

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stories of Faith: Jonah
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Jonah 3 - 4

I am honored to be here this morning. I can't tell you how great it is to be with you again here at Faith Mennonite. I must confess that I have had a hard time with the prophet for this morning: Jonah. Scholars speak of Jonah as a minor prophet, the fact is that the only time I ever heard of Jonah is in this short book—4 chapters, 48 verses. And of course, what we remember is his time in the whale, following his reluctance in the first place to go to Nineveh—actually, he ran in the opposite direction, an 180 degree turn from Nineveh, then he gets on the boat, there was a storm, and since Jonah knew that he was the cause of storm, he was thrown over, then swallowed by the whale, where he spent three days (an auspicious time) until the whale spewed him up on dry land.

By the time of today's scripture, God has gotten Jonah's attention and he sets out to preach repentance to the people. Now I don't know if Jonah was afraid for his life when he went to Nineveh. The city was in Assyria and that country had a terrible reputation. Assyria (in present day northern Iraq) was known as the vilest of Gentile nations—it was a bad place. Frederick Buechner writes about Jonah's reluctance, "First, the Ninevites were foreigners and thus off his beat, and in the second place far from wanting them to see them saved, nothing would have pleased Jonah more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them."

But go, he does. According to the scriptures, Nineveh was a big place—three days' journey across the city. Jonah goes part way—one day's journey and he delivers the message. "In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown." Given how Jonah felt about the Ninevites, I can't imagine that he delivered this message with much passion or urgency, but it doesn't take the Ninevites nearly that long—the word spreads like wildfire, and the scripture says, "the people believed God." It didn't make any difference if they believed Jonah or not, they did believe God, and once the people believed, they fasted and put on sackcloth and ashes. They repented of their evil ways, from the highest to the lowest.

And all this happens, before the word even reaches the King. We read, "When the news reached the king." Jonah didn't tell the king—the people did. And when the king hears, he makes the proclamation and makes the repentance official—even putting the animals in sackcloth and ashes, and all shall cry mightily to God. The king continues: "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

And God changes God's mind about the calamity that he said he would do—and he didn't do it. End of the story of the Ninevites—but not of the story of Jonah.

Jonah is angry. And he tells why: God, this is exactly what I knew you would do. I knew you'd save these people. I know that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and steadfast love. There is no rejoicing over the people who were saved, no elation that he was such a Billy Graham that people heard and acted on the message. He is angry and wants to die—a pretty extreme reaction, if you ask me.

So, Jonah goes to the edge of town, and as Buechner writes, sat down under a leafy castor oil plant to shade him from the blistering sun and smoldered inwardly. It was an opening God could not resist.

God caused the castor oil plant to shrivel up to the last leaf, and when Jonah got all upset at being back in the ghastly heat again, God pretended to misunderstand what was bugging him. "Here you are, all upset out of pity for one small castor oil plant that has shriveled up," God said,

“so what’s wrong with having pity for this whole place that headed for Hell in a handcart if something’s not done about it?”

And the book of Jonah ends with this question. God asks Jonah, “Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, with 120,000 people?”

I must confess that I feel a bit like the end of the book—I ended up with more questions than answers. I know that you are looking at Old Testament prophets this summer, but before I turn to Jonah, I’d like to look at those Ninevites.

I was absolutely intrigued and not a little skeptical of their total and rapid conversion. A whole city—repenting, fasting, clothed in sackcloth and ashes. Not just a verbal “I’m sorry,” but visibly repenting. I read somewhere that the book of Jonah is read at Jewish homes during Yom Kippur, the time of atonement. From the highest to the lowest. And then the king says something that catches my eye: All shall turn from their evil ways AND the violence of their hands. The “evil in their hearts” is vague, ambiguous, but the phrase, “violence of their hands,” is stark and specific. This could have referred to the way in which the people of Nineveh treated their prisoners. It was known as a particularly brutal place.

But I also know a bit about the hands in Faith Mennonite. These hands tend gardens, chop vegetables and cook, build pergolas, fix up old houses, enfold people in hugs, hold grandchildren in their laps as they rock them, these hands sew, they knit, they crochet, they take care of the elderly, these hands work for peace—I know as sure as I am standing here, that these hands are NOT the hands of violence.

But this is the Fourth of July week-end and we are celebrating the birth of our country, with all the trappings of patriotism, picnics, fireworks. Even perhaps I might turn on public television tonight and be able to hear the 1812 Overture, with the cannons booming and watch fireworks exploding.

And it wasn’t much of a stretch to think about our country. But if I think more broadly about the violence of hands, this could be extended to mean many many things—not just domestic violence, crimes against persons—did you know that Minneapolis has already seen more murders this year than in 2009, the list goes on—and then there is the violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, so many other places in the world we don’t know about, and we can broaden out to the ravaging of our planet, drilling for oil deep in the ocean, clear cutting trees, etc. etc. So much violence—all you have to do is look at the morning paper, and I don’t know what I as an individual can do, and it is more than a bit depressing.

Now perhaps I have stretched this a bit, as Nineveh was not a nation, but only a city of 120,000, but even so, the conversion of a whole city seems pretty fantastic to me—the people must have had hearts open to hear Jonah’s message. But a whole city to change? Perhaps this should really be one of the miracle stories.

When I consider our polarized country, and an election coming up this fall, passions will run high and it will be hard, if not impossible, to find common ground on anything.

We may not be a city of 120,000 people, but we are becoming increasingly aware of how interdependent we are, and of the fragility of our planet and how much damage the violence of our hands has wrought.

It seems we have no shortage of present-day experts warning us of climate change, the dangers of rising seas, the shortage of food, displacement of people worldwide and as we are all too aware with the oil spill in the gulf of our insatiable appetite for energy and of our reliance on technology to fix anything and everything. So I wonder who the present-day prophets are today—I remember listening to Walter Brueggemann an Old Testament scholar—who I keep hearing calling us to repentance, or William Sloan Coffin, another modern-day prophet. Who can grab our attention long enough for us to listen so that we really will turn from our ways? And who can we really believe? Or maybe we just aren’t there yet. An old Chinese saying,

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Maybe Jonah just came along at the right time—and the people were open to the message.

A couple of words about Jonah. When Jonah sits in the shade of that lovely castor oil tree, he rejoices. We want God to be merciful and forgiving of us—but merciful and forgiving and compassionate of everyone, even our enemies? That’s not fair, we say. I keep going back to the story of the Prodigal Son who returns home, gets the fatted calf, the ring, all the goodies—while that elder son, the one who stayed home, worked hard, was the “good” boy is angry that the father forgives the wayward son and does it so quickly. I know there is a bit of Jonah and the elder brother in me. I want God to be God on my terms—I have my biases. I want God’s justice to be my justice—“It’s not fair.” We want God in our hip pocket, a personal God, one who will punish our enemies, give them what they deserve—yet, we want God to be generous, merciful and gracious to us, our family, our friends. . .but beyond that?

And like the elder son in the prodigal Son story—this story is open-ended as well. We don’t know if the elder brother went into the party—and we don’t know what happened to Jonah—it ends with a question mark, and perhaps that is that way it should be.

Perhaps the best we can do is not do violence with our hands and pray that the cooking, building, cooking, sewing, hugging, being open and aware and compassionate, working for peace, is all we can do in our corner of the world.

A open-ended scripture—but I do there is one certainty. That of our God., a God who can change God’s mind when he saw the people relent and repent. I am certain our God is a God who suffers when God’s people suffers, a God who has compassion on others—even foreigners. A God who hears and is gracious and merciful to all—a God whose compassion is wide enough to embrace us all, and folks, that is the good news. Amen.