

Turn Around

A Sermon for Worship on Missions Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 30, 2017
Text: Jonah 3:1-4:1

The story of Jonah is an ancient one, dating back to possibly the 8th century BCE (before the time of Christ). That it is a story, and not a word for word historical account of an actual event, is accepted by most biblical scholars. However, there is also little doubt that it is loosely based on what scholars do know was happening at this moment in the development of the ancient nation of Israel. The kingdom of Ninevah existed and was an enemy to the state of Israel and Jonah himself may or may not have been an actual person. But it's important to realize that whether or not Jonah was a real person and the details of this story are factual or fictional is beside the point. The story of Jonah is significant because it contains a powerful message for the ancient Israelites at a key moment in their history. That's why this story is part of the canon, or collection, of books included in the Old Testament. But it is an unusual story revealing a side to God that Jonah and other Israelites weren't all that comfortable with.

I've always been partial to Jonah, I confess. I think he is so much like us that it's hard not to feel a connection to him. God asks him to do something he doesn't want to do so he decides he

will just run away and hide from God. This sounds strange to us because how do you hide from God, right? But in Jonah's time, the Israelites were still clinging to the notion that God was anchored to place. The Babylonian captivity had started to dislodge that belief but as Jonah was struggling with God's call, this idea that God was in one place was not yet completely gone. So, Jonah thought he could hide and he found out pretty fast that he couldn't. This is where the whole whale thing happens. But, as is too often the case with stories like this one, we get hung up on the wrong image. Jonah's story is not about getting swallowed by a whale, as much as this image lends itself to all kinds of wonderful Sunday School craft ideas. Jonah's story is about what it means to listen to God with our whole hearts and minds and respond as God is asking us to.

The part of Jonah's story which we read this morning comes after the whale when Jonah has finally accepted he can't hide from God or what God is asking him to do. He's still not happy about it but he accepts it. So, he goes to Ninevah and does what God commands – he proclaims one short sentence to the Ninevites as he walks across the city, “forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown.” That's it. That's all he said. He didn't say the God of Israel would be doing this. He didn't say anything about repenting or changing anything. He only said the eight words – *eight words!* – God told him to say: “Forty days

more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown.” And I doubt he said them either enthusiastically or passionately. He did it only because God made him do it, sort of like how a teenager responds when you ask for a room to be cleaned or the trash to be taken out. I’ve always imagined Jonah walking across Ninevah rolling his eyes, kicking at the dirt, proclaiming God’s message because there was no other choice. But, darn it, he didn’t have to like it! And he didn’t.

That’s why Jonah was so upset when it worked! Those eight little words he proclaimed only half-heartedly actually worked. The people of Ninevah heard what he said and believed it. And, they took it to the next step under the king’s direction. It was the king who told the people what they needed to do to try to prevent Jonah’s prophecy from coming true. Usually, interpreting the prophecy would have been the prophet’s job but Jonah didn’t do it. He only did what God told him he had to do and not one thing extra. So, it was the king who, when he heard the prophecy, proclaimed to the people that they should repent of their sins and put on sackcloth and ashes in the hopes that God might, *might*, relent in fulfilling this prophecy to destroy Ninevah. And all the people responded with their whole hearts. Even the animals repented, the story says. Wow!

So Jonah the reluctant prophet, Jonah the rebellious prophet, Jonah the annoyed prophet also became Jonah the

successful prophet. But did this make him happy? Did this make him feel good about himself and what he had accomplished? Did this make him appreciate this amazing God whom he had been called to serve? NO!!! Jonah's success only made him angry. He was angry because the Ninevites responded and because they did so completely and so faithfully, God relented and showed them mercy. Jonah was furious at this. Jonah had wanted to fail because he wanted God to destroy the Ninevites because they were enemies of Israel. Then, when he succeeded and the people repented to such an extent that God forgave them and showed them mercy, Jonah was even angrier. How dare God, his God, the God of the Israelites show mercy to an enemy of Israel? That was just wrong, Jonah thought. So he went out to the edge of town and sat down to pout.

This is when God shows up again and confronts Jonah about his anger. But even in this confrontation God is merciful to Jonah. He tries to get Jonah to see the bigger picture in this situation through a very ingenious plan. God causes a bush to grow up over Jonah so that he might have shade and protection from the hot sun. This made Jonah happy. But the next night God sent a worm to eat the bush so that when the sun reached its full zenith that afternoon Jonah was left out in the burning sun. Jonah was unhappy again. That's when God said to Jonah, why are you upset? You did nothing to make the bush, which you

liked, grow. I did that. It came in a night and was destroyed in a night. I did that. Not you. Why should I not care about the people of Ninevah who didn't know right from wrong because they didn't know me? And that's where the story ends. No answer from Jonah. No continuing explanation from God. The story just ends with God's question.

God's question to Jonah is the most significant thing in the whole story, and it is a very difficult question for any of us to consider. After all, God is asking Jonah why God shouldn't care about someone Jonah had decided didn't deserve God's concern. Jonah had decided the Ninevites didn't deserve God's compassion. Even though the Ninevites repented very visibly and with their whole hearts, Jonah still thought they didn't deserve God's mercy. To Jonah they were still the enemy and that was that. No wonder we tend to focus our attention on the whole whale thing! Jonah surviving the whale because of God's mercy is a whole lot easier to deal with than God showing mercy to people we think don't deserve it.

Did Jonah change his mind and see God's point? Did Jonah turn around himself and his life once more as God confronted him yet another time in a way he couldn't ignore? We don't know. The text ends with God's question, not Jonah's response. That's the power and significance of this story for us, I think. Jonah doesn't show us how to respond by answering God's question

himself. Jonah doesn't give us the "right answer" to this test question. We are left hanging to answer it ourselves and we must answer it over and over again throughout our lives.

Should God show concern, show love, show mercy to people we think don't deserve it? That is THE question of Jonah's story and THE question any faithful person must consider how to answer. Another way of thinking about it is this: Do I believe that God gives everyone, *everyone*, a chance to turn their lives around, or not? The person who has been rude and unkind or just plain mean to me, do I believe God loves them anyway and is always ready to let them start over if they want to? Or do I want to hold on to my anger toward them, unwilling to accept that they might really want to change? Do I think, "well, God may love so and so but that doesn't mean I have to love them too." That's actually correct. You don't have to love them too. But you do have to accept that God does, that God always has loved them and always love them. God is always willing to give any of us a second, third, fourth, fifth chance to turn our lives around. What does Jesus say about forgiving people who have hurt us? Seventy times seven we need to forgive which means, as many times as it takes!

That's the significance of Jonah and his story in its own time and now too. Jonah shows us through how much he is like us that it is never our role, our right, to decide whom God loves. We do

not get to decide who is worthy of God's love and who isn't. We do not get to decide who God is merciful to and who he isn't. But we don't like that, do we. We don't like surrendering that kind of control to God. That's really, really difficult for us, just like it was for Jonah. We think we know who is and is not deserving of our love and concern and friendship and we want to project those very natural, very human feelings onto God. We don't like so and so because so and so was or is mean or selfish or untrustworthy or fill in the blank. Maybe we don't like someone because of how they feel about the things that are important to us. Maybe they don't care about saving the planet. Maybe they think poor people deserve to be poor. Maybe they think some people are more worthy than others of God's love. Maybe, maybe, they just don't like *us*.

The thing is, God doesn't care about any of that. God does care about justice and mercy for all God's Beloved Creation. Yes. Absolutely. God sets out God's expectations for us very clearly through the message of Jesus – Love God with all that you are and all that you have and love the other as yourself. Yes. Absolutely. The thing we have to realize is that Jonah's story reminds us how really difficult it is to love the other as yourself. And more than that, Jonah's story reminds us that God loves them, even if we don't. And that's the part that's so difficult to take. God loves them, God is ready always to forgive them – and to forgive us for

not being able to forgive those people we feel have wronged us in some way. All God asks is that we *try* to forgive them, and God takes it the rest of the way. God does forgive them when we can't and God understands how difficult it is for us to forgive some things. That understanding is God's grace, God's unconditional love. We can never earn it. No one can. It is a gift freely given and freely received. And neither can we un-earn it. That doesn't mean, however, that some people aren't just rotten because they are. It doesn't mean that some people aren't mean, miserable, short-sighted, selfish creatures who don't care about anything or anyone, even God. But that's not on you. That's on them. Their relationship with God is theirs, not yours. That's why Jesus is pretty clear when he says, "judge not that you be not judged." That's really the same thing God is saying in Jonah's story, just in a different way. Why shouldn't God care about all God's people and who are we to suggest God shouldn't? That's why I think perhaps the turning around that's happening in this story – the Ninevites turning around to do as God asks – is perhaps a different kind of turning around than we usually think. Maybe God is asking us to turn around and face God on our own, one to one, instead of turning every which way to see how God is treating folks we think don't deserve it. God invites Jonah and us to turn around. How will we do that? Why does it matter? Now that's worth thinking about! Let's tackle that together. Amen.

