January 24, 2021

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Our Old Testament reading today comes from the Book of Jonah. So I want to talk a little bit about the Book of Jonah today. We don’t really hear much from this short biblical book; it only appears in our lectionary cycle twice. Once today, 3 Epiphany Year B, and again in a couple of years on “Proper 20” of Year A.

Probably all most of us really know about Jonah have is what we remember hearing about him from Sunday school. And I’m sure you remember him; he’s the one that got swallowed by a whale. Everybody knows that. It is the one thing that everybody knows about Jonah, that he was swallowed by a whale… except that he wasn’t. He was swallowed by a big fish. Maybe we might learn more about Jonah if we were to actually pick up a Bible and read the story ourselves…just sayin’.

But anyway, the short book of Jonah is one of my favorite little gems of the Bible. It’s different from anything we read in scripture. Jonah is classified as one of the Prophets, but the book is different from all the other prophetic literature in the Bible in that it doesn’t give any prophetic oracle or writings. Instead it tells a story the about the prophet, about Jonah. And it is fine to view it as a story; I believe it loses a lot of its nuance and sophistication for those who insist that it tells of an historical event. It is literature, and very good literature, and I believe that we get the most from the story when we read it as such.

So given all of this, let me do a short retelling of the Book of Jonah for you. I will miss some of the nuance and humor but I hope it will put today’s reading into a more understandable context.

It begins with God appearing to Jonah and telling him to go to the great city of Nineveh “and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” Now this sounds like a perfectly reasonable thing for God to ask of a prophet at first blush, but it’s a little more complicated when we look closely. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and Assyria was “the bad guys”. They had been the nation that conquered and destroyed Israel. I was trying to think of a modern day analogy and the best I could come up with was this. It would be like telling a member of the French resistance in 1943 to go to Berlin and stand in a public square and announce that God was going to destroy the city. In other words, to Jonah, it sounded like a death sentence and he was having none of it.

So Jonah found a boat going in the opposite direction from Nineveh and got on it in order to hide from God. Like that was going to work. In response to this God whips up a storm that threatens the lives of everyone on board so they each cried to their own God and threw everything overboard to make the ship easier to save. Finally they cast lots to see whose God was angry and Jonah’s number came up. Jonah finally confessed and told them to go ahead and throw him overboard. So they did and when they did the seas calmed. That’s when God sent the fish to swallow Jonah. He was there, in the fish’s belly, for three days and nights.

While inside the fish, Jonah prayed, which seems like a highly reasonable thing to do. It is a truly beautiful prayer, filled with many lines from the psalms. The prayer takes up pretty much all of the second chapter of the book, which contains only four chapters, only 48 verses. The prayer seems to have been heard, because when Jonah finished it, “Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.” And just in case you have any questions about what happened, the King James Version of the Bible spells it out a little more clearly: “And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”…ew.

And so now we come to the part that is our reading for today. The Lord gives Jonah his marching orders again, which he follows this time. He walks almost to the middle of this really large city, the Capital city of his worst enemy, and says just eight words, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

Then a very much unexpected thing happens, at least unexpected to Jonah. The people hear him and they repent! Our reading leaves some of this out, but the King issues a decree which says in part: “Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

And God does! God spares Nineveh and all its people and all its animals. And you would think Jonah would be delighted with this turn of events. But he’s not. In fact, he’s very upset. He was all set to watch Nineveh get wiped out. He’s so upset that he acts like a three year old and pouts and says, “I wish I were dead!” So Jonah went out and built himself a little structure to sit in and pout and wait to die. I’ll read you the final few verses of the book.

“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, [I love that…God \*prepared\* a sultry 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?”

The End.

And so that’s the Book of Jonah. As I said, it’s one of my favorite pieces of scripture, of biblical literature. I hope you’ll read it; it’s very short and I think very dear. You’ll enjoy it.

I also like the way the book, with humor and kindness, totally convicts me and my own resentments. I have watched with some tears of joy the events of this past week, especially Wednesday, as our country has entered a new stage of what someone called “radical normalcy.” It has been a good week.

But, being human, I have also had in the back of my mind a very real and very present wish that those who led us down the path we’ve been o for the last few years “need to pay.” I want some kind of retribution, and I want it now.

But here’s the thing. Like with Jonah, that’s not up to me. And if it doesn’t happen with the speed and severity that I’m wanting, I may end up like Jonah. I may end up sitting under a bush pouting and waiting to die instead of enjoying the honor and challenge of living in a country that can look honestly at itself and attempt to make the changes it needs to make. I’m not saying that those that committed violence against our nation, and those that supported, condoned and encouraged them, shouldn’t be held responsible for their actions. They should.

What I am saying is that that’s not my job. My job is to follow the word with which I ended my sermon last week. My job, what God requires of me, is simple, and that is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with my God.

Amen.