

## **But They Are Really Rotten!**

[Text - Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5, 10]

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This morning I'm approaching our sermon time a bit differently. Rather than looking at a New Testament story about Jesus, I'm using our Old Testament story about Jonah. And instead of moving toward a definitive conclusion, I'm letting you know up-front that each of you will have to figure-out for yourself how the story ends. To begin, I'd like you to think of a person, or a group of people, that you really can't stand - an individual, or group, who have done things that make it extremely difficult to tolerate them, let alone love them. Have you got somebody in mind? Then here we go!

The story of Jonah is a larger-than-life parable, written approximately 500 years before Christ, and about 50 years after the Hebrew's return from exile in Babylon. It's a time when many of the people of Israel hold a deep resentment toward the people of any other nation. Their nation had been defeated and humiliated by their enemies; so the idea of their God caring for any foreigner, certainly isn't a popular one. The story of Jonah begins with God calling him to go and preach to the infamously corrupt city of Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria; and Jonah defiantly sailing-off in the opposite direction. In the eyes of most Hebrew people, he's doing exactly what they themselves would do. However, as we see throughout this story, God isn't going to let Jonah [or the Hebrews, or *us*] off the hook!

Our human nature may be to hold a grudge against others, and wish them ill; but that is not the Divine Nature. That's why this ancient story remains tremendously relevant today. It reminds us that the Divine Source of All Life is deeply committed to reaching and rescuing all people, whoever and wherever they may be. You and I may give-up on others, or even give-up on ourselves, but our Sacred, Originating Source does not. We may even try to run-away from that Sacred Source; but like Jonah, we find that there's just no place to hide!

“The word of the Holy One came to Jonah son of Amitai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it....’ God says, “Go east, Jonah!” but Jonah goes west to the port of Joppa and boards the first ship headed west - as far west as possible - the city of Tarshish, in Spain, the western end of the known world. Jonah wants to get as far as he can from the place God wants him to be. Essentially, Jonah is trying to flee from the very Presence of God; which of course, is an impossible thing to do. Where can a person hide from the Omnipresent Creator of the Cosmos - in Las Vegas? You and I wouldn’t even attempt such a ridiculous thing...or would we...have we? Have you ever tried to run away from God? Not by sailing-off on a ship, but by simply avoiding God’s Call in your life? I know that I have. In fact, I make Jonah look like an amateur. I can run away from God without even leaving home! All I have to do, is disregard what I believe God is calling me to do, and do something different.

I know that my Divine Source calls me to a life of faith and forgiveness, compassion and service; but sometimes I ignore that call. I’ve got my own plans and problems, and I don’t necessarily have the time or the desire to worry about the needs or concerns of others - especially those “others” who are clearly different from me, who offend me, or who live in far-away places. So I resist God’s claim on my time and resources, and use them for myself. And I’ll admit that sometimes it’s actually easier for us who work in the realm of religion to do this! After all, we already give a lot in service to God and others; so why should God expect us to go that extra mile, or extra miles? Shouldn’t God be pleased with what we’ve already done? Shouldn’t God be happy that Jonah was willing to be a prophet in Israel? Why insist that he go all the way to Nineveh and preach to those contemptible people who probably won’t listen anyway?

It easy for us all to justify our resistance to the Divine Call in our lives. We figure that what we have and are, basically belongs to us; therefore God should be satisfied with whatever we give. But actually, we’ve got that backward. *All* that we have, *all* that we are, comes from our Divine Source of Life, Who has a 100% interest in our entire lives!

Therefore, God not only cares about what we give to the Church, but also about how we use the rest of our time and resources. In the same way, God cares about Jonah, not only when he is serving God in Nineveh, but also when he's sailing away from Nineveh. No matter where Jonah goes, he remains a cherished child of God. Even as Jonah sits and bellyaches in the belly of that big fish, God still hears his prayer, and rescues him from that metaphorical place of pitiful isolation and deep personal darkness.

"Now the word of the Holy One came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' " So Jonah gets up and goes to Nineveh" - a city so *big*, that it takes three entire days just to walk across it! [And you thought that fish was big!] Jonah walks into the city, saying "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown! Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He grudgingly does this for one day, and then he's done. Of course he's only gone about a third of the way into the city, but apparently that's all he can stomach of those godless, unclean foreigners.

Jonah then says, "O.K. God, I did it; I warned them; I hope you're happy. But you know these perverted people will never change their wicked ways...." However - miracle of miracles - they do change! All the people [and even the animals] put on sackcloth and repent; which makes Jonah absolutely...furious! He doesn't want them to change. They are Ninevites! They would totally deserve it if God sent an earthquake or a flood to wipe them all off the face of the earth! But that's not the Nature of God; though sometimes that is the way of Nature. The Divine Nature, is a way of compassion, forgiveness, and extraordinary love and grace.

Jonah, conveniently forgetting how God had just reached-out and rescued him, goes to the outskirts of the city to sit and sulk. "You might-as-well take me now, God! If you're going to care for these godless people as much as you care for your own people, then I'll just sit here in the sun and die of dehydration! If you're not going to rain-down fire-and-brimstone upon Nineveh, then go ahead and destroy

me!” But just as Jonah is turning into a huge drama queen, God causes a huge plant to grow-up right over him, providing shade and comfort for this pathetic, pouting prophet. Now that’s more like it! At least Jonah is getting a little respect for all his hard work. So Jonah calms down, relaxes, and falls peacefully asleep - extremely pleased with his own personal, shady plant....But that’s not the end of the story.

The next morning, God “appoints a worm” to attack that plant, so that it withers and dies. Then God “prepares a sultry east wind, and causes the sun to beat down on Jonah’s head.” Jonah becomes faint and weak, and once again asks that he might die. “It’s better this way. My poor, precious shade plant is gone, and I’m completely devastated!” Then God says to Jonah, “Wow! You really got attached to that plant, didn’t you? Your concern for it is quite touching, considering that you didn’t plant it or make it grow. It sprung up one day, and was gone the next; yet you seem to care for it quite a bit.... Should I not care about Nineveh, with all of its plants and animals and people?”

And that is how the story of Jonah abruptly ends. That’s it! That’s all folks! The author doesn’t even tell us whether Jonah comes to realize how hard-hearted he has been, particularly in light of how gracious and generous God has been - not only to the people of Nineveh, but also to the people of Israel, and to Jonah himself. Does Jonah ever get it? Actually, that’s not the point! The point is, do those who hear this story - do you and I - get it? In the end, that’s what really matters. Are you and I willing to set-aside our judgements about race and religion, politics and nationalities, gender roles and social differences? Do we realize that every human being is precious to our One Heavenly Parent? Are we willing to reach-out and help all of our sisters and brothers who are lost or hurting, including those who have hurt us? Including those horrible people who came to mind at the start of this sermon?

As this powerful parable reminds us, God doesn’t give up on anyone; and neither should you or I. For while it’s true that we cannot change

them, we can still challenge them: not with force or fear, but with the power of Divine forgiveness and love.

History shows us that returning evil for evil only perpetuates that cycle.

Christ's Story shows us that overwhelming love can break that cycle, and that Divine Grace will arise and triumph!

Your story and my story....remain to be written.