen to their language, to hear what kind of music they enjoyed, to overhear conversations about Assyrian politics, to find out what the local issues were, to try to discover what kept people awake at night. In other words, to see their humanity as people made in God's image. He travels a day into this huge city before he begins to speak.

We need to listen to people who have a different story than we do. Listening to the hard truths is a starting point. My hunch is God is trying to get Jonah to see these people as people, not just as sinners he is supposed to preach to. So Jonah begins his sermon: “Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Well, lo and behold, it works. God uses the words of Jonah, even though he probably still doesn't want to be there. The writer says: The people believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. The king proclaimed a fast for the whole city. His proclamation said: All shall turn from their evil ways, and from the violence that is in their hands. And when God saw their repentance, God changed God's mind, and the city was not destroyed.”

It's instructive to me that change starts with the people. And then the king notices their repentance, and commands that all the city enter into a time of repentance. That's happening now. The power of people, especially people who have been oppressed, is causing elected officials to take notice. Nineveh changes as the people hear the words of a reluctant prophet to turn a different direction, and their collective movement changes the powers.

And does Jonah say: Thank you, God. I am so grateful that these precious people that you made repented. No! His enemies repent, and this is what we hear: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said: 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. (What he means is, I hate it when you do that!) And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:1-3)

Should we really be amazed at his reaction, that he doesn't want these people to live and be able to change their lives and get right with God? But you know what? I think there are probably some people we'd love to see get what's coming to them. We'd love to see God “zap them”. We really do believe that judgment ought to happen, unless it's judgment for us. Then we'd like some mercy, please.

Jonah is calling for God to destroy these people, even though he got a second chance! In fact, at the end of the story, Jonah goes outside the city

walls to sulk for a while. He builds a booth, and sits under it. God causes a plant to grow above him and shade him from the blazing sun. He's happy about that.

And then God causes a worm to eat the plant, and now Jonah is so frustrated that he says: "It is better for me to die than to live." And God says, You're concerned about a bush, that came into existence one night and perished a few hours later. "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" God is even concerned about the animals!

Because God is gracious and merciful and slow to anger. God wants salvation for all people. God wants abundant life for all of creation. I'm praying that God can use us, reluctant followers that we are, to help bring about a reimagined future that looks more like the reign of God. Amen.