



Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*<sup>1</sup>

Isn't God great? And isn't our faith stonger because we can laugh at absurdities?

All Scripture tells us something about the God we worship. The God that we believe created all life and all that is. The Book of Jonah is, in some ways, a bit of comic relief. A story so bizare that it helps us look at God from a different perspective. Part of what makes Jonah so special are the relationships between God and Jonah, between Jonah and Ninevah and between Jonah and the other participants in this very short book of Scripture. All Scripture is intended for our learning: our learning about who God is, our learning about our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

At Bible Study on Wednesday, our conversation focused on how Ninevah is like a mischevious child. Jonah is a pouter. And how there are similaries to the Book of Job and especially with Job's and God's conversation starting with "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth" (Job 38:4). A reminder that Jonah and Job are human, just like us, and that God is God. This doesn't mean that we can't or that we shouldn't question God but it does mean that God knows more than we do and sometimes we are called to do what we do not want to do.

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 people. You can see the immediate connection to Jonah. In the case of Simon, Andrew, James and John, they 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

<sup>1</sup> BCP Collects. Proper 28.

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

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. How many times are we asked to do something that will benefit our community but we simply don't want to? We have the skills and talents to undertake the task but really, we're too busy or we just don't like the person who is heading up the project. And it is fair and sometimes necessary to say "thank you for asking but not at this time" or "thank you but no."

Maybe if Jonah had responded to God this way the story we have wouldn't be quite so funny. A respectful "no" rather than Jonah's absolute terror at what God had asked. Now God could have said, "Ok, Jonah. I'll find somebody else." But God says, "oh, no, you don't, Jonah" 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?

So here's Jonah, running from God in a ship, in the middle of a storm, and then thrown overboard and he comes upon the big fish that swallows him whole. And 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 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 even when he doesn't want to follow God's call to go to Ninevah.

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.

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.

We are not told what it was that caused the Ninevites to change their bad behavior and convert to believers. They just did. And their actions supported their repentance - symbolized by the wearing of sackcloth and sitting in ashes. We had a good chuckle at Bible Study thinking about putting burlap on chickens. Even the animals repented (of what sins we do not know but that's what Scripture says!).

In Ninevah 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.

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 pout. 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.

And Jonah is really good at pouting. Now that the Ninevites have repented and been forgiven by God, Jonah is distraught and yet keeps up his conversation with God. He says: "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 ask ourselves how we respond when there is a task to do and it is done but not by us or not in the exact same way we would have done it. Do we pout or do we rejoice that the task is done?

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.

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 we continue our journey into 2018, 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. And then go into that call, trusting in the Lord your God, who loves you beyond all comprehension. Trust in the God who created you and who will be with you to the ends of the earth. **Amen.**