

JONAH AND THE STORMY SEA

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

August 10, 2008

Jonah, chapters 1 & 2

Jonah's story is a familiar one. It is often one of the earliest bible stories we hear and remember as children. The action is thrilling and the lesson simple: when God calls, we better obey! Throw in a "big fish" swallowing Jonah and it becomes a story legends are made of.

As a young person, it was a song that endeared Jonah to my heart; he was one of the stories discussed in a little ditty that taught about how God will see you through everything. Along with Noah, Daniel in the lions' den, and those almost supernatural figures of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who survive being thrown into the fiery furnace, Jonah's adventure was interpreted in the refrain to mean that "no matter what the worry or the work may be, you know our God will see you through."

Jonah and his whale may hold the attention of children but his story is still fascinating as we grow into adulthood. Jonah has even transcended the biblical landscape and reached into the cultural imaginations of many writers and artists over the centuries. Jonah's story is made for metaphors, and it is no accident that Jonah appears in the sermon in Whaleman's Chapel on Nantucket at the beginning of Moby Dick. No matter what your age, Jonah's story has an un-escapable appeal.

I've always liked Jonah's feistiness. As someone who almost always errs on the side of doing what they are told, there is something appealing about his blatant rebellion of God. As someone who gets seasick, there is something appealing about his ability to sleep through the mighty storm – in the hold of the ship, no less. As someone who hates to admit when they are wrong, there is something appealing about Jonah changing his mind and going to Nineveh after all.

Jonah's response of rejecting God's call creates a strong undertow in this story, but today, I want to focus on the storm that comes upon the sea and how the characters each respond to that tempest. First, let's make sure we know all the characters who are involved. The storm begins in Jonah chapter 1, verse 4 with the Lord hurling a "great wind upon the sea," so let's count both the Lord and the great wind as characters, for once flung upon the sea, the wind acts on its own accord, pausing and then tossing the waters of the sea more and rapidly when Jonah does not emerge.

Who else is in this storm? The mariners, who tell us a great deal about the nature of the storm by amount of fear they are feeling. Their willingness early in the story to surrender the cargo to save their own lives tells us how severe the storm is. Their captain is also singled out, and, in fact, he is the one who goes to the hold of the ship and wakes Jonah during the storm. By that time the experience onboard ship has become the kind of chaotic scene that can only be dealt with by prayer, which the captain strongly encourages Jonah to do, if not for Jonah's own sake then for the rest of the crew. It is not until the very end of this first chapter when the final character of this storm appears; it is none other than the infamous whale, actually called in the Hebrew a "dag gadul" or "big fish" so you can let your imagination wonder as to its exact species.

So, a prophet, a great wind, the Lord, a group of sailors, their captain, and a big fish walk into a storm....how do they react? What do they do? The sailors and the captain are rather practical characters. Of this motley group, they are easily the most experienced at sea, and they

recognize immediately the level of danger they are in. There is no red sky at morn warning them of the storm, there is no turbulent building of the waters; as quickly as the wind enters the scene the storm is fast and furious and deadly serious. These sailors see it at once, and do the first thing that comes to their minds: they each start to pray to their own gods. The cargo, which is their source of livelihood, goes overboard, in an effort to keep the ship as light as possible in the tempestuous waves.

You know people like these sailors, I think, or perhaps you are like one of them. I know a few people like these sailors, these are the people who sense the severity of a situation immediately, not because they are pessimists, but because they trust their intuition and they have an innate ability to think best in emergencies. Don't ask them to plan ahead, but be sure they are with you when the winds pick up and chaos begins.

The Lord and the great wind and the big fish are working together, and there is no doubt that the Lord is calling the shots. It is the Lord who commands the wind and the fish, but their presence looms large in the narrative. God puts the wind in motion, but it is as if the wind can sense the conversation on the ship; its job is not necessarily to break up the ship but to somehow wrap itself only around Jonah and deliver him to the Lord.

You know the force of this great wind, I think; it is the momentum of the storms we encounter. These storms seem to measure their pace and know intimately how we are reacting. I know that momentum, it is the force of the storm that keeps us constantly off balance but yet gives us just enough room to think we can get our balance back before we are hit again. It is a force to be reckoned with, and in the end it is a powerful reminder that the control we crave was never within our grasp, but our strength comes finally in letting go.

In Jonah's story it is also clear that the big fish is provided by God, an unexpected refuge in a storm that seemed to only have one end for Jonah. The belly of the fish will provide a second chance and a strangely comforting place to reflect and repent and recommit.

You know the comfort of the big fish, I think; it is a different place than the hold of the ship where we were trying to sleep through the storm. I know that comfort of the big fish, it is that event or person or time within the storm that is an unexpected blessing. It may be the moment when you realize you have the strength to get through the storm, or it may be an offer of kindness from a stranger, or a clarity about a relationship with a parent, or sibling or partner or child, that never quite came into focus before. It is the piece that you remember most when the skies have cleared, and wind ceases from its raging.

Jonah, meanwhile, is sleeping through the tempest. It is as if the storm began for him in Joppa and he is already exhausted of it before the winds threaten the ship. Once the captain wakes him, Jonah seems instantly aware of the storm's impact on those around him. He is not argumentative when the lots cast by the sailors point to him as the reason for their calamity. He is not evasive about what he has done to bring this storm about, or what God he worships. It is as if his mind is made up the moment he is awakened during the storm; he is going to have to leave the ship, and it is not likely to be to step onto dry land.

You know people like Jonah, I think, or perhaps you are one of them. I know a few people like Jonah, they are like bears coming out of hibernation when the storm hits. The practical needs are taken care of before they even get their eyes open, and much of the blame for the situation is put on them. However, they have an uncanny knack for self sacrifice; they seem fearless in the face of the storm because they take on responsibility and are willing to do that last thing which must be done, even if the last thing is being thrown further into the storm. These Jonahs do not suffer platitudes well, when people tell them "God will provide" or "Where God

closes a door, he [sic] opens a window;” they cringe. They are not responding in the storm for God’s approval or provisions, they are responding to the storm because there is no place else to go. Their weakness is a lack of instinct to avoid suffering; in fact, once they have a taste of suffering, they almost crave it. Suffering makes sense to them.

What is most amazing about all these different ways of responding to the storm is that they work together in unique ways. The narrative about Jonah is very focused on his journey, but without the other characters, the storm and its resolution are not felt in the same way. Without the captain, does Jonah sleep until the boat breaks up? Without the sailors, is the boat too heavy and does it sink before Jonah can confess that he is fleeing from the presence of the Lord? If Jonah isn’t forthcoming is the moment lost to admit responsibility and would the crew and boat perish? Without the fish, is Jonah’s blood on the hands of the sailors? In the storms we encounter, all the responses help make up the whole experience; we cannot get through the storms without each other.

I don’t know about you, but one thing I can never understand once I get in the midst of a crisis is why everyone doesn’t respond to the storm in the same way I do! My strengths are what everyone else lacks; my shortcomings are where everyone else should be stepping in. The internal dialogue skips through the stormy waves. Where is my help throwing things overboard? Why is everyone agreeing that I should be the one thrown overboard? Why can’t the one on my right stop the sea from being more and more tempestuous? Why does the one on my left want me to stop the momentum, I’m not in control here!

Storms, whether they are big or small, have a way of knocking us off balance. We can’t always see what role we are playing in the bigger storm or how we are relating to everyone else in the chaos. Jonah’s story gives us a unique perspective on how the characteristics of the characters work together to create this perfect storm. Jonah’s story reminds us that storms are part of how we relate to one another, and how we respond to ourselves and each other in them is at least as important as how we respond to ourselves and each other on the calm seas.

Seeing that bigger perspective is not always possible in the face of the wind hurling toward us, but that is where the presence of God comes in. You know this God, I think. This is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. This is the God who does not expect to find us in Tarshish when we were asked to show up in Nineveh. This is the God who experiences life with us, including the storms.

I often make the mistake of thinking my work is to prevent storms from happening, when in reality what we are all called to do is participate in the storms we find ourselves in. The Indigo Girls, a popular music duo from the 80’s and 90’s, sing a song that focuses on the importance of the storm. The song is called the Wood Song, which includes the following lines: “No one gets to miss the storm of what will be/ just on for the ride/ but the wood is tired and the wood is old/but we’ll make it fine if the weather holds/but if the weather holds we’ll have missed the point.”ⁱ

We recognize the presence of God in the serene moments of our life, but we often think God’s presence entitles us to miss the storms of what will be. By limiting God’s presence in that way, we forget that the people who are with us when the weather holds are also the ones with whom we are called to experience the storms. When we talk about building community we can get nostalgic and imagine peaceful seas and easy companionship, but the tempests are equally good community builders.

For whether we see ourselves as sailors, or captains, or prophets, or fish, or God help us, the great wind, or even a little bit of all of them, we are called to be present in the storms. For it

is there where we learn the point, “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and God answered me.” Don’t just hold on for the ride. Don’t try to sleep through the storms in the hold of the ship. Get up! Look around! Start praying!

ⁱ Indigo Girls, “The Wood Song” (*Swamp Ophelia*: Epic Records, 1994)
<http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/swampophelia.html>