A.M.D.G. Epiphany 3-B Text: Jonah

January 21st, 2018

**Jonah 3: 1-5, 10** The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth….  When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and He did not do it.

**A Whale Of A Tale**

Our Hebrew Scripture this morning is from a little book by the name of Jonah – tucked away in a section of the Bible known as the Minor Prophets. And many of us know this story, don’t we – some of us from the time we were small children in Sunday School. It was really interesting this week, on Thursday evening, that quite coincidentally, the story we were discussing in FIG – the Fellowship Intercultural Gathering group – was this very story of Jonah.

The story is set around the 9th Century BCE when the Assyrian Empire was at its height – although most biblical scholars agree that it was probably *written* several centuries later, after the Israelites returned to their homeland from the Babylonian Exile – after 537 BCE. It tells how Jonah was commissioned by Yahweh, the God of Israel, to go to the great city of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. Today, the ancient site of Nineveh lies just to the east of the modern city of Mosul in Iraq – recently in the news as a stronghold of ISIS.

Jonah was called by God to preach that the city would be destroyed if they did not repent of their sinful ways. And no task could have been more distasteful to him – for the Assyrians, who were known widely for their barbaric warfare – had oppressed Israel cruelly, and were bitterly detested.

This story reminds us that if going to church is dangerous – as we found out last week in our exploration of Samuel’s call – today, we discover that God sometimes calls us to go to places we would rather not venture.

Jonah’s story is a folktale, a parable, a satirical comedy that swallows us up and spits us out again – challenging us to look at ourselves – even as we laugh at the drama which unfolds before us.

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Everything is exaggerated: God calls – and Jonah responds by buying a one way ticket in the opposite direction to the farthest place he can run – Tarshish. *(map)* A huge storm develops and he ends up being thrown overboard and swallowed by a gigantic fish. He somehow manages to survive 3 days in the belly of the fish – who, completely nauseated at Jonah by then – vomits him up onto the shore. God then repeats the mission before him, and Jonah ends up in Nineveh, where he preaches the shortest sermon on record – just 5 words in Hebrew *“forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”* He probably thought this was an acceptable minimum to get God off his back. And to the shock of everyone – including, it appears, God – the entire population of the city, including the king and even the animals – repent of their sinful ways

Not only that – but according to the story – even God repents and changes God’s mind about destroying the city. And that makes Jonah furious! Confronted with astounding success, Jonah stomps off to sulk. “I knew it!” he says. “I knew You were a merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in love. I knew it!” And he doesn’t say it as a compliment!

Now I hope you catch the humour in all of this. The book of Jonah is a funny book. It is a satire on every exclusive, narrow-minded expression of religion. This is theology as high comedy. But as the story intends, I hope it also disturbs us as well. The story of Jonah holds before us a picture of God who is so patient, so relentlessly merciful that it pushes us to confront our own prejudices, our own biases, our own grudges and resentments.

Like Jonah, we *expect* God to be gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love – toward ***us.*** But that is not necessarily how we want God to be toward others. This is not just a ‘fish story’ or a tall tale about ancient feuds. No. The joke, if it is a joke, is on us. Somehow, we start out by laughing at this rather ridiculous whale of a tale – and end up being challenged to look at our own lives.

Here’s the question beneath all this: how far does God’s love reach? When Jesus answered that question in his words and deeds, he got himself into a lot of trouble. He never seemed to be able to distinguish between the people he taught and healed. He preached to the poor. He offered acceptance to the outcast. And just when they were ready to typecast him, Jesus went into the home of a rich tax collector and broke bread with the wealthy Pharisees. He did not distinguish between rich and poor, male or female, insiders or outsiders. He didn’t restrict his care to one group or another. No – in the name of God, Jesus gave himself equally to everyone he encountered.

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This ‘whale of a tale’ this morning from the book of Jonah is as relevant today as it was at the time it was written. We, too, live in a world that seems to be increasingly and alarmingly polarized by narrow-minded politics and selective self-interest. Last week, the comment made by the US President about not wanting to receive immigrants from “\*\**\*hole countries”* was shameful and disturbing – and made even worse by those who supported him.

And we in Canada are also not exempt – as we have seen in incidents of racial profiling of Indigenous people, and acts of hatred and racism - like the young woman attacked on the bus for wearing a hijab, or the graffiti sprayed on the walls of moques and synagogues.

As people trying to live in God’s way, the story of Jonah challenges us this morning:

- it challenges our own biases and prejudices (*we all have them!)*

- it challenges our narrow thinking and stereotyping - and widens the circle of belonging to include everyone;

- it challenges us that to take our faith seriously means speaking out against things like racism, homophobia, and sexism – wherever we find them;

- and it challenges our indifference, and our excuses for staying silent.

That’s the uncomfortable part of God’s word for us this morning.

The ***good*** news is that the story of Jonah also invites us to be open to the surprising ways in which God works in our lives and in the lives of others. It reminds us of our God who loves us so much that God keeps searching for us, even when we run off in the opposite direction. It tells us of a God who creates opportunities for us to learn from our mistakes – and gives us 2nd, and even 3rd and 4th chances when we mess up. And finally, the story of Jonah reminds us that there is no situation and no group of people to whom the love of God does not extend. No one can escape God’s presence – and no one stands outside God’s grace.

There’s much for us to ponder in the days ahead, isn’t there?

May God give us grace to have our eyes, ears and hearts open. Amen