

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost A

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

If *I* were the one responsible for translating the Bible, I think the full title of Jonah's story would be,

“Jonah and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day”

Catchy, isn't it?

I mean, just read the book. When I think of bad days, Jonah comes to mind.

First, he hears a call from God to prophesy. Now God, in case you haven't noticed, prophecy is one of those gifts that tend to get people killed. So already, we're off to a rocky start.

Then, Jonah finds out that he is being called to prophesy to Nineveh.

Nineveh??

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God, you *do* know that Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, right? The same Assyria that likes to raid our kingdom and destroy our cities? You want me to actually go to the city itself and prophesy to *them*? Oh please, please tell me you want me to give them good news.

You *don't*? “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Great.

So, you want me to:

Take on a job that gets people killed,
Go to a city full of very bad people that like to *kill*
people like me,
And give them very bad news?

Heck no, I won't go! And off he goes.

Being called to be a prophet is not an easy job. Many of the Old Testament prophets resisted their call at first. But none of them went to the extreme lengths that Jonah did.

Jonah didn't just resist, he fled the country. He picked the furthest point in the known world that a ship would take

him to. Tarshish was a port town in modern Spain. It would be like if God told me to go to Maine and I went to Hawaii instead.

Jonah thought that if he could just get away from God's country, he could get away from God. He assumed that God, being the God of Israel, wouldn't be able to follow him.

I'm sure most of you know the rest of the story,
How a storm threatens to destroy the boat Jonah is on,
How he gets thrown overboard and swallowed by the fish,
How he gets vomited out onto the beach, and finally goes to Nineveh to give his 8 word prophecy.

And that brings us to today's reading.

Jonah's prophesying is *wildly* successful. He is the single most successful prophet in the Old Testament. He preaches for one day, and uses only 8 words: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

And Nineveh immediately and overwhelmingly repents. Not even Israel or Judah, God's chosen people, were this

receptive to the prophets. He has just convinced an entire wicked, evil city to turn away from their bad. This sounds like very good news and a job well done by Jonah.

But Jonah doesn't see things that way.

Jonah knows that Nineveh is a city full of wicked, evil people. He knows that for all they have done, they deserve to die.

He's right. The people of Nineveh *did* deserve God's wrath. It's interesting to note that the word in Hebrew translated as "overthrown" is the same word used to describe what God did to Sodom and Gomorrah. So maybe a better translation of Jonah's prophecy would be, "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be utterly, catastrophically destroyed by the wrath of God."

But Jonah knows God.

Jonah knows that God is a merciful God as well as a God of justice and judgement.

The book of Jonah is not the only time Jonah appears in the Bible. He is mentioned as a prophet deep in the 2nd book of Kings, Jonah, son of Amittai, from Gath-hepher.

There he prophesies that, *despite* the fact that Israel has not been a righteous or just nation, God will expand its territory. God shows mercy to Israel, even though they don't deserve it.

So in this tale, Jonah of course knows God's mercy—when it comes to Israel, that's what he's come to *expect* from God. But he doesn't want Nineveh to know that. Jonah is so self-centered, he would rather see the whole city burn. *They* are not deserving of mercy.

I find it hard to pass too harsh a judgment on Jonah.

I like to think that I'm a pretty decent person. I don't steal. I don't murder. I don't commit adultery. Okay, I may covet my neighbor's awesome big screen TV, and Pastor Bill has a sweet bike, but overall, I think I do pretty well.

My parents worked hard to provide for my sister and me, helped me get a job, tried to teach me responsibility. I've paid my dues, and I deserve to be treated accordingly.

Certainly, I deserve to be treated with more respect than that welfare family with six kids and a mom who's never worked an honest day in her life.

And that drug addict who's wasted all his money on his filthy habit and has the nerve to beg for *my* money doesn't deserve an *ounce* of respect until he gets clean. I'll help the poor, but only if they help themselves too.

Where would we be, if God worked the same way we did.

What's ironic about Jonah's anger is that he can't see that he is just as guilty as the Ninevites.

He hears God's call and does everything an Israelite, a prophet of God should *not* do, yet he clings to the delusion that he is a righteous man before God. The immediate repentance of the Ninevites puts Jonah's ridiculous tantrums into even starker contrast.

Jonah is so blinded by his sense of self-righteousness, he can't see that he and his people would not be where they

were if it were not for God's mercy—the same mercy that God shows to Nineveh.

We, like Jonah, like to think that as followers of Christ, as baptized children of God, we are owed *more* because of our devotion. Like the early workers of Jesus' parable, we feel that if God can be merciful to the "others", we should get a little extra.

By all means, God, give good things to the "others", but let's be realistic, we have been good, and we should get a bonus.

We are so pre-occupied with our own righteous, we can't stand to see someone who doesn't have the devotion and dedication we do get the same reward. It goes against everything society teaches us to think.

We are lucky, that God doesn't think the same way we do.

We are lucky, because if God rewarded us based on our merits *NONE* of us would be getting paid, let alone getting a bonus.

We are lucky because God is generous and loving to us, who are just as miserable and misguided as Jonah, the Israelites, Judeans, Muslims, thieves, extortionists, ponzi and pyramid schemers, extremists, gang members, murderers, rapists, terrorists.

We are lucky because God cares so much for creation, for *all* of God's children, that heaven rejoices when even people like us cry out to God with the words, "We are so... very... sorry."

Jonah was wrong when he thought that by fleeing from God's country, he could flee God. God is not confined to a country, a region, or a people. Those distinctions are *ours*, and they are wrong.

When we shun another because we are their better,
When we hate another because they don't believe the
 Same way we do,
When we would rather kill another because we are
 Convinced that there is no other way,

We are no better than Jonah, who is angry enough at God's mercy that he would rather *die* than see God's mercy poured out on those who he hates.

We are no better than Jonah, who was so self-righteous, he couldn't imagine that he was just as guilty and worthless as Nineveh.

We are all God's children, God's creation. Jonah was concerned for the bush he did not plant or cause to grow, and we are concerned for the works of our hands and everything we invest our money and time into.

And should not God be concerned with all of creation, and every single person in it, who has been individually and lovingly shaped by God's hands and invested with the breath of life?

Thanks be to God for that concern for *all* of us creatures, who do not even know our right hands from our lefts.