

Proper 20 (Year A); September 18, 2011
Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA
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Texts: Jonah 3:10-4:11

“...And Should I Not Be Concerned...?”

Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, but instead he jumped onto a ship headed toward Tarshish.

After all, Nineveh was not the best job assignment in the world. It was an ancient city that was now rather shabby and crumbling. Add to urban blight the problems of the people themselves. They were rough and if they didn't like you, either who you are or how you act or what you say, you could come to a bad end there.

But Tarshish! Tarshish, somewhere in southern Spain, was the kind of place you would see in glossy brochures enticing you onto a glamorous cruise line. Tarshish was sophisticated, glitzy, and offered comforts and riches not often found in other places, certainly not in Nineveh. You would know your career as a preacher had advanced to a good place if you were preaching in a temple in Tarshish. But Tarshish was not where God asked Jonah to go. Tarshish was Jonah's dream for himself, an escape Jonah sought from the mundane, difficult work God asked Jonah to do among the not-perfect people of Nineveh.

Are there any Jonahs here? Have you ever been tempted to flee the life you have for something that looks a lot better? Have you wanted to leave the spouse who no longer satisfies you? Have you wanted to give up on the children who won't listen to you? If you are a student, have you wanted to give up on difficult material or a teacher you are having a hard time connecting with? Or give up on a family you think just doesn't understand you? Have any of you wanted to leave this congregation of frustrating sinners because there has to be something better than this out there?

Jonah was fleeing the life he had. But not only the life he had. He was fleeing from the presence of God. Are there any Jonahs here? Have you escaped looking honestly at yourself? Have you sought escape from the face of the living God by occupying yourself with anything else you can – computer games, television, pornography, too much food, drugs, alcohol – rather than risking getting to know God, and yourself (even your warts) better as you go about your everyday life and work?

Jonah boarded a ship and headed out to Tarshish but God did not let him get to Tarshish. A great storm arose and tossed around the ship as Jonah was sleeping down below. Jonah wasn't even aware of how bad things were getting for others on the ship because of his fleeing from God, until in their anguish they woke him up and told him the problem. At that point he admitted to them that he was fleeing the presence of God. "The problem is me," he admitted. They agreed together to a solution of throwing him overboard.

And, the story goes, the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah. He was put on 72 hour hold to begin to come to terms with God and himself.

After some one-on-one time with God in the belly of the fish, the fish spit Jonah out onto the shore. Then God told him, again, to go to Nineveh, to preach that they should repent or face destruction. Jonah did. He walked through the length of the city for three days and brought them that word. He spoke the word to people with different ancestry and religion from his. And, wonder of wonders, repent they did. The people repented, and the ruler of Nineveh also repented and declared a fast.

Jonah was not happy. He had obeyed in that he walked through Nineveh and preached as God told him to, but he still did not have God's heart of care for the people of Nineveh. He pouted that God would actually change God's mind about destroying the city of Nineveh. He looked around at this city, this people, who heard the word and turned to God and changed their ways, and thought, I would have looked a lot better if I preached the destruction of this city and God had actually destroyed it! But, as it turned out, the people were no longer paying attention to Jonah, but to God.

So Jonah said to God, "I knew this would happen! Didn't I tell you? This is why I didn't want to go in the first place. I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. So let me die now."

God may be slow to anger, but Jonah was not. Jonah was quick to anger. Angry Jonah went off in a huff by himself. God gave Jonah a bush to shade his head from the hot sun, then took the bush away. Jonah became angry again. Jonah was pretty concerned about Jonah.

Then God talked to Jonah and asked him: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and

twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Jonah is not a success story. Jonah never does, in this story, embody the care God has for God’s people. But the good news is that in spite of Jonah himself, God uses Jonah. In spite of the fact that Jonah went reluctantly to Nineveh, obeying in action but not in heart, God still used his preaching work to save the Ninevites God cared about.

We, too, get to go to Nineveh. We may be mostly concerned for ourselves. We may be tempted to leave the mundane and difficult places for a more appealing Tarshish. But God sends us to Nineveh, to the rough and difficult places – to bring ethics into the ethical breaches in our workplace; to accompany prisoners and ex-prisoners on the road of rehabilitation; to the poor, to care for them and to work to end poverty; to not give up on a friend who is struggling; to deal compassionately with the difficulties in our own families. I am not romanticizing this work. It is difficult, arduous work. It can be complicated and not always rewarding in the way we think of rewarding.

I’ve been Jonah many times, running away from the place God really wants me to go, of doing what God really wants me to do, and then when I get there, thinking about myself and lacking compassion for the difficult people I’m dealing with.

But God is full of compassion. We’ve sung it, we’ve prayed it, and it’s true. Part of God’s compassion is that God has invited us, as silly as we are, as hard-headed and lacking compassion, into the gospel work of bringing healing to this broken world, with its people and animals. We may constantly divide people into groups and find some more worthy of our presence than others. We may not share the urgency of God’s heart for the needs of all God’s people, whatever their station in life, religion or ethnicity. But God did not give up on the people of Nineveh, and God did not give up on Jonah. God does not give up on our difficult neighbors, and God does not give up on us. God will not let them go, and God will not let us go. God sends us to testify. And God invites us to live in his presence, to get to know the heart of God, a heart that insists on concern and compassion, a heart that invites us to share in God’s own concern.