

SUNDAY, July 14, 2024 “Jonah and the Big Fish”

Psalms 27 and Jonah 1-2

We continue in our summer sermon series “At your Request” focusing on a Biblical story which has been used in several other stories in literature as a way of teaching many foundational characteristics of being faithful or unfaithful to God. Jonah is the story of a man who is commanded by God to go to a city and prepare them for destruction. Jonah’s task was to travel to Nineveh about 550 miles north east of where he was. There he was to tell the people on the streets that they are doomed because of “their great wickedness.” But instead, Jonah refuses and attempts to flee from “the presence of the Lord” by going to Jaffa or Joppa. He sets sail for Tarshish which is as far west as one could go in the Mediterranean Sea with a crew of sailors to whom he tells his plan. However, a huge storm arises and the sailors, discover that Jonah is to blame. Jonah admits that it is his fault that they are experiencing a ‘monster’ of a storm. Jonah tells them that if he is thrown overboard, the storm will cease. At first, the sailors refuse to do this and continue rowing, but all their efforts fail, and they eventually throw Jonah overboard. As a result, the storm calms and the sailors offer sacrifices to God for saving their lives.

What does this story tell us so far about Jonah? God loved Jonah and wanted him to do a specific yet difficult task of telling the people of Nineveh that city would be overthrown because they had turned away from God and lived their own ways. But Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. Why? Was he afraid of being the bearer of bad news? How bad was this city? What was so wrong with the city that caused Jonah a good man to flee and try to hide from God?

Maybe we might ask a similar questions. Maybe there is something you are fleeing from in this moment—pain, hurtful words, angry people who offend you, why is this? Because there may be people who seek to stir the pot, cause problems or at least point them out without resolving them and do so in hurtful ways. But why turn away from God? Because there seems to be no way to be helped.

And people are in need of help right now. Those who are hurting in many ways are angry also- at the LCBO strike, at plant closures, at limitations placed on social assistance, at not knowing what tomorrow will be, and the idea that no one cares. But as faithful and loving people, we are called to care. This is because we are made by God in His image and God is love.

Jonah finds himself thrown in the sea. The sailors were fearful of what they had done by throwing him in the water. The water became calm again so the sailors offered a sacrifice and made vows and they were reassured that what they did was needed. Meanwhile Jonah is in the water. And God provided a large fish to swallow him up. A large fish swallowed Jonah. For years we have thought it was a whale to swallow Jonah. Yes there are whales in the Mediterranean Sea, but for a whale to swallow a man whole is highly unlikely, nor is it possible for a man to remain alive within its stomach. But God did provide some sort of fish to keep Jonah alive. Because it is during this camping time within the fish that Jonah rationalizes about his life—how much lower he could go? He's in a fish? Yet God looked after him and kept him alive. He did not die when thrown overboard, he was saved by a fish and so what does Jonah do? He prays to God out of his distress. And Jonah is concerned about how he turned against God and how was he now to face God, worship him and seek forgiveness? Jonah prays.

How many situations have you found yourself in and you were unsure of what to do? Maybe it was concerns for yourself or others that is situations of uncertainty about what to say and do because of what you did or didn't do; or what you should have done. Did you pray? And what happened? In many situations what happens is a calmness of heart, a logical connection between heart and head and then a process of understanding one step at a time.

While in the great fish, Jonah prays to God in his affliction and commits to giving thanks and to paying what he has vowed. And hearing this prayer, God commands the fish to vomit Jonah out on to the beach. Soon after, Jonah hears God's call to go to Nineveh and begins his journey. On arrival, Jonah tells the people that there that Nineveh will be overthrown. The people listen to his message and they believed, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth and repented. Even the king proclaimed this time of repentance for all and hoped that God would relent and change his mind.

God saw what occurred in Nineveh and did not cause the calamity on them. When this occurred Jonah became angry with God and with himself. He leaves the city and makes a shelter, waiting to see whether or not the city will be destroyed. God causes a plant to grow over Jonah's shelter to give him some shade from the sun. Later, God causes a worm to bite the plant's root and it withers. Jonah now fully exposed to the full force of the sun, becomes faint and pleads for God to kill him.

There is no more written in the book of Jonah but we might speculate what happens—Jonah sees the good things that God has done for the people of Nineveh who now have

repented and live for Him once again. Jonah himself is recognized as a prophet who did eventually follow God. Yet what is often only known about Jonah is his extended stay inside a large fish. Was this possible? Real? Believable? One must decide on one's own.

However, Jonah is also mentioned in the New Testament in both Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32. Jesus makes a reference to Jonah when he is asked for a sign by some of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus says that the sign will be the sign of Jonah: that is Jonah's restoration after three days and three night inside the great fish. This is the sign which prefigures Jesus' own resurrection.

Jonah's story is a story of a regular man who was resistant to God's call to serve. He knew that Nineveh was not a good place. But it took Jonah the experience of fleeing from God, cast overboard and being in a situation without escape unless God looked after him. Jonah cried out in distress, God heard and Jonah said Ok I'll go.

There are times in our lives when we don't want to do something- how do you resist? Do you run away? How far can you go? What makes you stop running? Something in your past or a question of your future?

Whether we believe in the fish part of Jonah's story or not, we do recognized that God saved Jonah and through this prophet the people of Nineveh repented. We don't know for how long as such, but we do know that repentance took place. Yes Jonah became angry over this- but God showed him what he had done.

How many of us can relate to Jonah? Being told resisting and growing angry? What might we do now in hearing this 'big fish' story again? He had nothing to do but pray while in the fish. And this is what we can do—the most/ the least and what is needed today. Pray; pray to God and let him know where you are, what you are thinking, feeling and doing and what you might be doing in order to bring about change to your life and to the lives of others.

Jonah's story is about a man of faith resisting the call to serve and tell others God's message of love. How might we understand this for us today? How are you called to tell others of Jesus love for you given through the Father and in light of the Spirit which guides us? This is what we are called to do. Are we willing?

Let us pray.

God of grace we thank you for Jonah's story of being called and resisting this action. Enable us to pray to you in our distress and in our times of joy so that we hear again your will for us as individuals and as a community of faith. Hear now our prayers. SILENCE Amen.