

SERMON: Forget About the Whale

Text – Jonah 4:10-11

A Sermon preached by the Rev. John H. Houdeshel

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First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA

"God said, 'what's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure; this big city of more than a hundred and twenty thousand childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?'" (The MESSAGE)

I feel very blessed, as the senior member of the clergy staff, to have the privilege and opportunity to serve as the "anchor man" on the series of meditations based on the books of the so-called "Minor Prophets" - all of us bearing in mind that the word "Minor" must be understood in the sense of small or short, certainly not in importance. More than that, I have received the additional blessing of being able to choose the book upon which I am to present my message - with the obvious limitation that it had to be one which had not already been presented. Since this message comes at the end of the series from the Old Testament and just before a much longer series on the words of Jesus from the New Testament, it has seemed to me that the best choice would be the book of Jonah, and it is my hope and prayer that after another 20 minutes or so, you will agree with me.

I realize that to ask you to forget about the whale with a text from the book of Jonah almost insures that you will not. It's like asking a little boy to sit on a chair quietly for ten minutes and not think about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. What else will he think about? Nevertheless, I will continue with my request because I have strong feelings for doing so.

As one who has been reading and studying the Biblical text for many years, it seems sad to me that what I consider to be very important messages in the book of Jonah have been almost completely lost in the discussion of whether or not a human being can survive in the innards of a whale for three days and nights. This is the way in which Eugene Peterson describes it in his introduction to the book of Jonah in the "MESSAGE." "Everybody knows about Jonah. People who have never read the Bible know enough about Jonah to laugh about him and the whale. Jonah has entered our folklore. There is a playful aspect to his story, a kind of slapstick clumsiness about Jonah as he bumbles his way along, trying, but always unsuccessfully, to avoid God." Thus I have an ardent desire this morning to try to lift up what I perceive to be at least some of the very important messages of the book.

The most important message, it seems to me, is that God really loves the world and everything and everyone in it. In the words of the hymn, "This Is My Father's World." It is His by right of creation and salvation and redemption. This becomes quite obvious in the books of the New Testament. Recall the opening words of the familiar text, "For God so loved the world. . ." However that message does not appear very often in the Books of the Old Testament. It is in the Book of Jonah that it is stated most clearly.

Because we Christians have included the books of the Old Testament as a part of our "Canon," we tend to feel that this revelation of the love and compassion which God has for the whole world is entirely consistent with the message of the books of the Old Testament and that the concept of the love of God has always been seen as universal and all-inclusive. However, when we read these books more closely we realize that this is not the case. When God revealed Himself to Abraham, some 4,000 years ago, He gave him the promise, in Genesis chapter 12, "I'll make you a great nation and bless you. I'll make you famous, you'll be a blessing. I'll bless those who bless you, those who curse you I'll curse. All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you." As we make our way through the Biblical record, we read how this "blessing of God" was shown in the relationship which developed between God and the descendants of Abraham, but there is not a whole lot of evidence that this "blessing" was communicated to any other people.

Again and again, we read how Abraham's descendants were in an adversarial relationship with the other nations and were exhorted by the prophets to avoid any connection with those who were not a part of his family - whom they then began to call the "people of God." The early descendants of Abraham were called "Hebrews" after the name of Heber, who was an ancestor of Abraham. His grandson was Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, and his descendants were called Israelites. One of his 12 sons was Judah and since his descendants became the rulers they came to be called Jews. The "religion" which developed came to be called "Judaism." As the years passed, this "religion" became more and more exclusive and the Jews, for their part, were warned not to have any dealings with people of other nations. In common parlance, non-Jews were given the designation of "Gentiles," - the Hebrew word is "Goiim" or in the singular form "Goy." "Abie's Irish Rose" may have been a "thing of beauty," but she was a "Goy" forever.

Happily, the Book of Jonah has a message which is completely contrary to that. Right at the outset we read the words which are startling. (I need to say parenthetically that throughout this presentation I will be reading from the translation which was made by Eugene Peterson which he titled the "MESSAGE.")

"One day long ago, God's Word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh: Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." What an unusual command that is. When we read of God's "call" to the other prophets, they are all commanded to carry the message of God to their own people. In this instance, God was commanding a prophet to go and preach to a city of non-Jews - the Goim. He was to be the first in what turned out to be a long line of "foreign missionaries." More than that, this city was the capital of Assyria, a nation which was growing in military power and might, dominating more and more of its smaller neighboring nations. Even worse than that, this is a nation which, in about only 80 years after Jonah's ministry, was going to conquer the nation of Israel and carry many of its people away into captivity. In fact, the conquest of the nation of Israel was going to be so complete that it would never again be able to survive. Jonah simply could not stand the thought of going to preach to such a people and took an action which expressed his conviction. He simply refused to go.

That's not quite right. He did not simply refuse to go. He went off in the opposite direction. Nineveh was east of Jerusalem. Jonah went to the port of Joppa and bought a ticket for passage on a ship

going west - to Tarshish, which has been identified as Spain. At that time, the eastern extent of the Mediterranean Sea was considered to be the end of the world. Go beyond that and you will fall off of the edge. However, the ship was not very far from Joppa before a tremendous storm broke out. The sailors started to do everything they knew how to do to keep the ship afloat - even to throwing all of the precious cargo overboard. The nature of the storm convinced them that this was not an ordinary storm, but actually was an expression of the displeasure of one or another of their gods. They began praying to their several deities and enlisted everyone else on board to do the same. When the captain found Jonah, he was startled to see him sound asleep in the hold. With a degree of anger, tinged with a degree of unbelief that this man could be sound asleep in such a circumstance, he wakened Jonah and commanded him to join the rest of them in praying to his God. When the storm continued, they felt that there must be one individual who was responsible for rousing the anger of his God, so they drew straws to find out who the culprit might be, and, of course, Jonah came up with the short straw. They asked what he had done, and Jonah confessed that he was running away from his God and to appease the anger of his God, they must throw him overboard. They were reluctant to do that and tried with might and main to take to the oars and bring the ship to land, but all to no avail. Finally, with a prayer to their various gods for pardon, they did throw Jonah overboard. The sea immediately became quiet.

Meanwhile, God had prepared a "great fish" to swallow Jonah and provide a measure of hospitality to him for three days and nights. That's what the Hebrew text says, "a great fish." The Greek translation of the Hebrew, which we call the "Septuagint" also has the words for a "a great fish." It was Jerome, who, when he translated the passage into Latin, introduced the word "whale." Marine biologists tell us that a whale is not a fish, but an air-breathing mammal. All right, so it was a great fish - forget about that too. During that time, Jonah offered a very fervent prayer to God for his deliverance, and that prayer, being offered in such an extreme condition and unique environment is a classic expression for deliverance, and can serve well for anyone who feels that his or her situation is beyond all help. God heard and gave an affirmative reply and the "great fish" vomited Jonah on the beach.

Again God spoke to Jonah, delivering the same command as before - "Go to Nineveh . ." and this time Jonah obeyed. Entering the city of Nineveh he declared the basic text: "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." He seems to have had a very high but realistic opinion of his ability as a preacher and thus was apparently not surprised to see how the people responded to his message. They listened, they took him seriously and they began to repent. Even the king, when he heard of this, issued a royal decree, commanding his people to fast and begin to wear burlap apparel which was appropriate for those who were seeking the pardon of God. The King said, "Everyone must turn around, turn back from an evil life and the violent ways that stain their hands. Who knows? Maybe God will turn around and change His mind about us, quit being angry with us and let us live?" And sure enough "God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He did change His mind about them. What He said He would do to them He didn't do."

"Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness." Isn't it astounding, how this wondrous message of God's

love and mercy and forgiveness can be spoken by a man who is so violently angry? He constructed a make-shift shelter for himself on the east of the city and sat there to see what might happen - but nothing did. In order to protect him from the direct heat and light of the sun, God, in His mercy, provided a broad-leaved tree to spring up which provided welcome shade for Jonah and helped him to get out of his angry sulk.

But then God sent a worm to the tree and by dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the tree and killed it. Being exposed to the sun and a hot blistering wind from the east, in his misery Jonah prayed to die. He was convinced that he would be better off dead. But again God confronted him: "What right do you have to get angry about the shade tree? ... How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure in this big city of more than a hundred and twenty thousand childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

So, forget about the whale.

Remember God, Who saved Jonah, the reluctant prophet, when he prayed for deliverance from the belly of the "great fish."

Remember God, Whom Jonah knew as a God of sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, and rich in love.

Remember God, Who turned plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness.

Remember God Who loves everyone and everything in His creation.

And from our New Testament perspective,

Remember God, Who loves the world so much that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Thank You, God, for Your infinite love and patience with us when we too act like reluctant prophets.

Help us to remember that this is Your world both by right of creation and salvation. Help us to remember that your love this world and everyone and everything in it. Help us to be practitioners of love and forgiveness, ever responsive to the promptings and proddings of Your Holy Spirit. For Jesus' sake. Amen.