

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

March 7, 2021, The Third Sunday of Lent

Matthew 8:5-13, Jonah 3:1-4

LENTEN SERMON SERIES: "THE SIGN OF JONAH –GOD OF SECOND CHANCES

Jonah obviously didn't listen to his mother. I would imagine that Jonah's mother, like most mothers in the history of the world, told him a thousand times – "If you can't do it with good grace, don't do it at all." My friend Judy's mother used to say something like that.

Doing a thing isn't as important as how you do it.

She was also known for that old favorite: "If you're going to pout and be sulky about taking out the garbage, never mind, I'll do it myself."

Followed by: "If you're going to make a fuss about apologizing to your brother for being mean to him again – Forget it! It really isn't an apology."

Mothers have skillfully used shame as an effective tool for millennia.

So that's why I think Jonah didn't listen to his mother.

There he stands in all his glory – soaked and sick and smelling strongly of whale vomit. You would think he'd have learned a little bit about humility, but NO! God gave Jonah a second chance to do the job.

Or rather, God never let Jonah off the hook the first time.

That's why God sent the storm, and the fish, and the three days of being alone in the darkness of the belly of the great big fish. Ultimately, you don't say "no" to God.

So off Jonah traipses, toward Nineveh, the capital city of his country's worst enemy. If God were to tell you to go to Tehran, the capital of Iran, and tell you to warn them to repent or God would destroy them, you might be tempted to say, "Go for it, God! I'll just stay home and let you roast the city."

But that's really not a good analogy since the US is a big country and Iran is a tiny one.

In Jonah's world, he lived in the little country, in the shadow of the big, powerful Assyrian empire. So, it might be more like sending someone from say, Havana, Cuba to Washington, DC to tell the Congress to repent or God will destroy them. Would they even listen?

Yet, Jonah has finally realized that, one way or another, he's going to have to do this job. So, with the worst grace possible, still smelling of fish and probably covered with a full body rash from the acid in the fish's belly, Jonah sets off.

We're told that Nineveh is such a big city it would take you three days to walk across it. And then we're told that Jonah only walks one day into the city, telling them God's message. God wanted the whole city to repent, and Jonah the prophet knows this, and yet he only walks one day into the city.

This sure sounds like the same Jonah who was told to go east to Nineveh and tried to sail 3,000 miles in the opposite direction

This sounds like the same Jonah went to sleep in the hold of the ship when the storm started on the sea.

This sounds like the same Jonah who could have jumped overboard to stop the storm, but made the sailors throw him overboard.

Three days and nights in the belly of the great big fish have seemingly only changed Jonah a little bit. He's doing what God wants him to do, but he's not doing it very well, or in the way we would expect a

prophet of the Lord to act.

There he is, walking into the city that God is trying to save, and every now and then Jonah bellows out “In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed.” Now, I’ve heard some poorly constructed sermons in my lifetime, as have you, I’m sure, and God forgive me, I’ve preached some poorly constructed sermons in my time. But this one tops the list. One sentence, that’s it. He never says:
 who is going to destroy the city,
 or what they’ve been doing to get themselves into this mess,
 or what they could do to change the outcome.
 It’s a done deal, in Jonah’s book. “In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed.” Period. End of sermon. Good-bye.

Then Jonah walks the one day back out of the city, plops himself down on a nearby hillside, and waits for the hellfire and brimstone to begin. Literally.
 It’s such a Jonah thing to do; get a good seat and wait for the fireworks to begin.
 We will finish the story next week, but I’ll give you a hint – Jonah’s going to be just a little bit disappointed!

That darned God, so gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah tried so hard to get God to follow through on the whole fire and brimstone thing, but God just can’t seem to go there.

God frog-marches Jonah to Nineveh, and sees to it that he does as he’s told. Jonah does the worst possible job, and STILL, God’s will is done.

I guess that’s good news for you and me.
 It means that even when we don’t listen to our mothers,
 even when we do things with horrible grace,
 even when what we say is sulky and pouty and downright rude, even then,
 God’s will can be done.

Our God is the God of second chances. And third and fourth and fifth and 70 times 7 chances.
 Our God is gracious, slow to anger and abounding – abounding, abounding, abounding - in steadfast love.
 And ready to relent from punishing,
 even when, like Jonah, we do things with the worst grace possible.
 Even when we don’t listen to our mothers! AMEN

With support from Creative Communications and the Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer, Duluth, MN