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“The Reluctant Prophet”

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Jonah 3:1–5; 1 Corinthians 7:29–31; Mark 1:14–20

The story of the prophet Jonah, the reluctant one, is a whale of a tale. We all know it, we’ve heard it since the earliest days of our youth, our children know it, and yet, it finds its way into the collection of the sacred writings of the Old Testament. Here, this disobedient prophet has a hallowed place in the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures.

And we know, and I remind you of this, that the Old Testament is rich in its range of capturing human history and human experience in a variety of different literary forms from poetry to love poetry to prophecies to apocalyptic language and images to satire. Satire is in the news these days, and the Book of Jonah is, in itself, a satirical story that needs to be understood through the lens of that literary form.

For those of you who know of the power of satire are aware of how terrorists rushed the office of a satirical magazine in Paris and slaughtered cartoonists, columnists, and editors because that magazine ridiculed the prophet Mohammed. Ridicule is not the heart of satire, but for those of you like me who watch the *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report*, or maybe some of you still read *Mad Magazine*, you are experiencing satire. It’s been out there for many years. But satire has a way of communicating truths through humor. Not just humor but through irony and ridicule, through exaggeration, through mockery. My point is that satire has made it into the canon of our Scriptures as we listen to a satirical account of the prophet who teaches us how not to respond to a call from God.

The first act of the story begins much as the second act that you just heard. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, so Jonah hears the call, hears the Word, and realizes that God wants him to go to Nineveh and preach God's repentance. *Nineveh!* The enemies of the Jewish people were pagans. He wanted nothing to do with them. What is so humorous about this is that God calls him, and unlike Andrew, James, John, and Simon, who immediately left their nets and followed Jesus, Jonah hears the call, does a 360 and immediately goes the opposite direction. He catches a ticket on a steamer to Tarshish, and runs as far as he can run to avoid the responsibility of the call.

We know the story how God follows him, hounds him, and God hurls a great wind upon the sea, a mighty storm. He is asleep in the hull of the ship, and all the mariners and sailors are disturbed and upset. They cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity that has fallen upon them. Guess who ends up with the lot: it's our friend, Jonah, who then tries to explain to them who he is. He offers himself as a sacrifice to the sea monsters and allows the sailors to throw him overboard as a way to calm the waters.

The sailors were reluctant to do that; they rowed a little harder, but when things got worse, they decided that maybe it was in their best interest to accept his invitation, so they threw Jonah into the sea. As soon as he was thrown into the sea, the waters stopped raging, and the sailors began to believe in God while poor old Jonah, who was left to drown, was swooped up by this great fish, where he spent the next three days and three nights in its belly, offering God a great praise of thanksgiving.

Act Two begins with what we just heard a moment ago: God tries again. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message that I tell you." So this time Jonah made the trek to Nineveh and gave the shortest, pithiest sermon in the history of preaching.

"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That's all he said. The result was staggering. The whole city was immediately converted from the king all the way down to the sheep and the cattle. Everybody listened, and everybody responded: a spontaneous conversion of a city! I wish our preaching was that

effective! It was only 4 Hebrew words: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Everybody proclaimed a fast, everyone great and small put on sackcloth, and God later says when he saw how they responded, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about their calamity and did not bring upon them any harm.

You would think that Jonah would be pleased that his word was heard and responded to with great spontaneous conversion, but he was more than angry, more than displeased, because in his heart of hearts, he knew that if he ever preached obediently the message God wanted him to, no matter how perfunctorily he did it, this was going to be the response. He wanted nothing of it. He tried to explain to God why he was so angry. He said, “This is why I left in the first place, why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning!” So he goes and sulks. God allows him to cool his heels and allows a plant to grow over him to shade him from the sun. God realizes that his cooling down period is not helping matters, so he takes away the shade. Jonah gets angry that he lost his shade from the sun. God responds to his constant refrain of “it’s better for me to die than to live.” God ends the story of Jonah with a very harsh question: “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow, and now you resent me? To stay my hand over a great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?” (Jonah 3:10-11) And that ends the story.

What is the lesson of the prophet Jonah’s story and his adventure? On one hand, each one of us is Jonah, if we can identify with some of the narrow-mindedness and the sectarian ways in which we look at people who are different from us. It is pretty clear that Jonah wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Ninevites. These were not a people of Abraham. These were not a people of the Ark of the Covenant. They did not attend worship in the temple. They were our enemies. He wanted nothing of them other than to be avoided, much less to turn to God in repentance. So in some ways, we can identify with that reality of how prejudice and discrimination of people who are different from us can affect the way in which we make decisions and the way in which we are inclusive and welcoming to those who are different from us.

The message of the story of Jonah is bigger than that. Through Jonah, we have access to a God who cares, who loves, who is compassionate for all men and women of every state in life. In Jonah's heart of hearts, he knows this God of compassion and love and care when he says, "I knew that you are a gracious God, merciful and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing." To me, that is the heart of the story: our God is that kind of God, gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and full of steadfast love who wants to relent from punishing. Jonah knew that, but he refused to accept it. He wouldn't grasp it, he wouldn't allow it to be implemented, but he knew it in his heart of hearts, the truth that our God is that God, no matter who hears His message of conversion. It's a truth that we need to revel in and to be gracious about ourselves.

Our God, as taught in this gracious story of Jonah, is a God who teaches us to not only hear the word of conversion, but to accept, like Jonah, the mission to preach it. Even in our nearsightedness, we have the opportunity to accept the mission of the church in the form of our Christian faith to preach the endless breadth of God's mercy and God's forgiveness in season and out of season.

That is the message I want you to be left with this day: that God's loving mercy waits for all who repent, whoever they are, wherever they live, and whatever they have done. The message of Jonah and the story of Jonah is all about God's utter freedom to do as God pleases, and in some ways, this bolsters the fundamental truth of our faith that we are justified, that we are saved and redeemed by faith alone in a God who is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and full of steadfast love.

References: Michael B. Dick
Walter Burghardt