

OH JONAH he lived in de whale. Oh Jonah he lived in de whale. That's part of a song from George Gershwin's musical Porgy and Bess.

Sadly when many people hear the name Jonah, **the only thing they know about Jonah is that Jonah got swallowed by a big fish.** Fortunately, we get to hear a bit more about Jonah in the first reading that many Christians will hear this weekend, and what we hear about Jonah in this reading may surprise us.

In the book of the prophet Jonah, Jonah was called by God to **preach a message of repentance.** God called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh preaching against their sin and wickedness. God wants Jonah to call them to repent. God wanted the people of Nineveh to change their ways and experience his forgiveness. The Bible tells us that Nineveh was an enormously large city and an enormously sinful city.

Oh and there's one other problem. Nineveh was a **traditional enemy** of Israel. It was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, that had repeatedly attacked the chosen people and destroyed the northern kingdom

of Israel. The people who lived in Nineveh were not part of the chosen people. In the minds of the faithful people of Israel the Ninevites were foreigners and they were sinners.

God asked Jonah to go and tell them that their sins could lead to their destruction and if God had stopped right there, I think Jonah would have been happy. Jonah would have been thrilled with the fact that God was going to rain fire and brimstone upon his enemy, these foreign sinners. But God's message to Jonah didn't stop there because through Jonah, a Jewish prophet, God intended to give the foreigners of Nineveh another chance. In other words God wanted to forgive them. God wanted them to change their ways so that they could live and be their lives be renewed, and Jonah, well, he couldn't stomach this.

Apparently, Jonah wanted God's mercy to be reserved for the chosen people. **Jonah did not want his enemies to be forgiven. He wanted them to be destroyed.** So at first when God told Jonah to go and preach repentance in Nineveh, guess what he did.

Jonah tries to run away from God, which, by the way, is never a good idea. God said go this way and Jonah goes the other way. But no matter how far Jonah runs, God finds him and brings him back to where he is supposed to be, and that's where the famous fish comes in. As he runs from God, Jonah tries to sail far away from Nineveh. Eventually he's tossed overboard and swallowed by the fish and three days later the fish spits Jonah safely on to the shore. Guess where. Right there on the shore that would lead him to Nineveh. Now all of that happens in the Book of Jonah before the passage we hear today, but we need to know all of that to understand our reading today.

The first sentence says the word of the Lord came to Jonah, This was **the second time the Word of the Lord** said to get up and go to Nineveh, after Jonah tried to flee, after the storm on the ship, after being spit up on the beach by the big fish. God does something a second time after Jonah learned the hard way that he should not run away from God simply because his plans are not the same as God's plans. God

speaks to Jonah a second time and this time Jonah goes where God has sent him.

So Jonah finally preaches in Nineveh and much to his surprise, **the people repent**. God forgives all of them, and Jonah can't stand it. In fact, Jonah is so upset about God being merciful to his enemies that he tries to run away from God yet again.

God gave Jonah a second chance but **Jonah is angry** that God gave the people of Nineveh a second chance. This reluctant prophet had preached and his preaching caused his enemies to change their ways yet he did not rejoice. Jonah couldn't understand how God could love the very people that Jonah hated.

It is a great Old Testament story so human, so entertaining, and engaging. But God is asking us some serious questions through a prophet who wanted his enemies to suffer.

For instance, one question God is asking is this, what do you want for your enemies? There are people who have hurt us, people we don't like. Perhaps sometimes, people we hate. What do you want God to do for them or to them? As you watch the news, as

you hear about political enemies at home or violent enemies abroad what do you want God to do for them or to them?

Jonah wanted God to send fire and judgment on his enemies, but God's intention caught Jonah by surprise because in effect **God was telling Jonah I don't want to destroy your enemies, I want to save them. I don't want to hurt those who hurt you, I want to help them. I want to change their lives and I want you to help me** in that process. In other words God said I want you Jonah to help in the healing of your enemy. I want you Jonah to love the sinner, and I want you Jonah to break down the walls that divide people. You are my child. They are all my children and I love them, and I want you, Jonah, to love them enough to preach to them. No wonder Jonah fled. Do we want to flee?

In today's Gospel passage Jesus proclaims the core of his gospel. The time is fulfilled today. The kingdom of God is at hand today. Repent and believe in the good news today. And there's that word again, repent. It's what God wanted the people of Nineveh to do. It's what God wants the

followers of Jesus to do. It's what God wants all of his children to do. Repent, that powerful scriptural word, which means change, change your mind, change your heart, turn away from sin, embrace God's mercy, stop going the wrong way, come home to God. Simon, Andrew, James and John are so fascinated by Jesus' invitation that they leave behind what they are attached to, and they start to follow Jesus.

If like them we want to follow Christ and embrace the repentance that he calls us to, we need to be ready for some real changes. **Most Christians I know would probably say I will go wherever Christ wants to take me**, but what would you do today if Christ said to you, I want you to go to the ones who hurt you and I want you to love them. Would you go there? What would you do if Christ said I want you to go to your adversaries and help to heal them? I want you to go to the ones who have caused you pain and I want you to bring them the good news of forgiveness?

We want to believe that we would follow Christ wherever he leads but what if he wants to lead us to that place where we are the ones who take the first step in reconciling with the one who has hurt us? What if he wants to work through us to bless the very people we struggle with? Would you go there or would you want to flee like Jonah?

We were baptized to be a blessing to a bruised world. We, each one of us, were baptized to be priest, prophet and king. So often, we can see ourselves in Jonah, the prophet. Let's not hide in the belly of a whale. As we receive communion today, let us let Christ into our lives. Let us renew our commitment to follow him, listen to his call to be prophets of forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and unity, especially to those we don't like or to those whom we are separated, whether by personal history, or the history of our religious or national backgrounds.