

“Human Anger and Confusion, and the Patience of God”

*Jonah 3 and 4; Mark 1:14-20

January 22, 2012, Third Sunday of Epiphany

By Pastor Kent Fry, Third Reformed Church, Holland, MI

Everyone knows the story of Jonah, the story of a man swallowed by a whale. Actually the text says that it was a large fish. Even the person, who never goes to church, knows from somewhere in the cultural landscape the story of Jonah in the Bible. And of course, those of us who have gone to church for any length of time, know the story of Jonah to the point that you may be thinking that what can possibly be able to say that I don't already know this morning. For Vacation Bible School this past summer, we made a giant whale's mouth out of huge cardboard which covered up one of our side hallways in the lower level so that the kids went into the fishes mouth and the sides of the hallway were the belly of the whale. The kids in our church, and some of the children in our community, know the story of Jonah and the whale quite well. We store the cardboard whale in the boiler room for the next time we teach the children the story of Jonah in the Bible.

There is perhaps no account in the Bible that is so well known by both the population in the culture and the members of congregation that is so little known and understood. There is perhaps no book in the Bible that is dismissed as a humorously folk-tale that has a very serious point and is not recognized for its theological rigor in regard to the nature of our condition as human beings and the character and the reality of God.

I. The Outlines of the Jonah Story:

Recognizing that God may have much to teach us in this previously familiar story, let us explore a brief outline of the story, pausing for theological reflection upon the way.

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” The basic theme we will want to pursue in the Book of Jonah is the patience of God. God is first patient with his prophet. For the first time that God came to Jonah calling him to go to Nineveh was back in the first chapter. Jonah did not do what a respectable prophet of God would do; he got on a ship bound for Tarshish. Tarshish is most likely somewhere off the coast of Spain. In other words, he headed in the very opposite direction from where God was calling him thinking that he could flee from the presence of God. Every Hebrew reader of the Bible in Old Testament days and we modern readers know that this is a rather foolish thing to do, for “where can we flee from the presence of God?” But God is patient with his prophet, as God must sometimes be patient with us.

The story is based on a non-assuming once mentioned prophet in the Old Testament (outside the book of Jonah) in II Kings 14:25 who prophesied in the eight century B.C. during the reign of the northern king of Israel, Jeroboam II. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the great super power of the ancient Middle East in the 8th century B.C., known for their cruelty to conquered people. The Ninevites in the 8th century B.C. and subsequent centuries were the arch enemies of Israel. The prophet Nahum referred to Nineveh as “the city of blood.” (3:1) Perhaps today it might be how Americans feel

about Iran or North Korea. Now we are getting to the heart of the ancient story, and the thrust of meaning for our modern context.

As Jonah is fleeing from the presence of God on the ship bound for Tarshish, a great storm comes up which caused by the Lord. And while Jonah on the ship makes a great orthodox confession to the pagan sailors, it is the pagan sailors who have a sense that Jonah is fleeing from the presence of the Lord. There is our first hint that the Spirit of God is working beyond the covenant community and the people of God, and that the covenant community needs to pay attention and be on guard for our exclusivism.

After Jonah has a psalm of thanksgiving in the belly of the fish, he is spit up on land. Well, if you were in the stomach of fish for three days and spit up on land, a little dishevel but it one piece, you too would be thankful to God and ready to listen to the call of God in your life. As our psalm used for the call to worship puts it, "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this..." God is patient with his prophet, and with us, and comes to Jonah a second time with the call to go to Nineveh and preach and help Israel's arch enemies. We are not wrong to imagine that Jonah is a new prophet of the Lord a bit like Paul words in 2 Corinthians 5 about new converts to Jesus Christ, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new."

Jonah goes to Nineveh, an exceedingly large city. The narrator of the story tells us that it took three days to walk across the city. Some historians dispute that, but the point is not to calculate exactly with our modern GPS but to be lost in amazement that Jonah could ever penetrate such a lost and fallen city of such size and magnitude. It was a bit like the Apostle Paul coming to Athens, the center of first century philosophical tradition and actually bring a conversion to the wisdom of the philosophers. Or maybe a pastor today coming to Manhattan and actually turning the cultural movers and shakers of America whether it be Wall Street or Broadway to faith in God in Jesus Christ.

Here is the manuscript of Jonah's sermon to Nineveh, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Actually in Hebrew it only comes out to five words! Five words! Forty days, because our God is patient giving them time. But they don't need forty days and the people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast. I don't think there is a preacher who doesn't marvel why his congregation don't respond to his or her preaching in the way the Ninevites responded to Jonah! I don't think I have ever had a sermon that worked as well as Jonah's.

But quite frankly it was a lousy sermon. It was a lousy sermon not because it was only five words, but because it never mentions God or that Jonah is acting as a prophet or preacher of God. He merely predicts the downfall of the city within forty days. As far as the Ninevites are concerned Jonah could be a geologist predicting the next tremor. So while the sermon and the message were not very good or constructed very well, God was able to use it. This means that God can even make a bad sermon speak and that the Word of God is not reduced to human instruments. "The Word of God can still be living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," which is good news for any of us carriers of the gospel when we fret about our sermons on Saturday night or all of us stumble with our friends or acquaintances sharing the hope that is within us. God can sometimes use our feeble words.

But notice not only that the population repents, but that the king gets in on the act. He demands not only human beings to repent but that the animals repent, which indicates

that somehow within the fall of Adam that somehow the whole creation order has fallen and groans for the coming of the Lord. I told you that this not some folklore fish story, but a highly sophisticated theological reflection on the nature of our world and the character of our God. But then the king is not content with mere repentance but he wants signs of repentance. “All shall turn from their evil ways and from violence that is in their hands.” We can almost here the words of John the Baptist, “Bear fruits that are befitting of repentance.” Or we hear echoes of the Prophet Micah at the high point of Old Testament prophetic word that we used for the call to new obedience, “What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The pagan king is not doing this because God can be manipulated or bargained with, as we would often associate with some infantile and sub-Christian faith. The king realizes that it may not work and that God will do what God will do, but the importance thing is to bow down and give him the honor and the glory. “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” (Jonah 3:9)

Whether it is the pagan sailors on the storm tossed boat when Jonah is fleeing from the presence of God or the pagan king of Nineveh, there is far more theological sophistication and faith than the covenant community or the church today is willing to often admit. This humorous fish story has a powerful and deep message about the character of God and his workings in the world that break through our simple caricatures of who is in and who is out. After-all, we do confess and say that God so loved, not the church, but the world, that he gave his only Son.

William Willimon puts it this way, “Therefore we relate to those of other faiths. We talk to them, enter into dialog with them, listen to them, serve them, and work to love them, not in spite of Christ but because of Christ. We see Christ working in them even if they as yet do not see that work. And we pray that we might even see Christ working through us.”

Let us not turn the profound teachings of God in Jonah into some simple mushy inclusiveness and pluralism that plagues much of our theology. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but Christ’s way is one that is resourceful enough to include us sinners is also determined to seek others.

And then as we go on in the story, “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....” (3:10) The older translations put it this way, “God repented.” The book of Jonah is not some childish fish story, but profound in understanding the character and person of God. God is not fixed and determined in his relations with human beings. God is not a philosophical principle that has laid out a blue print that God is handcuffed to follow exactly. God can respond and dialogue and change course in his action and response to human beings based on how they respond. Here is the basis for prayer as God takes into account his covenant partner. God improvises within a basic melody of his character and way with the world. If this seems difficult and pushes out your concept of God, I like the words of Lewis Smedes: “God changes his mind but he never changes his heart in his desire to save. Or as Peter puts it, “The Lord is not slow about his

promises as some count slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

II. Jonah’s Anger:

Chapter 4, Jonah was angry. The Hebrew actually meaning “burning hot.” Now he reveals why he headed for Tarshish, which really was known to God all along. “I knew you were a gracious God, and slow to anger; and abounding in steadfast love.” The prophet who we thought was a new person in God and who prayed the wonderful prayer of thanksgiving in chapter 2 in the belly of the fish has turned to a sour disposition of anger. And are we not as Christians, new creations in Christ, sometimes still struggle with the old man and woman? In fact, he tells God that he is ready to give up the ghost, so depressed he is at the turn of events. Well, it is a bit like if God told us to sing God bless...Iran... or North Korea, or something like that.

God plays a little joke on Jonah. He goes outside the city and impatiently waits for the divine holocaust to come down on Nineveh. And God provides a bush to provide shade for Jonah. The prophet likes that a lot. It is hard for us to imagine in January when there isn’t much sun in Michigan, but I have been watching the Australian Open Tennis on ESPN 2 and it gets hot and sunny in some places in the world and a little shade I guess although I haven’t experienced since August is a wonderful thing. God brings a worm to rot the plant. Jonah is angry, “angry enough to die.”

Then God delivers the zinger, which is really funny: “You are angry about the plant that you did not plant, then shouldn’t I be concerned with this exceedingly great city with many people that also has a lot of animals?” Or as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans: “God has consigned all human being to disobedience in order that he may have mercy upon all.” (Romans 11:32)

John Piet who I had for Introduction to the Bible my first year at Western Seminary said in class I think the first day for he introduced the Bible with the Book of Jonah: “What would happen if everyone in your hometown repented, believed the gospel and came to church on a Sunday morning?” There was then an awkward silence...the church would be mad and angry. Someone would be sitting in our pew. How is it that we think the pew we sit in is our pew? How did that ever come to be? We would run out of coffee.

One of the members of our congregation who used to work for the denomination (and I think you will have to do some guessing since that is at least a few people) has told me the story of a pastor of a congregation that was growing, and they had to have a congregational meeting about adding onto the sanctuary. An elder stood up and said to the pastor and the congregation, “We never use to have this problem. You have to go so that we don’t have this problem.”

It is sort of funny tragic story, but on a much smaller scale congregations can behave like that. We like all the children up front in the past couple years but would happen if in the patience and the mercy of God, the number of children doubled or tripled. Would we really welcome the children and let them come to Jesus? What about all the parents?

Maybe like Jonah we need to repent of our anger at the mercy of God; our snobby attitude, our desire to have people fit into our church the way we like the church with our

customs and traditions; our selfishness and wanting to hold the mercy and grace of God only for ourselves.

III. Nineveh, not Knowing Their Left from Their Right Hand:

But then there is the problem not just of Jonah and his anger that needs repentance, but of Nineveh that does not know their right hand from their left hand. The problem of Nineveh is not that they are a bunch of snobs with exclusivism but that they are confused about what is right and wrong, and what the way of the Lord is. As Paul says, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises....” but the pagans, the Ninevites, know nothing of this. (Romans 9:4)

Just like Jesus parable of the prodigal son and the elder brother, or the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, we ought to place ourselves in the story in more than one way. Are we the prodigal son going into the distant country in riotous living like the Ninevites or are we the angry and cranky older brother a bit like Jonah? Are we cranky laborers in the vineyard who complain about serving in the Lord’s vineyard throughout the day or the lazy workers who show up in the 11th hour too hung over and confused to really know the grace of God that we have received?

Are we the elect, the righteous, the commendable, the exemplary, angry at the patient mercy of God, or are we confused Ninevites who don’t know their right hand from their left hand? Forgive me if I suggest that sometimes we respectable people of Third Reformed Church are sometimes like the Ninevites more confused and wandering and not knowing how to sort out our faith in this age or time.

I think we don’t quite know what to do with the right and the left hand when it comes to human sexuality as a congregation in the 21st century.

I think we struggle with the role of the church in the midst of an increasing secularization that has been penetrating the heartland of the American Midwest.

I think we don’t always know what to do with including our children and our youth in the liturgical worship that we have.

I think we struggle with the role of technology and are somewhat technologically adverse as a congregation.

I think we struggle when we affirm Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, how everyone in the world of different faith figures into that.

If I can be honest with you, sometimes I feel totally inadequate as a pastor of this congregation, and I don’t know my right hand from my left hand.

Jesus came preaching, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent...” Part of our repentance is confessing our anger about the mercy of God, but it is also acknowledging before God our confusion like the Ninevites.

Conclusion:

The good news this morning revealed to us by God in the Book of Jonah in a profound way is that our God is patient.... patient with both Jonah and Nineveh.

We don't know at the end of the Book of Jonah whether the prophet comes around to God's point of view anymore than we know in Jesus' parable whether the elder brother enters into the father's celebration when he welcomed the younger son home.

But our God is patient.

We know that eventually Nineveh did come to an end; the archaeological ruins are there today. But we also know from the Prophet Isaiah that God does an alien work with his right hand putting down the arrogant and the rebellious but with his left hand raising up the repentant and the chastened. (See Isaiah 28:21; and Donald Bloesch, God Almighty, p. 130) God is patient with us Ninevites who don't know our right hand from our left hand.

Isn't it comforting beyond all expectation to know that the Lord had mercy upon the people of Nineveh? Amen.

Copyright by Kent Fry, pastor of Third Reformed Church.

Sources for the Sermon:

Fleming Rutledge in And God Spoke to Abraham, contributed to the basic idea of the sermon that in some ways we are like Jonah and in other ways like Nineveh, and the patience of God reaches to both. This is a delightful collection of Old Testament sermons.