

Jonah is mentioned only once in the readings that come up in the three year cycle, and then only in this small section. The book of Jonah is four short chapters long, and it is a parable. In fact, parts of it are meant to be rather humorous. It is a light-hearted story that points to a serious issue. Attempts to make it factual in order to say that it is literally true are a strain on the imagination and certainly the patience of any thinking person. Too many articles have been written hypothesizing how a “great fish” is actually a whale, and how it would be possible to live inside one for three days feasting on undigested plankton.

The few missing lines from our scriptures today are an account of how the king made everyone, human and animal alike, repent by fasting and wearing sackcloth. No doubt there somewhere exists, a Bible-College student project consisting of renderings of what biblical chicken, goat and sheep sackcloth costumes looked like. It is one thing to imagine an entire city of people wearing sackcloth and ashes; it is another to picture them trying to chase down the chickens so that they could appear more repentantly dressed. And, I can tell you from experience that it is impossible to make a cat repentant.

It’s a story. It is a parable, and it has a comic side to it.

It was written after the exile, based on an oral tradition that was passed down probably some two hundred years after Jonah lived. It was during this time that Israel had turned inward and became nationalistic, xenophobic and exclusivist after the experience of having lost their homeland. The story is about facing your enemies, calling them to account, and the surprise in finding that not only can they listen, but that God is with them as well. The story might contain an element of hurt and forgiveness in finding that God can change God’s own mind and can love your enemies as well as you. Jonah is Israel. Ninevah is the Arab city of her enemies. This entire city hears what God wishes and comes together and coalesces around their leader in order to make the changes they are called upon to make. What happens when you find out that your God loves you...but has had a change of heart and loves your enemies as well?

The Book of Jonah is read in the Jewish calendar on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when Jews confess their sins against God and neighbor. Offering Jonah to the congregation opens up the question, “How willing are we to let God be God?”

Since the story is so short, I am going to walk through it a little this morning.

The city of Ninevah is close to Mosul in Iraq. The excavations don’t show a city quite as large as was described in Jonah—some three by one and a-half square miles. It was the seat of the Assyrian empire, and a place to fear. When an enemy was conquered, the king took their enemy’s strongest soldier and flayed him alive publicly at the city gates. The king then made the offer to his enemy’s king: Surrender, and your head will be cleanly cut off. Continue, and when we conquer you, your fate will be the same as that of your bravest man. The word translated to mean, “violence and terror” is, “hamas.” Ninevah was a place to fear. Would that we could believe that the personification of violence and terror today could be approached, as was Ninevah, with an answered call for peace and the recognition that God is in all places and peoples.

Chapter One:

God tells Jonah to walk into his enemy’s city. For the story to work as it is intended, we have to see through Jonah’s eyes. This is like being told to walk into the headquarters of Hamas or into the midst of Osama Bin Laden’s den and announce God’s judgment.

Jonah hears God, turns around and runs down to the docks, buys a ticket on the nearest out-bound ship and hides in the hold. A great storm comes—so great that the sailors have to throw cargo overboard to keep from sinking, and they wake up Jonah, who has been sleeping through it all. Jonah tells them that he is the reason for the storm—that he has been hiding from God, and he convinces them to throw him overboard. They do, and the storms cease.

Chapter Two:

It's about this whale...

A great fish swallows Jonah, where he stays for three days. Praying to God through the words of psalm, Jonah appeals to God, who delivers him through a divine act of piscine regurgitation.

Chapter Three:

Now, Jonah is ready to go to Ninevah, knowing what the alternative is like. Here, he makes a rather weak prophecy, yet the people of the most dangerous and powerful city believe him immediately.

Jonah represents those in Israel who fear and hate their neighbors. The ironic twist of the story comes when the God of Israel spared Israel's worst enemies who repented after Jonah had preached to them.

So "what kind of a God is this?" becomes the fundamental issue of the story. The whole tenor of the narrative is that of a midrash, a story told to interpret biblical texts that raise similar questions.

Yes, the political scene can change overnight. The change is so abrupt, so dramatic. Nineveh's turning moment was certainly unexpected by Jonah. This unexpected mercy will challenge Jonah about his own need for radical conversion in the final chapter of the story.

However, what does it mean that "God changes God's mind" in verse 10? How easily we forget that human agency is so intertwined with our perceptions of God being active in the world, that the assertion that "God changed God's mind," may be the best we can do to explain God's acts that do not meet our expectations. We envision the time when much of the church reports that "God changed God's mind" about LGBT persons and relationships, pronouncing us blessed instead of cursed. Of course, some of us are clear that such is the truth already. God's mind does not need to change, only people's perceptions of God's mind.¹

Obviously this is a story, but it is one that teaches.

Pastor and scholar Bruce Epperly says that,

"The reluctant prophet Jonah presents Nineveh with the call to decision. One path led to destruction; the other to peace and prosperity. While we may hesitate to identify divine activity with the destruction of nations, we can definitely affirm that the actions of persons and nations have consequences for good or for ill. This was the case of "godless" Nineveh and it is surely the case for the nations of the earth, including ours. In the interdependence of life, we often reap what we sow, personally and nationally. The ongoing economic crisis, terrorist threat, unease in the Middle East, starvation in Africa, and global climate change are hardly accidental, but the result of decisions made by political leaders, nations, everyday people, and corporate entities.

"Can we choose life rather than death when faced with such complex and intricately connected threats? The U.S. has just inaugurated a new president. Will the audacity of hope triumph over the passivity of entropy? Faithfulness calls us to choose again and again, and take new paths toward life rather than destruction for our planet, nation, and ourselves.

Epperly continues, "Jonah predicts destruction for Nineveh in its entirety. For once, the people hear God's call and in response, the king assumes the role of national theologian—'Who

knows? God may relent and change God's mind.....so that we do not perish.' While we may not attribute our current crises to the hand of God, the king's question and affirmation invites us to see ourselves as decision-makers whose choices shape the future, rather than passive victims of fate. The passage from Jonah implies that the future is still open for us."

This presents the idea of a God that is changed as a result of interacting with God's creation—which, by the way, is a basic idea behind Process Theology—we are all evolving together, Creator and creation, towards an end of our own co-creating. What that end will be depends largely upon how we love God and our neighbors as ourselves.

Finally, in Chapter Four, Jonah is angry. The God who showed him mercy, is slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and who relents in inflicting disaster, is the same God who now shows the same compassion to the enemies of Israel. This is too much for Jonah to take, and he goes away mad, and stays mad.

"God changed God's mind!" Jonah cannot fathom this, yet here at the end of the chapter is the image of a lively, decision-making God, who is not bound by the past, who can do new things, and bring forth new possibilities. God calls to Arab Nineveh through the words of Jonah, but God also responds to their decisions.

We have a new set of circumstances in front of us. As we look at them, both here and now in this place, and in the world around us, what possibilities and dreams are we thwarting as a result of our old habits, passive natures, and inability to work together based on the selfish notion that God is our God alone, on our side, and absent from partaking in the affairs of our enemies, ideological or otherwise? Our country finds itself in a defining moment. Our world, likewise. What new energies of transformation might be released if we turned from our entrenched positions and worked for the betterment of a world where God is recognized by different names?

How would it change your own priorities, actions and commitments if you were to live as if God's realm was the coming reality instead of basing your actions on the known world which is passing away; the world which, if difficult, was the world you knew and clung to?

The apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) speaks to how we can live in a world that is changing. The answer: hold everything lightly. Don't try to cling to what you think you have. Stay in the midst of your emotions, your relationships, your business, without allowing those things to define your life or expectations.

The future is about change, or there will be no future. Jonah rejected that change—change that said that our own perceptions about the divine could not include others different from ourselves or our way of thinking. Jesus taught about radical inclusivity—the kind that we as a church in Orange County are widening our doors for, and the same kind of inclusion that finally releases us to drop our ideological, national and tribal hatreds in favor of unity. Let the events of January 20th start us walking together. May God bless this new president, this nation, this new day, and the opportunity to heal our world.

Sermon Resources

1. "Out in Scripture" for January 25, 2009 www.hrc.org/scripture/week.asp
2. Bruce Epperly is professor of practical theology and director of Continuing Education at Lancaster Theological Seminary, and co-pastor of Disciples United Community Church.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 3:2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

3:3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 3:4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 3:5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.