

“And You Think I Am Stubborn!”

by Pastor Art Scanson

Jonah 3:1-5:10

A Sunday school teacher was proud of her lesson for the day. She thought she had presented the material quite nicely. Summing up, she asked the class, “And what do we learn from the story of Jonah and the big fish?”

To which eight-year-old Suzy answered after a brief pause, “Always travel by air.”

Hopefully that is not the only thing we learn from the story of Jonah.

Now most of us know part of the story of the prophet Jonah. In case you forgot, Jonah was the man who got swallowed by a big fish.

Remembering that story, we find God coming to Jonah asking him to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and cry out against its wickedness. Jonah wanted no part of this as he hated those people and so he went the other way. The Harper’s Bible Commentary describes Jonah as “*a man who is the embodiment of intolerance, bigotry and lack of human sympathy.*” And you think I’m stubborn.

Do you know anyone like Jonah? Is there any of Jonah in you or me?

Jonah was determined not to go, so he boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, which was about as far away from Nineveh as you could go in that ancient world. The scriptures tells us that he thought he could escape “the presence of the Lord.” What an idea! He would go somewhere where God was not!

This bring us to the first point of our lesson for today. There is no escape from God. **God is a universal God.** It is like some people yet today who act in a certain way when they are in church but act entirely different when they are at work. As if God can see them in church, but not in the workplace. They seem to forget the words of scripture that says, “your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32:23) Somehow we think our misdeeds can be hidden, and that we are safe. My friends, we can’t hide from God and we can’t hide anything from God. Yes, we all know this but how many of us from time to time, do as Jonah? Oh, we don’t have to board a ship or fly to a distant place. We can do it with our minds and hearts. How often do we just tune out. Those times when we ignore God voice that calls us to serve or to minister in God’s name.

Back to our story. Jonah still tries to flee. But the story tells us that the ship encountered a terrible storm at sea. The wind and waves were so bad that the seasoned sailors on board called out to their gods for mercy. It was so bad that they cast lots to determine who it was that was so bad. Well, Jonah was the one and so they wanted to know what he had done that this evil would come upon them there at sea? And true to human nature, in the midst of disaster, Jonah confessed that he was trying to run from God. So they ask Jonah what they needed to do to stop this storm. Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, then the sea will calm down.” So they did. He was no more in the water when a great fish swallowed up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. The big fish can no longer stomach Jonah after three days and coughs him up on dry land—alive and well, and

feeling punished.

As a side note, I think it was Dwight L. Moody the great preacher who said that was easy for the great fish to swallow Jonah whole. After all Jonah is only one of the minor prophets.

But really, on an affirming note, it is interesting that Jesus once referred to the story of Jonah. Jesus said to some of his skeptics that the only sign that they would receive would be the sign of Jonah. Meaning, Christ would emerge from the ground on the third day after his crucifixion just as Jonah had emerged on the third day from the belly of the fish.

At this point the Lord came to Jonah a second time and told him again to go preach to Nineveh. This is where we catch up to the Scripture lesson for today. Read Jonah 3:1-5;10.

Jonah's preaching had brought about outstanding results. Hearts were changed and you would think that a preacher would rejoice in such a great victory. But not Jonah. The next few verses tell us that this made Jonah angry. So he said to God, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. . . . (This is where three of the most fascinating sentences in all of scripture come) . . . *I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. . .*"

Can you believe that? Can you believe that Jonah was upset that God had a change of mind about destroying Nineveh. Jonah was so angry he asked God to take his life - so angry that he wanted to die! But then, how often when we have been wrong that we have wanted to die? Maybe not to the extent that we want to die, but angry.

Here is the great good news - it is the last line of the story, when God says, "*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*"

But there are also a couple of other lessons for us in this story. The next lesson is: **God's love is a universal love.** Not only is God's love universal, but it is also a love of diversity. God created a rainbow of different people and that's how God prefers it!

In the book Greater Than Unconventional Thoughts on the Infinite by Mark A. Tabb, he tells about bananas. Now you are really wondering where I am going. Well it has to do with diversity. After all, aren't all bananas the same color? Well, yes, but this may be the problem.

Did you know that bananas may be on the way out? They may soon go the way of the dinosaur. One report suggests that, if we are not on our guard, bananas may disappear in less than ten years.

Here's the problem. The vast majority of banana trees, regardless of location, are virtual carbon copies of one another. The modern banana lacks genetic diversity. Therefore, any parasite or disease that strikes one banana tree has the potential to wipe out the world's entire supply. The fruit is threatened by its uniformity.

Here is where Mark Tabb makes this comment: "*The banana crisis shouldn't*

surprise us. Uniformity always makes a species weaker. The more alike plants or people may be, the more at risk they actually are. This is especially true of the human race. Most of us feel threatened by those who aren't like us. Whether the pigmentation in their skin is different or their ideas run counter to our own or their outlook on life is just plain strange, diversity makes us uncomfortable. Variety may be the spice of life, but most people prefer their life bland. Those strange people with their strange ways of doing things perplex us."

Yet, my friends, it is God who created diversity. But that is the good - different people have different gifts. This is especially good in a church. With each of us sharing our God given gifts we can accomplish greater things for God's impact on our church and our world.

Jonah needed to learn: God is a universal God and God's love is a universal love. Yes, God even loved Jonah, his hard heart and all. The last lesson for us to learn from this story is: **God's grace is sufficient for all.** This is supported by the truth of the New Testament: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Which is to say, we are all dependent upon God's grace.

One of the best-known hymns of Christendom would tell this lesson. It was written by a former slave trader. As I share this we can't help but see that God has to have a sense of irony! Who is more demonic than a slave trader? Taking innocent human beings from one part of the world, snatching them from their families, stuffing them down into the cargo holds of ships, chained, many of them dying en route, then selling them into bondage in a distant land. Yet Christ touched John Newton's heart and subsequently Newton wrote, "*Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretched like me; I once was lost, but now and found, was blind but now I see.*"

We don't know if the scales ever fell off Jonah's eyes like they fell off of John Newton's eyes. The Bible doesn't tell us. But Jonah and John Newton help us learn three great lessons:

- That we cannot flee from God's presence;
- That God loves everybody; and
- That God's grace is sufficient for all of us.

Let each of claim those truths for ourselves today!

Thanks be to God!