

Soul Stretching: Rethinking
The Book of Jonah, Mark 1:14-20
January 22, 2006

In an old *Far Side* cartoon we see a bearded man, standing at the front door, dripping wet, in rags. The woman opening the door says, “For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, and smelling like a fish!...And what story have I got to swallow this time?”

Jonah is one of the most humorous stories in the Bible. Perhaps it is humorous because Jonah is so human; we recognize ourselves in Jonah!

Jonah is reluctant to accept the call of God, and so he runs away – literally. He high-tails it out of town on board a ship. He tells the sailors that he is running away from God. When the sea becomes dangerously stormy, the sailors “put two and two together” and decide that the storm is God’s punishment for the runaway prophet. They confront Jonah, who owns responsibility for his actions. He suggests that they throw him overboard to save themselves. They do so, only God is not going to let Jonah get off so easy. God arranges for a big fish, a fish larger than a human being, to swallow Jonah whole without digesting him. Jonah is made to sit in the smelly belly of the fish for three days and three long nights. Jonah uses the time to rethink his situation and his response to God’s call. What emerges is a conversion, a change of heart – at least temporarily. In prayer Jonah recommits to God. In turn, God orders the fish to regurgitate Jonah out onto dry land.

God calls Jonah a second time, “Get up, go to Nineveh, and preach the message I tell you.” This time Jonah goes to Nineveh as commanded. We really can understand his reluctance. Jonah is from Israel; Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, located near the current city of Mosul in northern Iraq. Things then were no better between Israel and Arab nations than they are now. Assyria is stronger and Israel is weaker. Assyria ransacked Jerusalem twice. Jonah hates the Ninevites because the Assyrians have humiliated and crushed the Israelites. They have stripped Jonah’s people of their land and culture. They are heathens who don’t worship God. Jonah wants nothing more than to see his enemies condemned and beaten.

Jonah delights in the thought of preaching hellfire and brimstone to his enemies. But God wants Jonah to warn the Ninevites of their impending destruction so that they would have a chance to change their ways and be saved. The very thought that God might care about those evil people turns Jonah’s stomach. No way does Jonah want to offer those dreaded people a chance to change and experience the forgiveness and grace of God. They

don't deserve God's mercy; they deserve God's judgment. Jonah's hatred of Nineveh is greater than God's mercy.

When God calls a second time, Jonah reluctantly walks through Nineveh. He doesn't spend much time preparing his conversion sermon. It's short and to the point: "Repent in forty days or you're toast!" His sermon meets with stunning success. All the people of Nineveh, even the king, repent. They turn from their pagan ways and believe in the God of Israel.

God rejoices in Nineveh's repentance. God decides not to destroy the great city. God forgives the people and includes them in God's mercy. Jonah, however, is livid. He angrily shouts at God, "This is why I turned down your mission in the first place. I knew that you are a God of grace and mercy, a God of forgiveness and love. I knew that you are a God of second chances. I hate these people; I don't want them to have a second chance; I want them to be punished. Now they have pleased you by changing their minds. You can love them, God, but I will never love them." Jonah stomps off pouting.

In spite of his disgust, Jonah is the most successful prophet in the Hebrew Bible! He calls the people of Nineveh to repent, to reconsider their loyalties, and to make some deep life-changes. Much to Jonah's dismay but God's delight, the people listen, they turn around, they rethink their worldview, and they change their lives. The Ninevites turn from their evil ways and turn toward God. The transformation is so dramatic that it evokes a change of heart from God, who withholds the intended punishment.

The idea that God changes God's mind and repents of intended evil raises some tough questions about the nature of God. This could be the topic of another sermon, or even a book, but as an aside, let me make a brief comment. God, as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, is not a punitive being inflicting chaos and violence upon creation. However, in the face of mystery and powerlessness, people have often attributed catastrophes to God. Jonah also describes characteristics of God that are more in keeping with Christian theology: "you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." God is a just God, which means that God will be angry at injustice and may feel moved to action; however, we must be discerning in labeling events as acts of God. The nature of God as we know God through Jesus Christ is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Now back to the Ninevites and their repentance. The word "repent" is not used often in the Hebrew Bible. The idea of repentance is often expressed by words such as "turn" or "return." The book of Jonah tells us

that the Ninevites turned from their evil ways. In this sense, “turning” means much more than a mere change of mind; it represents a reorientation of one’s whole life and personality.¹ The Ninevites turn from evil and toward God because God has been gracious enough to warn them that they were headed down the wrong path. They seize the opportunity to rethink their loyalty and turn in a new direction.

Jonah, on the other hand, is not so willing to rethink his attitude and to change his mind. He’s stubborn, stuck in his own opinion. Jonah does not agree with God’s ways and God’s agenda. So when God’s way wins out over Jonah’s way, he pouts.

The Gospel of Mark takes us to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and his first sermon, which is also very brief and to the point: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” There is that word again: repent. In Greek it means a change of mind, a change of attitudes, a new way of seeing the world. The way we’ve been thinking and valuing is flawed; the revelation of God in Jesus offers us a new vision, a new way of seeing things.

Jesus’ second sermon is just as brief and fairly successful. He says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Simon, Andrew, James, and John all leave their fishing nets, boats, and families and follow Jesus. They turn from an old way of life and turn toward a radically new way of life. They move from stability to itinerancy, from security to uncertainty, from their own agenda to God’s agenda.

Those first disciples leave more than their nets by the seashore. The nets are symbolic for all that must be abandoned in order to follow Christ. Popular psychology counsels the heavy-laden to get rid of their excess baggage. The old spiritual sang it: “I’m gonna lay down my burden down by the riverside.” Those called to follow Jesus litter the lakeside with precisely the kind of stuff Jonah had difficulty giving up: attitudes, prejudices, opinions, attachments.

“The disciples of Jesus discovered that fishing nets were only the first things they would be called to leave behind for the gospel’s sake. As they traveled and camped around Galilee, they discarded beliefs about the character and will of God. They cast off their assumptions about God’s mercy, love and justice. Judas, of course, clung to his religious-political beliefs until they became a noose around his neck. None of the others were perfect disciples either. Each had his ‘Jonah moments’ of resisting the call and questioning God’s agenda.”²

Jonah's story reminds us how easy it is to become entrenched in our own parochial point of view. There is a natural, all-too human reluctance to see others who differ from us as recipients of God's grace.

"When we decide to follow Jesus, we are called to lay down some of our most valuable possessions: our understanding of the world, our view of right and wrong, our assumptions about whom God favors and whom God despises, our ways and our thoughts."³

Discipleship is an ongoing journey of turning from our way to God's way. Our first song this morning was "Lord of the Dance." It is sung to a Shaker tune, which also has other words: 'Tis a gift to be simple. The chorus says, "When true simplicity is gained, To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn will be our delight, 'Til by turning, turning we come round right." In turning we engage in simultaneous motions—turning away from something or someone and turning around toward something or someone else. Turning is the means of shifting direction, focus, and action. Repentance is a matter of reorienting our lives, of rethinking our positions, of turning away from whatever inhibits life, and of turning toward that which gives life, which is God, grace, and relationships. Turning is both a one-time event and a continual life-time event. For it is only by turning, turning, that we come round right and find ourselves in the place just right—the valley of love, delight, and life.

Fred Craddock tells how his mother took him to church and Sunday school during his childhood; his father didn't go. His father complained about Sunday dinner being late when his wife came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and his father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said. Fred heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the hospital and down to seventy-three pounds. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. Fred flew in to see him. He looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. All the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom were from persons or groups from the church.

Fred's father saw him read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

Fred asked, "What is your story, Daddy?"

And his father wrote, "I was wrong."⁴

Following Jesus means leaving our nets on the seashore, nets tangled with preconceived notions, personal judgments, and our stubborn resistance to change. Leaving that baggage behind, we are free – free to experience the love and grace of Jesus. Free to allow others to also experience the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Let us turn, my friends, turn from all that holds us in bondage and turn anew toward Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

¹ Douglas John Hall, "Turning," *The Living Pulpit*, July-September 2004, p. 32.

² Mary W. Anderson, *Christian Century*, January 5-12, 2000, p. 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 14.

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