

January 24, 2021, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
Obliging God

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God.

This passage seems to indicate, contrary to anything Jim Morrison from the Doors had to say, you can petition the Lord in prayer. The book of Jonah is much like a adage I tend to live by, “life is far too serious to be taken seriously.” Without humor we have no distance from events that threaten to undo us. Jonah was wisely written to give us a comic look at a very serious topic. The reluctant prophet given a message to carry across to an enemy nation gets thwarted in his hope of escape. He is swallowed by a big fish when he sets out to disobey God’s directive. I suppose a modern analogy would be an envoy of the United States reluctant to tell the Chinese how they can avoid an economic recession decides to go to India instead. He tossed overboard when the Panamanian tanker he’s sailing in gets overtaken by a hurricane. The panicked superstitious crew toss him overboard to appease the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. He is picked up by a Russian submarine which delivers him to Shanghai. If you think that would make a great movie you are coming close to understanding what the folks who gave us Jonah were up to.

Instead of debating fish or whale the updated version gives you a way into the reason for the authors of the Bible to tell you this tale. One thing the Bible wants you to

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know is that the prophet's message will get delivered no matter how much the messenger tries to evade it. If God wills something be done it will be done. The method may involve going around human roadblocks, stubbornness, or animosity. The other thing is the content of that message. Jonah was supposed to tell Nineveh it was all over for them, their reign of terror was ended because something more terrible was on its way.

Methodists aren't like us; their ministers are appointed by the bishop. One church complained that their new minister was full of hellfire and brimstone. They were tired of being told they were all about to be condemned to the lake of fire. The bishop decided to teach them a lesson. Her replace that preacher with an even more fired up exhorter. After some time, all was quiet so the bishop asked some members of this church how they were getting along with the new preacher. We like him because even though he tells us we are all condemned he doesn't seem so happy about it.

Jonah was thrilled to tell those people of Nineveh they were about to be judged, but he knew God's mercy. Lo and behold, to use some Tudor English, they saw the truth of his preaching and the error of their ways. Nineveh is now a dusty archeological dig, and Jonah has been joined by Pinocchio and Geppetto in that whale of a story. By the way a shocking truth in the genuine Italian version Pinocchio smushes Jiminy Cricket in the first chapter. It was quite a shock, but to understand Pinocchio it helps to know that he killed his conscience in act one. That's never a good thing. Jonah's story is about the desired effect of prophecy. Not to be confused with crystal ball prediction, Jonah's job was to point out the consequences of the behavior of his audience. There is hope that the disaster may be avoided by changing one's way.

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It's simple. Prophecy says if you continue to drive toward that cliff you will find gravity pulls you to the center of the earth at an increasing rate of about ten meters per second. If you heed the fair warnings of the prophet Penn DOT or New Jersey DOT and turn aside from the cliff you will get a more comfortable outcome. That's the story. It leads to all sorts of soul searching when bad things happen because you must have done something to bring it about. For a remedy to that mistake you must look elsewhere in the Bible. As a basic rule, however, it is better not to court disaster.

Closing prayer: Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.