

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 "Ministry to the Mutants" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/21/2018

Here in northern California, I am aware that there are a lot of folks who have a fish story of one kind or another! Mine involves a Grandma who made us thread our own fish hooks with worms when I was 5 years old and if the worm was too big for the hook, bite it in half so it would stay on better. I heard another from a colleague about an atheist who was spending a quiet day fishing in Scotland when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow both. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh, my God, help me!" Just then the scene froze in place and a booming voice thundered out, "I thought you didn't believe in me?" The fisherman called back, "Really, God? Until a minute ago, I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!" To a preacher, it is a great fish story.

But let's be clear, today's story is not just a fish story – it is a comedy of grand proportions. It is a satire on every exclusive, narrow minded-expression of religion there ever was. It is a comedic story about everyone who hasn't wanted to do what God commanded and did everything in their power to get out of it. When God orders Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the Ninevites to shape up and start believing in the One True God, the expression on Jonah's face, according to Frederick Buechner, was like that of a man who had just gotten a whiff of trouble in his septic tank. After all, the Ninevites were not his peeps; they were foreigners; they were mutants to be suspicious and wary of lest one get too close. And because they weren't his peeps, nothing would have pleased Jonah more than for the Ninevites to get exactly what they deserved. After all, they came from what POTUS would call a ***(blank) hole country which the Israelites found disgusting and not worthy of their attention. Nineveh was a big city

in Assyria that was hated by the Jews for not just being a different religion or race but also for being a threat to them. In the 8th and 7th centuries, the Assyrians had plundered Palestine looting and burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. In 721 BC, the Northern Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist as a result of the Assyrian conquest. In other words, to the hearers of Jonah's story, Nineveh was the object of intense hostility. Imagine an African-American being asked to go preach to the KKK, a Native American being asked to share a peace pipe with President Andrew Jackson, nicknamed "Indian killer," or the son of assassinated Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of Kim Jong-un, being asked to forgive his uncle— it was an impossible mission. It would be like a Jew crawling out from the rubble of the Holocaust, out of the ovens of Auschwitz, and pleading, "Anywhere, Lord, anywhere but Nineveh." A ministry that anyone would run from, if we were honest with ourselves.

Let me remind you, just in case you may have forgotten, about some of the troubling details in this metaphorical story. After Jonah chokes back his nausea at the thought of saving the Nineveh mutants, he jumps on a boat, not eastward towards Assyria, but west to Tarshish, somewhere around the Rock of Gibraltar. But God, who isn't limited by national borders or fool-proof hiding spots, keeps track of Jonah and sends a huge storm in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea. The sailors on board become convinced that the storm is Jonah's fault so they throw him overboard. Still trying to get out of his assignment, Jonah finds himself flailing around in the ocean and then gets swallowed up by a great big fish, (not a whale but the text says great big fish). The big fish starts bringing him back eastward, back to the shore where he started, and Jonah starts praying a flawlessly composed psalm. From sixty fathoms below the sea, in the darkness of the fish's belly, comes this loud, wailing voice, "I am cast out of thy

presence (O God). How shall I again look upon thy holy temple?" Well, the poor big fish can't stomach Jonah any longer, so he vomits up the preacher, and I would imagine that the fish feels as relieved to be free of Jonah as Jonah is to be back on dry land. Then God says for a second time, "Now, Jonah, go to Nineveh, that great big city and do what I told you to do."

Feeling like he somehow has to honor the vows he made to God while in the belly of the fish, Jonah changes his mind and agrees. And this is just the beginning of minds being changed. Having just spent 3 days in the belly of a fish with digestive gases having bleached him white, Jonah starts parading up and down the streets with a sandwich board, "The time is now -repent or die in 40 days!" He must have been quite a sight with ragged clothes, missing a couple of teeth, and a little seaweed hanging down from his left ear. He strolls into the center of town, belts out his message and then begins the countdown: "40, 39, 38, 37..." The people believe the warnings; they repent and vow to change their evil ways. The king of Nineveh hears the sermon and he repents; according to the story, even the cows hear the sermon and they repent (what cows have to repent for, I cannot say). There is a grand party to celebrate the good news of the One God who loves them and forgives them. God is so impressed with Jonah's preaching and the response of the Ninevites that even God repents – that is what the story says, God's mind was changed. Thanks to Jonah, everybody has turned toward the face of God which, if you ask me, is probably what God wanted in the first place. That is the good news. Can you guess what the bad news is?

The bad news is that when Jonah sees all this, he gets furious. He says, "Darn it, God, that is why I ran away from you in the first place. When I preach doom and destruction, I want doom and destruction. But here you go, being all merciful, kind and forgiving. It just makes

me sick.” This is theology at its most ironic. According to William Carter, it challenges the most narrow-minded, narcissistic among us, but it also niggles at the average person of faith. It disturbs us because it displays a picture of God that is so loving, patient, and relentlessly gracious that we are compelled to extend our human boundaries of God’s infinite grace as well. Why is Jonah so angry? The short answer is because God loves too many people. The long answer is, in Jonah’s words, because God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing.” That is how we expect God to be with us, but it is not always how we want God to be toward others. So we get angry with God and feel sorry for ourselves when the task of living accordingly seems impossible. How can we ever live up to such love, how can we ever change the bigger picture at work in our world?

The world conspires to make Jonahs out of us all. It beats us down and tells us we can’t really make a difference, so we just need to fall in line and make the best living we can for ourselves and our family. Our values may tell us we need to head east to Nineveh, we may need to stop seeing other nations, other faiths, other races as less deserving or equal but we turn around and walk west and get on the boat with Jonah, because it is just too hard to do anything else. We spend our precious time in the belly of a big fish, out of touch with our calling, our sense of meaning and purpose. Several years ago, Michael Lerner wrote a book called “The Politics of Meaning.” Lerner said that too often we give up on our deepest held values of compassion, caring and community because they don’t seem practical in the real world. Instead, an ethos of selfishness and materialism prevails by default. These are the values that we settle for when our deeper values seem out of reach. We may not be able to bring about racial reconciliation or even have the kind of relationships we want, but at least we

can pursue our own happiness and carve out our own little niche for peace of mind. Ironically, these attitudes give us less freedom and power as they erode community and make it less possible to live the life we want. Jonah's way seems easier at first, but in the end, we all get thrown overboard and end up in the belly of the big fish.

However, when we find the courage to speak truth to power, when the abused find the words to say me too and time's up, when the mutants discover their worth and the foreigners are embraced, when we spend less time fussing about our own space and more time creating space for all, then we begin, not only to live the values we profess, but we preach to the world a God of grace and love as God commanded. Too often we have preached a God of love and added conditions to that love when there are none. As a people of faith and as a nation, the time is now for us to repent, to change our hearts and minds concerning our judgmental attitudes which have been problematic since the beginning of humanity. Let us choose the good news over the bad, grace over exclusion, love over selfishness so that we might celebrate with the Ninevites, and even the cows, in the compassion of our God!