



by Carlos Bautista
<http://ministry-to-children.com>

Today as we review the year past and we look to the year ahead, I want to take a different approach during the sermon time. One goal is to remind us how central the Scriptures we read each week are to how we live and how we respond to God through St. John's. Another is to offer up some questions and some possible ways to approach Scripture in your own study and prayers. Those who put together the Revised Common Lectionary that is the basis of our weekly readings chose texts that often have a thread that runs through both the Old and the New Testament. Today is such a week.

The book of Jonah is, as you can see from your insert, short. Maybe not sweet although it is packed full of theological questions and issues, metaphors, numerology, humor and satire. Maybe you learned about Jonah in Sunday School or maybe you only heard about this crazy tale of someone living in the belly of the whale (at least in my childhood it was a whale and not a big fish). There's a lot more to the story than thinking factually or literally about how a person could be swallowed by a big fish, live to be spit up three days later and then grump beneath a bush because people actually repented.

Jonah is about "call" and mirrors the Gospel reading today when Jesus reaches out to Simon, Andrew, James and John and tells them he will make them fishers of men. You can see the immediate connection to Jonah. In the case of Simon, Andrew, James and John, they

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

immediately left their nets and followed Jesus. The Gospel writer Mark is quite clear that the four immediately followed Jesus- no questions, no apparent thought for how those they left behind would cope with their absence. They seemingly simply put down their nets and followed Jesus. I suspect that most of us are like Jonah, though. We not so immediately follow when Jesus calls. We can think of 101 reasons why we really can't simply put down our nets and follow.

Jonah is, then, more helpful to us when we consider our relationship with God. It is, if you will, more realistic. Perhaps not as factual, but more realistic.

Let's read together, Chapter 1, verses 1-6 (read).

What do we have that sounds familiar here?

1. The Lord calls and gives Jonah a task, or if we think about this in contemporary language: a mission or ministry. There is need for the Word of God to be brought to Ninevah because their wickedness has become great.
2. Jonah says "not me" and flees in the opposite direction. Jonah wanted to sail "away from the service of the Lord." Who knows why- maybe he felt unequal to the task, maybe he had been to Ninevah and enjoyed their wickedness. Who knows? He refused to follow and fled.
3. God says, "oh, no, you don't" and causes a storm that was so severe that those on board the ship were afraid it would break up. So the captain goes to Jonah, wakes him up and asks "How can you be sleeping so soundly?" See the parallel to the Gospel story of Jesus asleep in the boat when the storm comes up and a similar question from the disciples.

Now, for the rest of Chapter 1 (read).

1. Casting of lots to determine an outcome was a common approach in Biblical times. Remember the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothes. Or when the disciples selected a replacement for Judas after the betrayal. Casting of lots was one way that God's will was revealed in ancient times. Since God had called Jonah, and Jonah was the one on whom the lot fell, God's will is revealed.
2. So Jonah, after revealing his God to be the one who made both sea and land, tells them he is fleeing God's call and to throw Jonah overboard. But they keep on rowing against the waves, probably in disbelief that throwing Jonah to his death makes any sense. And when the sea does calm down after throwing Jonah overboard, the sailors recognize God's power and become believers.
We see this type of response when Jesus and later the apostles perform miracles and the crowds become believers. Witnessing something you cannot explain away sometimes causes us to reevaluate our lives and our beliefs. We come to a belief in God through many ways and events.

Now for the big fish. Read Chapter 2 along with me (read).

Jonah was in the belly of the big fish for three days: note the time period. A common tie, perhaps, to the resurrection of Jesus after three days. And what does Jonah do? He prays and

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

I'm reminded of St. Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing. What does Jonah pray? He prays the psalms in large part. Jonah evidences through these prayers his familiarity with Hebrew Scriptures. He is a learned or at least religious man who draws comfort from the Scriptures of his faith.

The psalms that Jonah uses are ones that we use: we call upon the Lord in our troubles. While we might not use the term Sheol, we might have times when we feel we are in hell - a place of torment, darkness and with no way out that we can see. During his three days in the belly of the big fish, and through his prayers, Jonah comes to accept the task that God has put before him. And so God causes the fish to spew Jonah out upon dry land. Jonah, having been chastened and having now accepted the task, is once more in a position to move forward.

Chapter 3 from which we read a bit earlier continues the saga. (read)

1. God calls Jonah a second time just to make sure that Jonah is clear: "Go at once to Ninevah... proclaim to it what I will tell you." This reminds us of Jesus, as reported in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, when he tells the apostles not to be afraid that they do not know what to say. God will give them, and us, the right words at the right time.
2. We are not told what it was that caused the Ninevites to believe God. They just did. And their actions supported their repentance - symbolized by the wearing of sackcloth and sitting in ashes. I always chuckle when I think of the animals covered in sackcloth- if your pets are like my cats, good luck putting sackcloth on them!
3. Note the hope of the king: "Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from his wrath, so that we do not perish." And God did relent, accepting their repentance, and Ninevah was spared.

The repentance, though, is not action of Jonah but rather of the king, the inhabitants and even the animals. Whatever Jonah said, as inspired by God, was sufficient for them to turn their lives around and focus on God. And it is God that decides to withdraw the threat of destruction. As we saw in the interchange between Abraham and God over the fate of the city of Sodom, God can and sometimes does change from what God had said. In two cases, then, God had threatened destruction. Abraham called on God to withhold that destruction of first 50, then 40 and finally if 10 righteous men could be found. And God was willing to not destroy Sodom if there were 10 righteous men. But 10 righteous men were not found and Sodom was destroyed.

In Ninevah by contrast, when the king, the inhabitants and even the animals showed their repentance, God withdrew the threat of destruction. God listened to them and God listens to us.

Chapter 4 is what suggests to me that we may be more like Jonah in our response to God's call than we are like Simon, Andrew, James and John. Read with me.

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

1. Despite his initial reluctance, Jonah did what God commanded and the city of Ninevah and its inhabitants were saved from destruction. Jonah, however, is unhappy, and goes off to sulk. It's not the result that he wanted. Never mind that it is the result that God wanted. Our egos too often get in the way of first, hearing, and then following what God asks of us.
2. There is an interesting juxtaposition in verses 2 and 3:
 "For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live."
 Why would Jonah be so upset that he wants to die? Perhaps it is because God and Jonah saw the mission differently. To Jonah, the Ninevites were foreigners who ought to die and so their repentance and God's forgiveness meant that Jonah had failed. Thus, he wants to die.
 We might pause to consider who are foreigners to us and how we view their actions- do we want them to die (at least figuratively) solely because they are different from us?
3. Jonah sits under a plant which provided shade and is happy with what God provided. It is then contrasted with God's sending a worm to attack the plant so that it withered. Again, Jonah begs to die. And God responds by pointing out that God created the plant and so God should care for Ninevah and its inhabitants including the beasts. God and Jonah, like God and Job, discuss God's role in the world and all of creation. Unlike the Book of Job, though, Jonah does not respond that he spoke without understanding and Jonah fails to acknowledge God's sovereignty.
 We are left with an open question. We do not have Jonah's reply to God's statement that God cares.

What are we then to make of the Book of Jonah and its relevance to today and to St. John's. Jonah is a wonderful example of what it means to be called by God into ministry. What it means for us to witness to God in this time and this place. The word "call" though can cause some discomfort. We most likely have not dropped our nets immediately upon hearing Jesus say "follow me." Maybe it is because we shudder at the thought that God is talking to us and we feel unworthy.

The website "On Faith" offers this for us to ponder:

We've turned the idea of a "calling" into this hyper-spiritual, practically unknowable, mysterious aligning-of-the-stars thing. I used to feel that way — and it gave me so much anxiety. Until a pastor friend of mine explained it this way: your calling is simply a combination of feeling burdened (also: passionate) about something and being gifted in that area. God created us with very specific, yet varying capacities. It's a safe bet that if you're pursuing what you love and doing so for God's glory, you've found your calling — especially if you're provided the opportunities to do so.

On a grand scale, a calling isn't merely your vocation — though, the word does come from the Latin *vocare*, meaning *to call*. Rather, all Christians also share a calling — mainly to follow Jesus and to live as he lived. “A calling, you see, is usually just a specialization in an assignment given to all believers,” writes pastor J.D. Greear.¹

Jonah, Job, Abraham, and all the others we read about in the Bible were each called by God to take action to bring God's realm closer to earth. We are called — and sometimes we run from our call as Jonah did. God calls, and calls, and calls until we, like Jonah, are spit up upon the earth and respond to God's call. Our passion may be in something others never see. Our response to God may be in living a life that evidences the love God has for us even though we never use the words to encourage another to come to faith. Remember St. Francis who said “Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary.”

What God asks of you and what God asks of me may be the same or it may be quite different. God asks each of us, though, to love our neighbor and to love God. As you review 2014 and begin to plan for 2015, ponder where and how God is asking you, through your life and your connection with St. John's, to live the Gospel, praying without ceasing and loving your neighbor as yourself. **Amen.**

¹ <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2015/01/16/5-words-christians-need-to-reclaim/35896> (Jan. 24, 2015)