

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 21, 2018

“Get Up, Go”
Jonah 3:1

Prelude:

Our lesson this morning comes from the book of Jonah, a small writing sandwiched between Obadiah and Micah in our Old Testament.

Jonah is quite unique, not simply as a prophetic book, but among the whole canon of scripture. It contains no oracles or visions or utterances of **“Thus sayeth the Lord”** that is typical of prophetic proclamation.

He is a **“recalcitrant prophet,”** meaning that when summoned to serve, he resists. This is one aspect of what makes this material special. Jonah has no interest in being a good and faithful servant; he doesn't particularly care about being an agent of grace; he proves himself to be uncooperative, not compliant.

Jonah has knowledge of God.
But he doesn't like
what he knows about God.
He is, in fact, quite resentful at being
lassoed into a scheme that manifests
God's extravagant care for
a people Jonah detests.

A little background.
Mention is made of a Jonah in the II book
of Kings, 14:25; we read there of

“Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-hepher.” This Jonah served during the reign of King Jeroboam II, a king who reigned over the nation of Israel (as opposed to Judah), for a good portion of the eighth century BCE (he had a 41-year rule over Israel). He **“did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”** which is a rather frequent judgment rendered upon the sovereigns by the school that produced the I/II Kings literature.

The name of Jonah means **“dove.”**
The name Amittai means **“truth.”**

The prophet Jonah mentioned in II Kings (who apparently was on the court payroll) seems to have been appropriated for the telling of a parable - which is basically what the book of Jonah is; parables, I remind, are a literary means employed to subvert myth, to check and balance and alter what myth seeks to sustain. Parables in general, and Jonah as a parable in particular, express profound insight into the nature of the God with whom we contend as a Christian people.

The president of my seminary, B. Davie Napier, said of Jonah, the book, **“The author of Jonah means to write his fabulous, moving tale around an obscure historical prophet. But he hardly meant for his story to be taken as history ... The story is a story, and let it be repeated, the author never meant it to be taken any other way”** (Napier, *Song of the Vineyard*, p. 366).

Let's review briefly.
Jonah, the son of truth,
 is texted by God,
**“Get thyself to Nineveh, that great city,
and cry out against it; for I know of
their wickedness.”**

Jonah did not.

He did get up and go.

God Googled directions pointing east.
Jonah worked with TripAdvisor and
 headed west.
Set off for Tarshish.

God's plan was for revival in Iran.
Jonah desired a Mediterranean cruise
that would land him
 safe in southern Spain.
Jonah sought, we read -
**“to flee from the
presence of the Lord.”**

You may recall the psalm (139) that poses
the question: **“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there ...”**

Jonah, in part, may be a companion
piece to this psalm, a reflection upon
the futility of human flight from the
presence of the Lord, the inescapability
of the divine framework that governs
life within the reaches we can conceive.

**If I take the wing of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right shall hold me fast (Psalm 139:9-10).**

That's where Jonah is headed –
“**the farthest limits of the sea**”
to flee the unfleeable God
who has summoned his service.

The escape plan proves futile.
God toys with Jonah – which is
why the story is such a delight.
Sends a storm to rock the boat.
Captain of the ship orders prayers
to avoid disaster; in the casting of lots,
seeking cause for the trouble,
Jonah is exposed, and volunteers
to walk the plank so to speak;
So he gets tossed overboard
as a stratagem to quiet the threatening storm.

Jonah gets swallowed up by large fish
provided by the Lord, mind you,
and there remained for three days and three nights.
In the belly, we read.
In the belly of Sheol, we read.
There Jonah prayed, and he was delivered.
Spit out really. Regurgitated. Upon dry land.

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A second time, God rings Jonah's number.
Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city ...
Proclaim the message I tell you.
This time, Jonah goes.
He preaches to Nineveh.
And that great city repents.
And the God who was of a mind to smite

the people, God also has a change of heart;
the calamity that befalls a wicked people
was avoided, and mercy ruled.

What might we say of this parable,
this “story” that is a story?

A word about Nineveh. We don't understand
Nineveh, we won't get much meaning out of
this material.

It was in 2002 that
the Rev. Dr. Charles G. Adams
(Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, Detroit)
preached here in Plymouth Church -
that was some time ago, when
the pulpit was stage right, in its
previous chancel configuration.
Dr. Adams reminded us in such a way
that I haven't forgotten, that
scripture critiques scripture.
Parable subverts myth.
There are passages of scripture
that redress passages of scripture,
that reassess teachings of scripture.

Scripture critiques scripture.
It is not enough to simply know the Bible.
We need to know what the Bible knows
about the Bible, or, more pointedly,
where the scriptures expand upon
teachings that otherwise eclipse the
God we reverence.

The story of Jonah will not let us
flee from the Presence of God.
The story of Jonah will not let us
encamp in a place with
dispensation of favor, while others

reside in a graceless place,
a godless place.

This is why it is important that we
understand Nineveh.

Nineveh is “**big apple.**”

Sin city. Not reckless lust and greed and
thrilling vice, not tabloid sin, but
political sin, empirical, dominating,
oppressive sin, the sin of the strong making
life miserable for the weak sin.

Nineveh is roundly vilified in scripture
as capital of the Assyrian empire;
“that great city” was symbol of everything
every subjugated people hated.

Nineveh was cruel, callous, and full of conceit.
Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds: “**The Assyrians
plundered all the peoples within her range.
Wherever her name was known it was execrated.**”
Utterly detested and declared to be evil.

In the words of the prophet Zephaniah,
Nineveh was “**the exultant city**” that declared
of itself. “**I am, and there is no one else**”
(Zephaniah 2:15). When its demise came,
which it did, those who suffered its cruelty
showed no sympathy. “**Everyone who
passes by it hisses and shakes the fist.**”

That’s Jonah’s sentiment. He has no interest
in Nineveh getting anything other than the
destruction he feels it deserves. And yet,
the message of the book of Jonah, run counter:

God shows mercy to the people
Jonah holds in contempt.

We need to know where our Ninevehs are today;
 the people we've grown fond of hating,
 that we can't bring ourselves to love;
 we need to pray our way through the temptation
 to hiss, to curse, to shake the fist,
 invoking divine damnation.

To quote from Napier again, the book of Jonah
 is "**timelessly pertinent**," for it is unrivaled in its
 "**repudiation of exclusivism**." – Jonah nullifies
 notions of religious, theological, ethnic, political,
 national exceptionalism/ego (see Napier,
Song of the Vineyard, p. 366).

It is for this reason that it serves as possibly
 the most powerful prophetic message in all
 of scripture.

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It may be one of the great challenges of our age
 of how to break out of the bubbles we live in.
 How we deal with the differences that divide,
 the factions that create such havoc,
 the parties that are so wrapped and
 curved upon self interest,
 they have neither the interest nor desire to
 relate to those with whom they disagree.

Work with me here, for our bubbled lives
 may be the end of us if we be not careful
 and prayerful. United we stand, divided
 we fall, yes? Yes. But question with me:
 must we always possess an external enemy
 to attain internal cohesion?

It was George W. Bush (2002)
 who coined the term, "**axis of evil**."

Iran, Iraq, N. Korea. A trinity of Ninevehs external to us. Enemies, others, we could look upon as a threat to “our way of life.”

I have an article on my desk, from the *Wall Street Journal*, headlined: “The New American Divide” that laments a growing cleavage in our culture, **“America is coming apart** - not from external threat, but internal disintegration due primarily to cultural inequality. The date of this article: Jan. 21/22, 2012, six years ago this weekend. Long before the current occupant in the White House.

In the 2016 election there is, I believe, strong credible evidence of Russian interference, using forums like FaceBook to infiltrate our “bubbles” in such a way as to manipulate emotions, stoke resentments, stir anger, based upon our internal issues, so that Nineveh becomes Fox News (a Pravda news outlet) who serve those who pride themselves on being free, white, and 21, some of whom still want to hang Hilary. Nineveh becomes the Rachel Madow crowd, a threat to God, its wanting to restrict access to guns, to curb coal, to a channel that really believe a woman should have control over her own body.

Ninevahs do not have a specific geographic location. Ninevehs reside in the heart. And God will raise up Jonahs to stand in the gap - to relate to the un-relatable.

C.K. Chesterton once said, **“The Bible tell us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”**

Possibly so. Regardless, the love to which we aspire, of the other who is not like minded, is a daunting task.

I have a list, not long, but list nonetheless of insults that have given me some amount of pleasure when pondering.

- **“I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with great pleasure”** (Clarence Darrow).
- **“I didn’t attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it”** (Mark Twain).
- **“I have just learned about his illness. Let’s hope it is nothing trivial”** (Irvin Cobb, 1876-1944, humorist, columnist).

We do not always wish well.

We do not always work well

when we harbor Nineveh ill will.

Our creative capacity to think ill of others penetrates into the depths of our consciousness to the degree we may even think it natural.

Jonah comes to show us another way.

And Jesus - he too shows us a more excellent way.

It was in the early 1990’s that Stanley Hauerwas wrote a book entitled: *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*.

His thesis - generally speaking - we have all the dressings of religiosity, but so little to show for it. In this work, Hauerwas states: **“Our violence lies not in ourselves but in our loves.”**

Enlarging our loves is our constant quest as Christians.
When we restrict our love, we become a lethal people.
The church so infected becomes anti-Christ.

So - let the love ripple out. Send it far, send it wide.
Restrict it not, for God's love is not restrictive.
It includes each and all - even the beasts,
the creatures of earth and air and sea;
it reaches to the ends of the earth,
to the farthest of stars in the outermost galaxies,
to the very depths of our souls.

It is for Christians, Jews, Muslims,
secular saints, religious sinners;
Not for one nation under God,
but our planet - and all planets -
in God's inconceivably vast universe.

So let us "**get up, go**"
and do what we can while time is ticking,
and we have opportunity to advance what is good,
and pleasing and excellent in the wonderful
creation we share with so many others.

John Muir once said: "**The world is big,
and I want to have a good look at it
before it gets dark.**"

So do I. So may we all. Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*