

Sermon – “The Reluctant Preacher”

Scriptures– Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:11, Mark 1:14-20

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading is from the prophet Jonah, chapter 3, verses 1-5, and verse 10 through chapter 4, verse 11. Jonah, the reluctant preacher, is a prophet who rather than heed God’s call to preach in the city of Nineveh boards a ship for the furthest port in the other direction. His plan is foiled by a storm and Jonah gets tossed into the sea where a huge fish swallows him. While in the belly of the fish, Jonah has a change of heart. The fish spits him out on dry land and Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach repentance. The Ninivites repent and God forgives. Jonah has a difficult time swallowing God’s mercy to strangers and, rather than rejoicing, Jonah pouts! Hear now the word of God.

*1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ...When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He 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. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" <sup>5</sup>Then 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. The LORD God appointed a bush,<sup>[a]</sup> 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When 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." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And Jonah said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then 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. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Amen.*

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 14-20. Here the fish imagery continues as Jesus reels in fishermen who repent and become disciples. The word “repent,” literally means “to turn around—change the direction of one’s life!!” Rather than turning and running in the opposite direction as Jonah did, these fishermen drop everything, turn around and follow Christ. Let us open our minds and spirits to the Word of God.

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As Jesus went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed Jesus. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “The Reluctant Preacher”

Let us pray: Holy and benevolent God, give us insight into our smallness and enlarge our hearts that we may be bigger people, more loving, more forgiving, and more open. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

During our honeymoon, Peter and I saw a family of three whales in the waters of the Pacific off the coast of Maui. As a way to remember this momentous sighting, this unlikely chance occurrence, this fluke, Peter bought me a gold whale’s tail charm. It always gives me joy to wear this fluke. Over the years the whale’s tail has become more than a fluke for me, it has also become a symbol for Jonah, the story of the reluctant preacher who found himself in the belly of a whale.

I suppose it is fair to say there is a little bit of Jonah in each of us. As I read the story of Jonah, I am surprised at how much I identify with this reluctant preacher. How many of us get asked to do things we don’t want to do? For a while we might ignore the request... suppress our feelings...go in another direction. However, inevitably, unwittingly we act out our feelings and usually find ourselves in greater turmoil...symbolized in this story by the storm at sea.

When Jonah found himself thrown overboard, the big fish God sent to swallow him up and to give him a “time out” was a gift to Jonah and an affirmation of what the psalmist proclaims. *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139)*

Thank God for a kindness and a mercy, a constancy and a steadfastness that is beyond our understanding ... thank God for those times we find ourselves in the belly of a fish, waiting, praying and wading through our own stuff. It is crucial on our faith journeys for each of us to have a safe place to be honest, to be authentic in the presence of our Creator about our feelings, our doubts and disappointments, our fears and laments and those things we just don’t feel like doing anymore.

I believe that Jonah, the reluctant preacher, was only able to go to Nineveh because he spent time in the belly of that fish. Having a heart to heart with God made it possible for Jonah to turn around and to reach out to those he didn’t know or care about, even if he did it half-heartedly.

This is a poignant story about a man, a fish, a “time out” and a second chance. However, there is more to the story about this reluctant preacher as it speaks to the Hebrew community during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In the years following their return from the Babylonian exile to rebuild the temple, Israel was reluctant to reach out in compassion to share the knowledge of Yahweh, a gracious and merciful God. Sadly, they had become a community fearful of and hostile to the outside world, building walls rather than mending nets and being fishers of people.

Surely they had good reason to be afraid. They had endured a great deal and yet, they had forgotten who they were and who their God called them to be, a beacon of light to the nations of the world. The anonymous Hebrew writer told the story of Jonah, the reluctant preacher, to

confront this narrow perspective, this provincialism...to help the Jerusalem community see themselves more clearly and have a change of heart!

As the story unfolds, the Ninivites have a change of heart; Yahweh has a change of heart—but Jonah's stubbornness persists. He becomes angry, like the older brother of the prodigal son, who refuses to join in the celebration. Jonah prefers death to acknowledging God's favor to anyone but himself. The real tragedy is that Jonah is not a bad man. In fact, he's the only professedly religious character in the story.

According to early 20th century Scottish theologian, Graham Scroggie: *Jonah's one devastating weakness is his individualism. To all who are not of the same mind and attainment as himself, he is cold, unsympathetic, arrogant and patronizing.* Dr. Scroggie goes on: *Jonah is a big man tricked by his very bigness into smallness, a good man who consumes his own goodness and becomes a moral bankrupt in the eyes of the world.*

The message of Jonah is relevant for all people, especially those of us who profess to be religious. In his book Reverence, Paul Woodruff reminds us that faith is not always reverent. He writes, *because the faithful may hold their faith with arrogance and self-satisfaction.* Tragically the history of religion, time and time again, reveals this attitude within people of faith.

The message of Jonah is universal and timeless. As we hear it this morning in a very different context from when it was first told within the Hebrew community—we, too, see the Jonah's around us and within us... in his stubbornness when things don't go his way...in petty pouting. We see ourselves in his arrogance, chastising God for being too merciful. We see ourselves in his self-centeredness, cursing a plant that gave him shade one day and was gone the next.

When we have been where Jonah is and someone loves us enough to help us see the absurdity of our perspective; we have the opportunity to pause, to take a "time out," to chuckle at ourselves, and to wonder how our ways, our perspectives, and our opinions consume any goodness within us. We have the opportunity to repent, to change, and to turn around!

As we ordain and install newly-elected elders and deacons and begin a year in ministry filled with immense hope, may the story of Jonah, the small and reluctant preacher, inspire us to examine those prejudices, stereotypes, biases, and preconceived notions that divide us and keep us from celebrating the bigness of God's heart and the largeness of God's mercy. Amen.