

## A Whale of a Tale

Jonah 1:1-17, 2:10

Jonah 3:1-10

There are as many variations on this story as there are ministers in the world, I am sure, but the story is told of a minister who took her car to the garage for some repairs. When she went to retrieve it, and the mechanic told her how much the bill was, she was horrified. She exclaimed, "But I'm just a poor preacher." To which the mechanic replied, "Yes, so I've heard, *and* I'm told you don't make much money either."

The story of Jonah is the story of the poorest preacher, or at least, of the poorest sermon that has ever been recorded. Jonah doesn't want to deliver the message. Jonah hates the Ninevites and wants nothing to do with them and so he runs away from God's call. But after being spewed out of the big fish, whatever it might be, Jonah at least knows the second time God calls him that he must do as he is bid. And he preaches a seven word sermon. No hope, no love, no despair, no invitation. "In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed."

Jonah's story holds out hope for us when we seek to find the right words and know that we fail. For although Jonah has no desire for his words to have any impact on the people of Nineveh, Israel's enemy, the people of Nineveh believe and repent and pray that their repentance will turn away God's anger. And God changes God's mind, repents of the anger against Nineveh and spares the lives of all those who dwell there.

The worst sermon ever preached and the city repents and the people are spared. It gives us pause when we blame poor preaching for our lack of spirit, of witness, of faith or of growth. For the story of

Jonah tells us that God can and does work through all those who listen with their hearts and seek to understand. It isn't the preaching that brings conversion, but the state of the listeners.

How comforting for every preacher who ever experiences a dry spell. It doesn't depend on us. How encouraging for parents or friends who seek to find the words that will help someone else, to know that although the words may not be eloquent, if the time is right, if the listener is open, then God can and does work miracles through the poorest of instruments. It's humbling as well because it shows us that the response we get may not be the result of our eloquence, but rather because God and the listener have found common ground and have come to an accord of their own.

Jonah isn't happy about the transformation. Jonah slinks off and pouts. Jonah can't quite comprehend that God can love and forgive those whom Jonah hates, that God's idea of justice may not coincide with Jonah's or with ours. We really don't like to think about such things. God isn't limited by Jonah's personal preferences, or by ours. It means that God loves Palestinians and Israelis alike. It means that God loves those for the Keystone pipeline and those against it. We like to think that God is on our side. But the reality is that God doesn't choose sides, God chooses people. Regardless of their position, their race, their creed, their colour, their gender or their sexual orientation, God embraces those who embrace God's values. There will always be true people of God on every side of every issue, which can be disconcerting. There will also be enemies of God on every side of every issue, which invites us to become more discerning and more open, seeking to see beyond our prejudices and our barriers.

Jonah was written by a prophet who invites the nation of Israel to realise that although they may be the chosen people, they are not the only people God loves.

Through Jonah we are invited to embrace our call, even when we feel that our gifts are not equal to the task. It's also a prompting to listen to the persistent voice, and to realise that there is no real way to escape God.

How do we respond when we are called to do something we don't want to? A colleague suggests that people turn to drugs and alcohol, not only to deaden their pain with the world, but also to drown out the call of God, to turn off the voice which summons them to do something with their lives which circumstances or past experiences have told them it is "impossible" to do. How many things do we call "impossible" when, in fact, it is just that we — for a wide range of "very good" reasons — don't want to do them? Or don't see how they can be done? What do we use to deaden the sound of God's voice? What do we do when the "call" is ridiculous?

Everything in the story of Jonah is larger than life. Everything in the story of Jonah challenges us and our understanding of God. The people of Israel understand the story of Jonah to be a call to recognise that God is far bigger, far more loving, far more generous, than we can imagine. The story prompts us to stretch our expectations, to recognise that God doesn't endorse or condone our pettinesses. God will not support Jonah in Jonah's desire to see the city of Nineveh destroyed. No more will God endorse our smallness.

As you might imagine, every time we come to the story of Jonah the on-line discussion group has much to say about the big fish. Fish

can't vomit because it would mess up their gills. Whales don't swallow people .... But we too are reminded that when we get caught up in these details we are missing the broad strokes of the story.

It's impossible for a fish to throw up.

It's impossible for a fish to swallow a man,

It's impossible for a man to live inside a fish or whale or any animal for three days.

It's impossible for a storm to be controlled, sent simply to bring back a runaway.

It's impossible for a storm to be quieted with a human sacrificial tossing.

It's impossible for God to love a rebellious, runaway child.

It's impossible for the bloodthirsty Ninevites to turn from their wicked ways.

It's impossible for a plant to grow up overnight.

It's impossible for it to be just as quickly destroyed by a mealy mouthed green worm.

It's impossible for God to speak to a sinful human being – again.

It's impossible for God to forgive bloodthirsty gang-style Ninevites.

It's impossible for God to forgive God's self-centred, bigoted representative.

It's impossible for Jesus to use Jonah as the only prophet to be the prototype for his glorious resurrection from the dead,

And yet, "with God, all things are possible"

Isn't it wonderful how God makes foolish the wisdom of this age?!

Amen.