

The lectionary for these weeks between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday bombard us with stories of people being called—called to follow Christ, called to serve God. I have to confess that I most appreciate the ones in which the one called is slow to respond—probably because I ran from my own call to priesthood for so long. I can't relate to the ones in which the disciples just drop everything as soon as they hear the invitation from Jesus. What about their poor father, Zebedee, who is suddenly left to fish on his own? What about Peter's wife, who could not have been happy to hear he was taking off and leaving her and her mother at home to fend for themselves?

No, it's the stories of people like Jonah that really resonate with me. People who heard a call, a command, an invitation to participate in God's work, and said, "Now wait just a minute here..."

If we were playing a word-association game, and I said Jonah, I would bet that most of you would respond, "Whale." That's the Sunday School story we teach children—it's easy, it makes a great coloring page, it is fantastical and fun and we don't have to dig down into the real lesson of the book of Jonah.

The story of Jonah is great, but it is NOT about the whale—and definitely not about the "success" reported in today's reading. It's about human nature and the nature of God. It's about the consequences of thinking anyone is outside the mercy of God.

The story of Jonah is a parable. To quote one of the commentaries, 'It's too important to be taken literally.' It was not written during the time of the Assyrian threat in the 8th century BC, but after Exile, more than two centuries later. It is a morality tale to remind the newly-restored community that they received God's mercy not for themselves, but so that they would share it with others.

This is how the story goes.

Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh—the capital city of Assyria, the worst enemy Israel ever faced. Assyria was not on a mission to capture and relocate, as the Babylonians would be a few generations later. Assyrian armies ripped through the land, destroying everything in their path. If we were to tell this same tale today, the plot might be that God called a Jewish man to go to Berlin in 1939 and point out the sinfulness of the people and the leadership. It's a suicide mission. No one is going to listen to him, they aren't even going to just laugh at him and walk away. He is sure that they will kill him.

So what happens?

Jonah runs—boards a ship in the opposite direction, boards a ship in Joppa to go to Tarshish. He is going to get as far away from the place God wants him to go as he possibly can.

But a storm blows in. This being a parable, we are to see God's hand in this storm. The sailors are terrified, all praying to their various gods, tossing out the cargo...all while Jonah was curled up asleep in the cargo hold. Eventually they cast lots to figure out WHOSE God they should call upon (read: Who is to blame!)

The blame falls on Jonah. He recognizes that his resistance to God's call is putting all these other people at risk. So he tells them that they need to throw him into the sea. They hesitate at first, they don't want to be responsible for killing this man. But as the storm continues unabated, and even grows worse, they finally relent.

Interestingly, we are told that they see this as a sacrifice to Jonah's god. Even THEY are being converted to belief in the power of YHWH, the God of Israel.

Splash! Into the water goes Jonah. "But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights."

While Jonah was there in the dark "belly of the fish," he had time to think. Time to repent—reconsider his actions and commit himself to a new path. One of those 'prison conversions' we see so often.

The English translations of what happens next are all very tame. The NRSV says that the fish "spewed" him

out, but the word is actually VOMIT. The story is supposed to make us chuckle.

That's where we pick up today's reading. Jonah is standing on the shore, dripping wet, reeking of whale bile, and God once again calls him to go to Nineveh and "proclaim the message" that God will give to him. Jonah gives in. He goes to Nineveh and walks through the city, shouting at them that they are about to be destroyed. No doubt he is waiting for the authorities to come pick him up and punish him for speaking out against the mighty empire of Assyria. He may die, but at least he obeyed God.

But what happens instead? This is where we know it's a parable, not fact. In *history*, the Assyrians never repented and fasted and believed in God. In a story, anything can happen.

The Assyrians repent. They saw the light, they believed in God and allowed God to change them. They were converted.

Wouldn't it be great if this were the end of the story? The hero had his moment of crisis, but eventually accepted his call and achieved great things. That's how morality tales go, right?

But no. I am a little annoyed with the lectionary for giving us THIS snippet of the story, because THIS is not the point.

This is not just a story about how God works through us to reach other people—as important as that is. This is not just a story about how important it is to obey God, even when we are called to do something really difficult or dangerous.

This is a story about how God wants OUR hearts to be changed, as well as those God is reaching through us. God wants us to see even our enemies through God’s eyes, and find compassion for them. God wants us to understand that God loves the WHOLE world, even those who resist God. God wants us to share the good news, not just because we’re “expected” to, but because our experience of God’s love and mercy has so transformed us that we can’t imagine doing anything else.

I want to read you the last chapter of Jonah, because I think it’s the most important part of the story, and shows us that this is not a story about Nineveh at all. It’s a challenge to each of us, asking us what WE do with the grace that God has given us.

Remember that the entire city has repented, even the king has called for a fast...

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’

But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the plant, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.

And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

One last quick thought. A while back I had an insight about an incident in the Gospels. Jesus is confronting the religious authorities with their faithlessness, and tells them that all will be left to them is “the sign of Jonah.” I’ve always taken this to mean the 3 days in the tomb, but what if there is another way of understanding it? Perhaps Jesus is not saying, “See I’ll appear after three days and you’ll understand who I really am.” Perhaps the sign of Jonah is this—that God cares about so much more than we do. God is concerned about all those people we dismiss as unimportant or unworthy of care.

What if a big part of being a disciple is not about what we do, but what we allow God to do through—and *in*—us?

Amen.