

“Jonah’s Epiphany”

January 24, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

We are in the season of Epiphany. An epiphany is a realization/understanding of something which has previously been confused, misunderstood, hidden in darkness. It is an illumination. Jonah is one of those people who has an encounter with God, an epiphany. Question is, what will he do in the aftermath of his epiphany.

Jonah, Jonah, Jonah. He is the guy, whose story is told in the Old Testament, who thinks that he knows better than God. He lives with his certitudes about who God is, who his enemies are, and his belief in the ways of the world. And he is the guy who focuses, obsesses actually, about what divides us rather than consider all the possibilities of what might unite us. I believe we have heard this comment a few times over the past several days. I was so impressed this past week with Amanda Gorman, the nation’s first youth poet laureate who read her poem during the inauguration of President Joe Biden. She says “ We are striving to forge a union with purpose, to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and condition of man. And so, we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.” Jonah would have benefited from hearing her words. Jonah is committed to fortifying all that divides us and what he doesn’t understand is that to perpetuate our divisions prevents us from moving into the future of God’s design. Before we listen to and consider his story, I have another story which sheds some light on Jonah’s predicament.

A couple of guys from Alabama loved to fish. They heard that ice fishing was a great sport so they decided to give it a try and scheduled a fishing trip to Canada, to a place which was famous for its ice fishing, but it was a place to which they had never traveled. They stopped at a local Canadian bait shop to purchase the very best bait and tackle for the lake. The shop owner told them they would need an ice auger. An ice auger is a drill of sorts, which drills a hole in the ice from which they could drop their fishing lines. It was a bit expensive, but the men did not hesitate; they purchased the auger to drill holes in the ice.

A short while later they began to prepare for a great day of ice fishing. About two hours later they returned to the shop and asked the owner for another auger. The shop owner was confused. "What's wrong with the one I sold you?"

"Nothing," they answered, "it works fine."

"Then why do you need another one?". Our friends from Alabama convinced they know everything about fishing, even if it is a place which is foreign to them, reply to the shop owner's question about why they need two drills.

"It's cold out there. The holes keep freezing up on us before we can even drill a large enough section to get our boat in the water, so and we haven't been able to fish yet. At the rate we're going, we're not even going to get the boat in the water before dark. Two drills will help us drill a large enough area twice as fast." Sometimes, we are so convinced we are absolutely right that we don't even consider other people, from other places and their ideas or information which might help us.

This morning's story from the Old Testament is about another guy who thought he was absolutely right – but God has a lesson Jonah needs to learn. And maybe you and I need to hear the same lesson.

Prayer for Understanding: Bread of heaven, feed us. Word of truth, teach us.

Author of life, help us to broaden our understanding of your world and the people to whom you call us to go and speak a word of grace and love. Help us to be kind and tenderhearted, not closed and self-righteous. Make your church a transforming presence among all your people. Amen.

Read Jonah 1

Jonah is a hard guy to defend. Called by God to journey to Nineveh where he is commanded to speak a prophetic word, Jonah jumps on the next boat headed in the opposite direction – to Tarshish. Why Tarshish? For one thing it was a lot more exciting than Nineveh. Nineveh was a place with an unhappy history and absolutely no presumed future and the people are absolutely not the kind of folks with whom Jonah would want to associate. Going to Nineveh to preach was not a coveted assignment for a newly ordained Hebrew prophet. But, Tarshish..... Tarshish was an exotic seaside town, teeming with energy and adventure. Prosperous and rich in culture. In Tarshish, Jonah might have a spectacular ministry among people who think and act like him. But God does not always call us in the direction we would prefer. We are okay in responding to God's divine call but we would prefer to choose the destination. We would prefer that God's call be convenient and uplifting. Nothing difficult or what we would consider to be drudgery with those creepy Ninevites.

This morning I want you to consider the one place or situation, and the one person or group of people, to which you would absolutely detest going and interacting and maybe, just maybe, that place or circumstance or group of people is exactly where and to whom God is sending you.

Once on board the ship to Tarshish, Jonah nearly gets everyone killed for his rebelliousness and disregard of God's call. In the midst of a life-threatening storm at sea, Jonah sleeps while the sailors pray! The sailors shake Jonah awake and ask him to explain who he is and tell them something about his God. He obliges and suggests that they just throw him overboard. Jonah would prefer to die than go where God is sending him. It is amazing that Jonah's simple conversation with the sailors is enough to convert them to faith in the same God – Yahweh, God of the Hebrews, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of Moses. In the Hebrew language the sailors shift from using the generic term for god – Elohim, to Yahweh, the Hebrew word indicating a personal relationship with God. Jonah is converting souls in spite of himself!

Overboard Jonah goes into the sea and God sends a giant fish to turn Jonah around and spit him in the right direction. As a teenager I can remember arguing with my mother about the historicity of this part in the story. How could a person survive in the belly of a fish for three days? Surely this part in the story is meant to be a metaphor. To get stuck at this point in the story by asking the "how" question, well, we miss the point of the story. This story is about a Hebrew prophet who wants to control his own destiny and close his ears to God and it is about a God who listens but will not be dissuaded. It was not just that Jonah was afraid to be a prophet. He might have said okay if God had sent him someplace nearby like Jericho or Shechem, but Nineveh ... It was

the capital of the Assyrian Empire, now known as Iraq – which was hostile to Israel then and now. Jonah has no desire to participate in Nineveh’s salvation. If the city was going to hell, let it.

Jonah sits in time out in the belly of the fish for 3 days and eventually the giant fish spews Jonah on shore. Reluctantly Jonah goes where God sends him, not because he has a change of heart but because he finally acknowledges that God is in control. His only consolation is thinking how delicious it will be to pronounce judgment on all those wicked Ninevites, those people who had devastated Jewish cities and killed Jewish people.

I have an image of Jonah rolling into town for a big preaching revival. He puts up his big tent, sprinkles sawdust on the ground, arranges the wooden benches. He spreads the word that there is a revival tonight, and as the time draws near, he puts his big black Bible on the pulpit, tests the sound system and waits for the crowds to arrive.

And they do – thousands of them, with their children and servants and livestock. Even the king is there, right there on the front row with purple robes. Jonah knows how evil they all are, how richly they deserve God’s judgment, and he cannot wait to get started. He clears his throat and shouts “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That’s it. The shortest recorded prophecy in all of scripture!! An eight word sermon!

No sooner does he get that one sentence out of his mouth than the whole city repents on the spot. “Yes!” they shout. “We believe!” The king orders a fast and leads them all out to change into sackcloth and ashes, and there stands Jonah all alone in his tent, shaking his head in disbelief. Meanwhile, the Ninevites cry mightily to God, and

God decides to spare them after all, and the revival is proclaimed a howling success. With one eight-word sermon Jonah has accomplished more than all the other prophets put together. He has converted the biggest city in the enemy empire. Everyone repents except Jonah. The Ninevites repent, God changes his mind, even the cows and the goats repent, but Jonah does not repent or relinquish his self-righteousness. He slinks off to the outskirts of the city and hopes God will decide to destroy it after all, because he cannot accept the possibility that God's idea of justice might not coincide with his own.

Jonah is sulking on a hill outside the city when God confronts his attitude with a lesson about a bush. I will not detail the lesson but the point God tries to make with Jonah is that what God does with the Ninevites or any other people is really not up to Jonah's determination. The job of deciding how the world should be run already belongs to God.

I don't think we have the right to be in control of how God's grace is distributed. Maybe, just maybe, from where God sits, we are all a mess. When the Ninevites are spared why wouldn't we shout "Praise God!"? Or we can choose to pout outside the city-wide celebration, all alone. The story of Jonah ends unresolved. So, I guess we all have the opportunity to answer God's question for ourselves.... "Shall I, God, not care for all of my children?"

And so we know, that to put our future first, we must put our divisions aside. We need to lift our gazes to, not stands between us, but what stands before us. Opportunity and not division. Perhaps this is the lesson God wants Jonah to discover; and you and me.