Sunday, January 26, 2003
DON'T GO THERE
Jonah 3:1-5,10

The book of Jonah in the Old Testament is not really a book at all. It's a short story, a parable — not meant to be read as history, but as a teaching story. It is very similar to the kind of parables Jesus told. It is one of the most powerful stories in the Bible. It's a story about a preacher who tries to run away from God, gets swallowed up by a giant fish, and in the process ends up where he does not want to be, but where God wanted him to be in the first place.

One theme in the story is that you can try to run from God, but you can't hide. A second theme is that you can be angry with God for the wrong reason. A third theme is that God's love is bigger than you ever imagined. That love is infinite and unconditional, and it cannot be controlled by you or any church or any religion. God is bigger than the neat little carrying cases you design.

The story of Jonah is a funny story, a parody of prophecy and preaching, a satire about some of your most deeply held religious convictions.

The Bible tells you nothing about Jonah except that God told him to go to Nineveh, which is described as a great city. Historically, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, but in the story of Jonah, it's a metaphor for any large city in the world, any group of people, or any problem you don't want to face. To the Hebrew listeners who first heard the story, Nineveh was the symbol for everything allied against them. Just as journalists once spoke of "Moscow" not simply as a city in the former Soviet Union, but as the heart and soul of an "evil empire," so Nineveh stood for everything foreign and evil — a code word for "enemy."

In this kind of thinking, the capital city of your enemy is not filled with men and women, children and cattle; it is filled with enemies who stand against you. Luckily, you have God on your side. God always stands against your enemies, right?

So it is good news when you are certain that God has decided to destroy Nineveh, your enemy. There's only one catch: "You, Jonah! Go to Nineveh. Tell them they are not to be destroyed. Tell them God loves them also."

Ironically, today, ancient Nineveh would be located in a part of the world that many people in our own nation now find to be very wicked.

In the story, Jonah does not want to go because he believes the people there do not deserve to hear about God's love. Jonah wants vengeance, not preaching. He doesn't like them because they worship a different God, and they are not descendants of Abraham and Sarah, so they are not part of God's chosen people. It's impossible for Jonah to think that God would care about them. But on the other hand, Jonah is afraid that God might be foolish enough to love them.

Here you discover the first truth the story wants you to see: God sometimes calls you to face things you do not want to face, to speak to people you don't want to speak to, to confront situations you prefer to ignore. Every person has a Nineveh. You have yours, and I have mine. It's sometimes called the "elephant in the room." It is something or some issue you know you

should confront, but you consistently refuse to do so. The roads to Nineveh are identified by signposts that read in modern slang, “Don’t go there.”

You’ve been in conversations that have ended with the phrase, “Don’t go there.” Sometimes Nineveh is outside of you — it can be a person, a relationship, an issue, a job, a phone call, a decision. Sometimes Nineveh is inside of you. It can be a bad habit, a feeling, an envy, an ambition, a fear, a prejudice. It can be thirty extra pounds or a third drink in the evening. You’ve got a Nineveh, maybe even more than one. I’ve got a Nineveh. “Don’t go there.”

Jonah responds to God’s call by jumping on a ship headed in the opposite direction — towards Tarshish, a hiding place. Again, the story invites you to look at yourself. Where do you go to hide from what you know you should be doing? If you have a “Nineveh,” you also have a “Tarshish.” It could be work — you tell yourself and others that you’re too busy to deal with your Nineveh. Or it could be distractions, TV, social media, or whatever you do to avoid what you need to be doing.

But Jonah is in for a series of surprises. God sends a storm to mess up his escape. The sailors, who are more superstitious than religious, begin to call on their own multiple gods. The captain wakes a sleeping Jonah and tells him to pray. They need to cover all their bases. But prayer doesn’t work. So they try rolling dice. When the going gets tough, the tough go gambling. They cast lots to discover on whose account the storm has come up. Now they know Jonah is the problem. To his credit, Jonah admits he is the problem and volunteers to be thrown overboard. Why he doesn’t jump overboard himself, I don’t know. To their credit, the sailors at first reject this offer and try rowing faster to outrun the storm, but it doesn’t work. So reluctantly, they throw Jonah overboard, and the storm ceases.

Then Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish. Again, the story is filled with symbolism. Being swallowed by the big fish represents Jonah hitting bottom — the turning point. Now he realizes that all of his running away is not working. This is not what he had in mind. The path he has taken does not go anywhere near where he wants to be. He is at the end of his rope. And as many of you have discovered, when you are at the end of your rope, God is there waiting. You can run, but you can’t hide.

The huge fish vomits him out onto the land. What a way to travel. Next is my favorite part of the story, hilarious in its understatement: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up. Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.” After being in the belly of that fish, Nineveh was looking better all the time.

Now, reluctantly, Jonah begins to preach. He calls the people to repentance, and to his amazement, they actually do it. You would think that any preacher would be delighted to have that kind of response. But Jonah is furious. He is angry at his success. He is angry with God because he knows God will forgive these people who don’t deserve it. He wants to see them punished by God. Jonah is furious with God. He says, “Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish, for I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Here you had to go and be forgiving to these people, and you made me help you to do it.” Thomas Carlyle, in one of his poems, writes, “I hate God’s enemies with a perfect hatred. Why can’t God do as much?”

Here again, the story reminds you of a basic truth that most people have trouble remembering: the real business of God is forgiveness, not revenge.

There was an article in the news recently that reported with a sense of amazement and disbelief that people who received financial settlements after sexual abuse by priests did not feel better. The reporter did not seem to understand it. It has been similarly reported that those who watch executions in an attempt to bring closure to a terrible period in life do not, in fact, feel better. This is not to say that people who commit crimes should not be prosecuted and punished, but financial settlements and punishment do not touch the core issue. Revenge does not bring inner peace.

Jonah won't change. In the story, God tries to tickle Jonah into a chuckle. Jonah goes up on a hill to pout. God causes a plant to grow and provide shade for Jonah while he sulks. Then God causes a worm to attack the plant and make it wither away. Jonah sulks even more. He is now left in the hot sun rather than the shade and is tremendously angry about the loss of the shade. He goes into mourning for the dead plant. God then says to Jonah, "Come on, lighten up. If you can feel sorry for the plant, surely I can feel sorry for all those people of Nineveh."

And that's how the story ends, with that hanging question: Should God not care about Nineveh? It's a good question, and it remains hanging there in your life and mine. Should God not care for Nineveh? Should God not love people you don't like? Should God not love people you are convinced don't deserve it? Should God not love people who don't define their religious faith using the same words and believing the same doctrines that you do?

"Sure," you might say, "it's all right for God to love them if they repent like the people of Nineveh did." But do you believe it when your enemies repent? Wouldn't you rather have a God who hates what you hate? That's what Jonah wanted.

I am convinced that in the story, God wanted Jonah to learn to laugh at his pretensions and self-righteousness. Too often, religious people take themselves too seriously and do not learn to laugh at their prejudices, hatreds, and small vision of God's purposes.

Mark Twain had difficulty understanding the enmity among God's creatures. He said that he tried an experiment:

"So I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. After a little training, I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added a Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

As God sees it in the last verses of the story of Jonah, there's only one kind of people on earth: God's people, each one created in God's image. "You are concerned about the bush," God said to Jonah, "for which you did not labor and which you did not grow... And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons, people I created and people I love?"

Jonah's understanding of God is too limited. The God revealed in the story of Jonah is not the private possession of any group. The story wants to remind you that too often you regard religion as a means to get God to do what you want, when the real point of religion is to get you to do what God wants.

The good news is that God is always greater than your understanding, your definition, or your doctrine of God. God is bigger than you think, particularly when it comes to love and compassion. God's love encompasses all that God has made and crosses all kinds of human boundaries. Amen.