

May 29, 2011

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

“God would NEVER do That!”

*Oh Jonah he lived in a whale; O Jonah he lived in a whale.
For he made his home in that fish’s abdomen; O Jonah he lived in a whale.*

*It ain’t necessarily so; it ain’t necessarily so.
The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible, it ain’t necessarily so.*

Sportin’ Life, a ne’er do well character from Gershwin’s musical, *Porgy and Bess*, sings those lines to the people of his poor, black community.

The Grand Sweep swept us into the book of Jonah this week. If asked about this book of the Bible, what would we say? We might echo Sportin’ Life’s first words of the song: this is a story about a man who was swallowed by a whale, lived in its belly, cried out to God for help, then, after God spoke a few words to the whale, Jonah was vomited out onto the shore and saved.

Is that it? Is that all there is to the story? In my life, most adult conversations about this book of the Bible focused on whether or not these events really happened. Some folks said, “Hey, God would NEVER do THAT, not REALLY. It’s just not possible. It ain’t necessarily so!” Other folks said, “Boy, are you ever wrong! God is the creator of the universe and can do anything and everything he darn well decides to do!” A common result of such exchanges was that people from each group basically felt superior to the people of the other group.

One thing I can tell you after 24 years of ministry in the United Methodist Church, is that God is not pleased with us when we do this. This does not delight God’s heart. Maybe Satan’s but not God’s.

Another thing I can tell you after 24 years of ministry in the UMC, is that people who love Christ, who give their hearts to him and serve him with gladness are represented in each of these groups.

A final thing I’d like to tell you after 24 years of ministry in the UMC is that I’m convinced God wants us to **STUDY THE MESSAGES IN THE STORY!** Not to argue about the scientific, historical nature of the story. The

story of Jonah speaks truth to us. It tells us the truth about who God is and how God behaves.

We need to approach this Scripture like trusting children, EXPECTING to discover a wonderful truth that can only be revealed through the exact words of the text. It's not easy to distill a truth spelled out by a whole story into a few sentences- but here's my attempt to capture the message of Jonah:

We are limited. God is not. It is arrogant to think we know all there is to know about God. God always loves. God always seeks to save.

What would God do? What would God NEVER do? What are some things God would never ask US to do?

-God wouldn't call an ordinary person without any remarkable gifts, without power or influence, to do some far-reaching, sweeping task. For example: expect any of US to affect conflicts in the Holy Land in some direct way.
GOD WOULD NEVER DO THAT!

-God wouldn't send a person with a message of warning to their most hated foe. For example: ask a black person to contact the KKK and get them to see the error of their ways.
GOD WOULD NEVER DO THAT!

God wouldn't send a person alone into the midst of their enemies to deliver an unpopular message. For example: ask one lone sixth grader to confront the 8th grade popular clique that's been cruelly picking on his friend.
GOD WOULD NEVER DO THAT!

But the book of Jonah tells us: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."* (Jonah 1:1-2)

Here we learn that Jonah was an obscure Galilean, with no special credentials of any kind. And he was directed to show up in an enemy city of many thousands of people with a reputation for great evil. Not only was he supposed to show up, he was supposed to warn them that God was not at all pleased with the state of affairs in Nineveh.

God would NEVER do THAT, would he?

God especially wouldn't keep asking someone to do this who didn't WANT to. Who tried to avoid it at all costs. Who was uncooperative and would rather see the enemy punished than saved.

Listen to the next verse: *But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed from Tarshish to flee from the Lord.*

Wow. Talk about a reluctant prophet. Talk about disobedience. The geography is unfamiliar to us, but this was equivalent to God sending him to L.A. and he promptly found the fastest plane to New York City. God would never keep after someone like that, would he? After all, we have free will. God would let him be, right? God couldn't have much use for him, could he?

The book of Jonah teaches us that God is willing to expend a lot of effort to encourage the desired response. A storm, the whale, God has means at his disposal to persuade and encourage. After these wild events, after the whale spat Jonah out and he was lying bewildered on the beach: *Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city. It took three days to go all through it.*

Jonah got up and trekked into the city. Now this city, this really big city, was a big, bad, wicked place. God wouldn't bother with "those kind of people" would he? They didn't worship God, care about God, or care about people in need. Jonah REALLY didn't think they deserved God's warning. God couldn't love them and want to save them- not as much as God loves and saves decent people!

God would NEVER do THAT!

But: *Jonah started into the city, going a day's journey, and he proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the*

king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

What was that last part again? The Revised Standard Version of the Bible puts it this way: *God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.*

God changed his mind? But, we all know THAT IS ONE THING GOD WOULD NEVER DO! God is forever the same, unchanging, firm, powerful.

But according to Scripture as we have it in Jonah, God did. God did change his mind. God didn't change his NATURE, but his plans.

What a story. No prophet had ever met with such success. A town of 120,000 people, changed, transformed, converted dramatically by the word of one grumbling spokesman for God. Even the ANIMALS wore sackcloth and repented!

In this story, Jonah ALONE disobeyed. The heathen sailors manning the ship he tried to flee in, the heathen population of Nineveh, the wind, the waves, the WHALE: all of them listened to God and obeyed. Surely God must have had some terrible punishment for this wayward son. Jonah even COMPLAINED when his warning worked and the people of the great city were spared.

What did God do with this tough case? He helped him understand. God gave Jonah the shade of a leafy plant, to protect his head from the burning sun as he sat outside the city pouting following his success. Then God took the shade away. The plant withered and died. That helped Jonah EXPERIENCE how precious one, green, vegetal life could be. Then God explained: all those lives, the 120,000 people, to say nothing of the animals in Nineveh... all were precious to GOD.

If we believe this story, if it does tell us TRUTH, then we have to consider what God will and does do. If Jonah's tale speaks truth, then:

- God calls all kinds of people to very hard tasks;
- God loves all creation, even bad people and our enemies;
- God keeps after us, even when we run in the opposite direction;
- God is merciful, ready to teach us, to help us understand, to spare us;
- God even delivers us when we are trapped in the belly of some wild beast, through our own wrong choices and actions.

As our opening hymn puts it: *Ponder anew what the Almighty can do!*

Remember this the next time you find yourself in the dark belly of some huge, devouring entity or experience. God will hear you. God will help you. God will ALWAYS do THAT.

GOD ALWAYS LOVES AND SEEKS TO SAVE. What an amazing God we serve. Amen.