

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: January 21, 2024, Year B, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-5, 10, 4:1-11 (The designated first reading is Jo=nah 3:1-5, 10)

Title: Jonah, the fish, the bush, and the mercy of God.

Focus: What's the story of Jonah about? What do you remember from childhood? In contrast to a focus on the marvel of a fish swallowing a man, the story is ultimately about a God whose grace extends wider than we could imagine to embrace outsiders and even one's enemies.

Text for Preaching: (Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-5, 10, 4:1-11)

^{1:1}Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai ("uh-ME-tai"), saying, ²'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

^{3:5}The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' ⁵And 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.

^{4:1}But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

⁹ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ ¹⁰Then the LORD 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. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

What do you know or think about Jonah?

What do you think of when you think of the story of Jonah? Here’s what I imagine comes to mind for many people:

- “Extra! Extra! Read all about it! A giant fish swallowed a man whole, where he lived in its belly for three days before getting spit up on the beach!”

What comes to mind is a crazy, outlandish headline that gets your attention about a story that couldn’t possibly be true. Is that what comes to mind for you?

- That sounds like a “Ripley’s: Believe it or Not!” story.

Like this one: **Did you hear about the couple who lived in a giant potato?** It’s true—sort of. *Display photos.*



The Idaho Potato Commission created “The Big Idaho Potato.” The potato is 28 feet long by 12’ by 12’ built of steel, plaster, and concrete. It traveled across the country on a flatbed trailer for seven years to promote the state and its primary crop.

Now The Big Idaho Potato has been fixed up like a Tiny Home. It now is permanently “planted” outside Boise and is called the Big Idaho Potato Hotel. You can stay in it overnight as an Airbnb guest. It claims to be the only potato hotel in the world!¹

The story of Jonah being swallowed by a fish is a memorable one and it may stick out as the dominant image when we recall the larger story of the whole book of Jonah, but I don’t think Jonah and the fish are the heart of the message of the book.

Here are the Highlights—the Plot Summary

¹ From the Idaho Potato Commission. <https://idahopotato.com/big-idaho-potato-hotel#:~:text=The%20massive%20potato%20was%20created,returned%20to%20Idaho%20to%20retire.>

- God gave Jonah a job to do.
- Jonah didn't want to do it.
- God persisted.
- Jonah responds—he delivers the message.
- The people repent.
- Jonah is angry.
- God responds.

Today's Designated Reading

I expanded the designated lectionary reading a bit today to help tell the larger story. The designated text from chapter 3 begins:

- “The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying . . .”

If the reading were to start there, a careful listener would ask, “Well, what happened when the word of the Lord came to Jonah the *first* time?”

God gave Jonah a Job

Prophets, as we have mentioned before, have a particular job to do. Their primary role is to be a messenger. Their purpose is to deliver that message whose intent is to draw people back to God.

^{1:1}Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai (“uh-ME-tai”), saying, ²Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’

God's call to Jonah was to deliver this message to the people of Nineveh, “that great city,” God says. Jonah is to call them to change their behavior—“to repent,” to use the “church word.”

- Did you hear the call? “Go, at once to Nineveh. . .”

Jonah didn't want to do it—he went the opposite way

From where Jonah was, Nineveh was north and east by land. What did Jonah do?

- He went west to get in a boat and tried to get as far away from this call or job as he could.
- What's our own receptivity to God's call?
 - Listening?
 - Exploring that, checking it out, seeking to understand it or confirm it?
 - What's our (or what's my) receptivity to God's call?
 - Am I at least listening or am I running the opposite direction?

God Persisted

God persisted—after the fish spit up Jonah. . .

⁵The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’

Jonah responds to God’s call—he delivers the message and they repent!

Jonah delivers that message: “. . . he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’

What happened next?

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth” (Jonah 3:4-5).

You could say that Jonah is the most persuasive preacher or prophet ever (They change their ways!).

They repent and put on sackcloth.

Sackcloth would be like a burlap sack. It would be coarse and itchy or uncomfortable. “Putting on sackcloth” is a metaphor or symbol of humility or seeking forgiveness. They are sorry for what they have done.

- And God changed God’s mind, says the text (Jonah 3:10).

Jonah is Angry

- He is the most persuasive preacher or prophet ever (The people of Nineveh—“everyone—great and small” change their ways! (Jonah 3:5)

You could imagine that the most persuasive preacher or prophet might be pleased. And yet he’s angry.

- Why? What do you think?
 - They were not “his people.” The city of Nineveh was the principal city of Assyria, who was the dominant power in the region and therefore feared and despised by the Israelites. They were the outsiders or the “bad guys” to the Israelites.
 - He’s angry because he said he *knew* it would turn out this way:
 - “. . . for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2).
- Jonah is angry enough to wish for his own death. He goes and sits outside the city to watch and see what will happen. To be honest, he’s sort of pouting. This

part of the story is pretty dramatic—the whole story is an intentional exaggeration to make a point.

God Responds: God's Mercy and Compassion

- *Jonah confronts God—or God confronts him.*

Jonah makes a place to sit. God causes a bush to grow and give him shade. Jonah is more comfortable. The next day, a worm attacks the bush and it withers.

Jonah gets dramatic again and says he wishes to die.

God says something like

- “You were so pleased about this bush that provided you some shade, but you didn't plant it or cause it to grow.”
- **Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?**
 - ¹¹. . . should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

So What? What's this Story About?

Hmm, so what's this story about? Not the oddity of a giant fish which swallows a man whole, but . . .

- “What do you think of when you think of the story of Jonah?” is what I asked you.

The image of a fish swallowing a man whole gets our attention. It's like the amazing Giant Potato Hotel.

But the most remarkable thing about this story is not about Jonah or the giant fish. **It's about God.**

Earlier in the story, Jonah says back to God,

- “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. . .”
 - He is cranky about the Ninevites, and he says this about God like it's a problem, but it's the good news, the best news of the story.
- God's mercy is greater than we expect.
- God's grace is wider and deeper than we define.
- God's grace extends wider than we could imagine to embrace outsiders and even one's enemies.

The most remarkable thing in the story of Jonah isn't

- The defiance of Jonah

- The response of the people of Nineveh
- Or whether a giant fish swallows a person whole
- The most remarkable thing in this story is the breadth and depth of the welcoming grace of God.

In this story, Jonah gets all cranky. God calls him to deliver this message to Nineveh. He refuses and goes in the opposite direction. He gets angry with God—probably for many reasons, among them that he doesn't want to see the Ninevites treated with mercy.

We, too, like Jonah, live in a time in which we are prone to define relationships into “us and them.”

When Jonah and we, too, get miffed that this little bush that has grown up and provided us some shade and has now withered and died, let us hear God's rhetorical question,

If you were so concerned about this bush that you neither planted nor caused it to grow, **should I not be concerned about the people of Nineveh. . .?**

The good news of this story is that whoever we define as our “Ninevites,” God cares for them and still desires grace or mercy for them.

Thanks be to God for God's steadfast love.