

WHO KNOWS?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 21, 2018

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32

Everybody knows the story of the reluctant prophet Jonah. Thousands of children's books over the years have depicted in literal detail and in every language, a picture of the grumpy old fellow with a candlestick in hand, inside the innards of the mammoth creature, complaining about the slime and the fishy smell and the God who is so reliably and frustratingly (from Jonah's perspective) forgiving.

It's a great story and pushes our imagination to think of a fish large enough to swallow a man. Of course, it also stretches credulity to imagine that the enzymes and digestive fluids after three days were not enough to have some effect on poor old Jonah's skin and hair and general condition. Yuck! Not to mention the question of how he breathed in such a confined area, and how he could see anything without a flashlight. But we're getting lost in the details and the literalism and this is a fable that is not meant to be read literally because this is humor and there are jokes embedded throughout. Only a literalist without imagination could miss that.

God speaks to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh, that great (and sinful) city, and tell them that they are bringing down God's wrath on their heads. So having been told to go to Nineveh, Jonah takes the first trawler he can find going in the opposite direction, to Tarshish. (We find out later that his reason for doing so is that Jonah feels that God is a pushover in the forgiveness department, and Jonah knows better than God how things should be handled. Nineveh should be punished and destroyed from Jonah's perspective. And Jonah just knew that God would save Nineveh, because God is too nice to give Nineveh what it deserves.

I told you it was a joke. There's humor in this.

And while on board the ship to Tarshish a mighty storm comes up, enough to throw the crew into a panic. Believing they needed to offer a human sacrifice to the waters of the god of the seas, they cast lots and Jonah got the short end of the stick.

So with a heave ho, over he went, and rather than go under, at exactly the right moment the God of kindness and forgiveness whom Jonah found intolerable, that God *appointed* (KJV) a whale to swallow the old prophet whole. Can you imagine a God who has such attention to detail that he can appoint a whale?

I told you it was a joke.

And for three days, the whale had to put up with Jonah and his bellyaching (sorry for the pun). Until finally *God spoke to the fish*, (if you can imagine that) and the fish spit Jonah out on dry land.

Jonah, seeing he was outnumbered by One, decided he better do what God had ordered him to do in the first place. So he went to Nineveh and preached repentance. We are not sure whether he hollered it or whispered it, because his heart wasn't in it, but it did the trick and even the king of Nineveh sat in sackcloth and ashes and repented of his evil ways.

Now *there's* a joke, and the joke is on Jonah.

Sure enough, God repented and did not destroy Nineveh, that great city, and Nineveh became a model of repentance and new beginning.

But lest we miss it, one more joke.

Jonah was beside himself that God was such a tender hearted God of reliable word that Nineveh had repented. So Jonah sulked. And God had compassion on Jonah and appointed a bush to protect the

prophet from the heat and the sun, and Jonah sat there sulking all afternoon, though pleased with the bush.

By the end of the day, God withered the bush and it died, which made Jonah angry again, and he complained to God that (doggonit) God was too generous, a god who keeps promises and is kind and tenderhearted. But God is also a God who makes plants wither and die and that was the last straw for Jonah who found God's kindness irksome.

So God leaves Jonah and the story ends with the completion of the final joke. "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" asked God.

"Yes, angry enough to die," said Jonah.

And God 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?"

I love that non-sequitur at the end... "and also many animals".

And we are left there hanging, sort of like at the end of the parable of the prodigal son when the elder son has been invited into the party for the returned prodigal, and the father has told him that he will always love him and always has, and the elder brother is outside the house, listening to the music, angry that the prodigal has been welcomed home, while the older brother is just wishing someone would do things the way they ought to be done, the way he would do things if he were the Father in the story, which is to say *God* in the story, and send the younger brother out to the barn to sleep with the cows and the cowhands and not in the big house, and certainly not restored to full membership in the family.

The Jonah fable is an Old Testament version of that prodigal son story if you think about it. And there is a phrase that appears in the story of Jonah that is a fascinating nail on which to snag your sleeve. You find it in that speech given by the king sitting in sackcloth and ashes who is speaking to the Ninevites. And he says, "*Who knows?* God may relent and change his mind: he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." "Who knows?"

And with the turning of that screw the whole story changes. Because what the king of Nineveh acknowledges is the possibility that God may do things differently than we expect and that God may not be so intent on punishing and retribution as we expect.

Instead, God is interested in justice, in right living, in leading a life worthy of our calling. And if that means that God will use a man like Jonah to change Nineveh's heart and mind, a prophet who thinks he can run the world better than God, then who knows what is possible with God? Who knows whether maybe even Jonah can repent?

Jonah's problem is that he can't live outside of the predictable, square, binary, singular options. If Nineveh is evil, then bring on the fire and brimstone. That's Jonah's perspective. Why else would Jonah flee to Tarshish when ordered by God to go to Nineveh? Jonah didn't want Nineveh to repent. He wished the worst on his enemy.

This is a story that not only corrects and chastens Nineveh, but that corrects and chastens Jonah as well. So all of us who like the trains to run on time, who have fantasized about the punishment we would rain down on those who are not living the way we think they should. The Kim Jong-un's and Harvey Weinstein's and you name your favorite irksome politician.... for all the people who know how to do God's job better than God does, punishing the evil and rewarding the good, this is the corrective story.

We like it when the crime and the punishment match. When the violation is not pardoned but exacted. When there are reliable rules that make sin and sentence equal. We like it, except when it is

applied to us, because when it comes to our sins and failures, we like a lot of forgiveness. We are counting on outrageous forgiveness and grace.

You see that's what the last vignette in the story is about. God, who has just saved Nineveh, that great sinful city, with more than a hundred and twenty thousand souls who don't know their right hand from their left... and many animals, don't forget the animals, the dogs and cats and sheep and cattle, and the worms and pigs and insects and flies, and horses and pigeons who are clueless about the sin that would destroy them. Would the prophet Jonah really see justice in the destruction and punishment of all these, and not give Nineveh and its people an opportunity to repent, and live well, and please God?

Who knows what might happen if God were merciful and forgiving, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love? Who knows... if God didn't run things the way we think, but rather as a kind and forgiving, as well as just God, *who knows* what might happen?

Nineveh repented in spite of Jonah's script for it. The king sat in sackcloth and ashes. Who would have thought it possible?

Jonah's story is a story that calls us to re-examine two things, the grace, mercy and love of God on the one hand, and on the other our own misguided need for a God who is as small as we are.

Jonah might have had a broader vision. But he wanted God to "God-up" and act like God, which is to say the way Jonah wanted God to act. But Jonah was thinking too small. His God was too small, too much graven in Jonah's image instead of the other way around. We limit ourselves and we limit God when we put God in a box like that.

The real heroes of the story (aside from God's grace and forgiveness) are the Ninevites, and their king, who hear God's warning, God's call to amend their ways, and who make the appropriate changes, unlike Jonah who is left sitting under a dead bush fuming at God not acting the way Jonah wanted God to act.

When the king of Nineveh took the risk and asked, "Who knows what God might do if we repent?" The king opened up possibilities that set no limits on either themselves nor on God. And because the Ninevites trusted in God's mercy and grace, a remarkable thing happened. Their repentance led to forgiveness and new life.

My Moveable Feast study colleague, Doug King, says about the Ninevites' remarkable reversal,

Imagine if we lived that way. If whatever obstacles were presented in our lives, we asked the question, "who knows" and responded to everything before us believing in God's gracious power to transform? Who knows what parts of ourselves that feel broken now might be mended? Who knows what relationships in turmoil might be healed? Who knows what we might accomplish as a community of faith reaching out into our wider world. Who knows?"¹

Let's don't be mistaken. The Ninevites repentance was not some political trick like we see all too often these days where a politician says one thing that sounds like a reversal, and the next day is not. The Ninevites really changed their way of living. Their repentance was not some frivolous conceit, it was a change of heart, which is why God's planned course of action changed also.

And their ability to change means we can change too, we can move from a course of action that assures everything will turn out badly to a trust in the God who has made all things possible. Who knows, with God, whether God may relent and have a change of heart?

So Doug King asks,

If we took seriously the potential for God's powerful loving presence to change and shape our reality what would we do? Would we stop convincing ourselves that we cannot change, that we cannot be as complete as we wish to be? Who knows? If we believed with all our heart that God truly is "abounding in steadfast love for us" what would we do [differently]?. Who knows?²

Robert Alter, the Biblical scholar, offers an alternative translation for that line about the Ninevites. Instead of “And the people of Nineveh *believed* God,” he translates it like this, “And the people of Nineveh *trusted* God.” [Italics mine.]

Trust is a stronger word than belief. Belief is a “head” word, whereas trust is a “heart” word, it shows up in how we live.

A friend of mine told me about the distinction between trust and belief;

We took a family trip to the Grand Canyon several summers ago, my friend said. I had never been. It is amazing. The views are breath-taking. Even more than the views, there was one thing that completely took me by surprise. Did you know they have no guard rails on the Grand Canyon? You can walk right up to the edges, if you are that type. Turns out, I am not that type. It turns out that I trust gravity. I don’t believe in gravity; I trust gravity. What we trust shows up in how we live.”³

If you trust in God, your life will show it because every day there is a reckoning and an opportunity to demonstrate it. It’s as certain as your feet meeting the floor as you get out of bed each day. Who knows what God will do if we only trust.

¹ Rev. Doug King, Moveable Feast paper, Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2018. Unpublished. p.5.

² Ibid.

³ Rev. Tom Are, as quoted by King in Moveable Feast paper.