

May the Words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Book of Jonah seems to be telling a very simple story – so simple, in fact, that it is too often left for the consideration of children in Sunday school, while we grown-ups, thinking we have perfectly well understood that simple story, go on about the business of thinking about more complicated things. Ask most church-going people what they believe the message of the story of Jonah to be, and chances are, you'll get an answer that goes something like this: Well, Jonah disobeyed God, and he ran into heaps of trouble as a result. The message, or 'moral' of the story, as most people will tell you, is basically this: "you'd better obey God!" I want to suggest to you this morning that, while that understanding of the Jonah story is good, as far as it goes, it is simply not good enough. There is much more to the Book of Jonah than that. The story of what happened to Jonah -- and of why it happened to Jonah -- is profoundly relevant for each one of us gathered here this morning, and for each and every Christian in his or her walk of faith.

I'm about to give away my age here, but I'll say it anyway. The way many Christians tend to understand the message of the story of Jonah reminds me of a TV show that was popular in the '70's when I was growing up. Do any of you here remember "Maude", starring Bea Arthur and Bill Macy? Bea Arthur played Maude, a headstrong, independent, but rather domineering woman, while her husband, Walter, who was more easygoing and affable, often ended up somewhat under Maude's thumb. When Walter would somehow interfere with Maude's plans, she would invariably look him right in the eye and, in a knowing and rather ominous tone, say "God'll get you for that, Walter."

Many Christians, I think, have a tendency to look at many of the stories of the Old Testament in a similar way: God gives the Commandments, man breaks the Commandments, God punishes man. Follow God's rules, or God will "get you for it." The free gift of salvation comes into play in the New Testament, with the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But even then, many Christians, I would indeed say, seem to bristle at the thought that those who have lived evil or dissolute lives year upon year, or who have even perpetrated sadistic and heinous crimes may be forgiven, in the sense that they may repent and be given the very same salvation as those who have tried to walk in God's way all along.

Although the story is told couched in terms of the symbolism of reward and punishment, the Jonah narrative is about far more than just that. Jonah's story is not simply in the Bible to let us know that if we do not do as we should, God will 'get us' for it! As we shall see, the Book of Jonah is about Transformation – it is about change of heart and change of mind. It is about the difference between simply believing in God and doing as we ought, on the one hand, and having ourselves and our lives *formed* by our understanding of ourselves as people made by God within a world of reality that is also made by God, on the other hand. The story of Jonah teaches us that we must **get our priorities straight**; we must endeavor to get our values and desires in line with those of God. And perhaps most importantly, as an essential part of this re-ordering of our values, the story of Jonah asks us to re-think our understanding of **justice**.

In conjunction with our examination of the story of Jonah today, I would ask that you keep in mind two New Testament passages. The first one is from Luke, Ch. 15, verses 11-32, and it is the story of the Prodigal Son. The second New Testament lesson I would like you to consider is the Parable of

the Worker in the Field (also known as the Laborer in the Vineyard, depending on which Bible translation you are using). It is to be found at Matthew 20:1-16. As I see it, both of these passages illustrate a very human (and very world-bound) reaction in their protagonists: the very same world-bound reaction that our friend Jonah has at the end of his dealings with the people of Nineveh. While the father of the Prodigal Son joyfully forgives, the brother does not. He resents his errant sibling, and feels slighted by the fact that his brother has squandered and not worked, had fun and not put in his time in the household. He does not understand that he himself has had the better lot – he has enjoyed a close relationship with the father, been privileged to help in his father's work, and had the bounty of the father's riches at his disposal all along. It is the Prodigal who has lost that time forever. Similarly, the Worker in the Field, at first content with his work and wages, becomes disgruntled only when he discovers the terms under which another has been hired.

Let us look at the story of Jonah. Jonah is called by God. He is given a commission, a mission which he is to do on God's behalf. He is to go to Nineveh and announce the bad news of God's judgement upon its people. Jonah doesn't want to go – he is being asked to go to a sworn enemy of his own people and give them a sort of cosmic 'heads up.' The people of Nineveh are not people of God's Covenant; they are not of the Hebrews. They do not worship Yahweh and Yahweh alone, for they are pagans. What is more, it is implied and we can imagine that the Ninevites are not terribly moral people; they are sinners insofar as they do not, it seems, do a very good job of keeping even the most basic natural laws of morality which God has given to the non-Hebrew people in the Covenant with humanity He made through Noah.

Jonah bails. We can imagine him thinking "This is where I get off!", "Oh no, not me! God, you can just get someone else!" It is interesting that in his desire to flee from what God wants him to do, he flees *to* that which is most opposite of God – Jonah flees to the most worldly and unspiritual of places, the city of Tarshish. In our Jonah class last summer, I compared Tarshish to a combination of N.Y. , L.A. and Vegas, in our own day: Jonah has fled to a place of riches and fame, of worldliness detached from Godliness. What is worshipped in Tarshish is the creature and not the creator. To run to Tarshish is to attempt to live as just a natural man and not as a material body housing an eternal soul. To run to Tarshish to fail to be true to ourselves, for we are both body and spirit, and not body alone.

Jonah is soon less than happy with his decision. As Ed discussed in his sermon on Jonah, our decisions to flee from our God will result in tumult and mayhem in our lives and in the lives of those around us. God works His justice through simple cause and effect: if we embrace only the material side of our nature, we get just that – the chaos, disorder and mayhem of pure nature. Jonah's denial of his spiritual nature and his embracing of his material nature alone brings him to misery. It is in the belly of the great fish, in the cavernous heart of pure and chaotic nature, that Jonah sees the light:

He must get right with God. It is the only way. He cannot go on denying his spiritual nature; he cannot continue to worship the creation without its Creator. He cannot be just half a man. The material world implies its Spiritual Creator; Jonah's material body implies an immaterial soul. Without Spirit, without God, we are, quite essentially, at sea – we are lost and in misery.

Jonah repents. And he is forgiven. Jonah is ready to embark upon the service that the Lord requires of him. While Jonah's worldly

side does not particularly want to do the thing that God requires of him, he has come to see that he must, else he loses God in his own life. For Jonah still, the spiritual life is hard and full of unpleasant duty. Following God means doing things that one would ordinarily not want to do, and not doing things that one really would want to do, if God would only allow it. For Jonah still, following God means giving up what he really wants, and doing what he really does not want, in order to please God. Jonah has not come to see that his love of God ought to imply a true love of his neighbour – meaning all of humanity – because God has created and loves all of humanity. Jonah does not actually wish the people of Nineveh well, and hope that they heed the call to turn to the Lord and partake of salvation. He can't stand them, but is going to preach and to prophecy because *that* is what *God* wants him to do. Jonah has turned to the Lord, but he is still worldly. He will do as God requires, but he is not going to *like* it.

Jonah is downright furious when the entire population of Nineveh repents, turns to the Lord, and is granted forgiveness and salvation by God. Jonah actually feels cheated! For Jonah, the fact that the people of Nineveh had been great sinners before their conversion or repentance should count against them. They are not entitled, he thinks, to the salvation they are given because they were bad before, while Jonah has spent all that time working hard and being good. This seems reasonable at first, as it seems to resonate with our human sense of justice.

Now, we must ask ourselves, what skin is it off his nose if the Ninevites are granted salvation? How does he lose anything from this? I suggest to you that there might be something more than a little bit dark and ugly underlying the common human tendency to resent God's forgiving of even

the most grievous of sinners who has truly repented.

Jonah feels that he loses by the Ninevites' gain because Jonah is double-minded. He loves and obeys the Lord, it is true. But Jonah is also still attached to the world and to its values. We might say that Jonah does his duty out of love of God, but it is still to him an *unpleasant duty*, and not the expression of his heart toward God's creatures. Jonah obeys, but he has not been *transformed*.

The world-bound human being seems to crave distinction and honour in the world, usually to the exclusion of all else. If everyone wins, my winning isn't worth as much. If everyone gets one, that lessens the value of what I have been given – it no longer makes me 'special.' Winning, or doing well in the world, seems to mean to win while someone else *loses*, to be noticed *above* the rest, to be judged to be in some way 'better *than*' other people. More money, more possessions, more fame, more recognition, more honors, etc. Competition is at the heart of all worldliness: for me to win, you must lose. For me to be happy, I must be the best, or at least, I must be *better than* someone else. The world-bound individual tries to set himself up as a god and is thus always in a position of insecurity – one can never be secure in trying to be one's own god, simply because one is not God, the Creator of heaven and earth and Source of all Being. The life of the world-bound man or woman is one beset by great anxiety, resentment, turmoil and even hatred: no matter what one acquires or how much one achieves, one's position is never secured, because one simply is not God.

More subtly, worldliness can disguise itself as a yearning for justice, particularly as a concern that we ourselves be always given a 'fair shake.' Like the Worker in the Field, we can be perfectly *happy* with what we have, *until* we find that someone else has more, or has laboured less and received a

share equal to our own. Once again, it is not what one has or has not that is the problem, but our concern with our state *relative* to that of someone else.

And most importantly of all, a person who, like Jonah, feels cheated by the repentance and salvation of others is, in all probability, not particularly happy in his own service of God. He obeys out of a sense of duty, because God orders it, while deep-down wishing he could be doing otherwise. Jonah feels that the Ninevites have gotten the better deal, because they got to spend all that long time sinning, and have received forgiveness and salvation in the end, while he himself has given up all that fun sinning and been dutifully obeying the Lord. He feels quite ripped off! This is plainly unfair! All work and no play! He feels that God won't let him have his cake and eat it, too, and he still sees that life of sin – of distance from God – as the 'cake' of enjoyment and delight, and the godly life as a burdensome drag. Jonah clearly doesn't have life more abundantly. If he didn't see the godly life as work and drudgery, he would not resent the Ninevites for not having had to 'endure' it. He has put in his time, so to speak, of working for the Lord, and these Ninevites have gotten to have all that fun and been saved just the same. Where's the justice?, he asks.

Well, where is the justice? And, more precisely, what could we say would constitute justice in this case? Obviously unhappy in his life of service to God, Jonah expects to be well compensated for his 'labors.' His obedience to God and his working for God's Kingdom has for him been a mere means to an end – he has not looked about himself and found that it is this work and this relationship with God that has brought him beautiful and abundant life. He missed it, and is waiting for a future 'pay-off' for his troubles. Jonah just doesn't 'get it.' He does not realize that he has been privileged with such a close relationship

with God, he has been gifted with the opportunity to share in the very Kingdom of God which is all around us ...

Insofar as we, as finite human beings, are able to understand the ways of God, His Justice and His Mercy, we can know at least this much: for the sinner who has truly repented of his or her sin, the *memory* of the time spent in sinning – in being distant from God – can truly be seen as punishment. Such a one, though *now* reconciled with God, carries the memory of a life in which this was not always so. And he or she has missed all of that time in which could have been enjoyed the Joy of relationship with God and Abundant Life.. The most perfectly Christian response is to mourn the sinner's irrevocably lost time wasted in sin and estrangement from God, and to rejoice at his or her turning toward God in acceptance of the free gift of salvation. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, we mourn the loss of time wasted in sin, and joyfully celebrate the sinner's redemption. Rather than envying the repentant sinner his or her time spent in sin, we give thanks and rejoice at the fact that we have been long busy in our labors of love for the Kingdom, that we have been given the marvellous gift of having already enjoyed so much Abundant Life.

To truly be making the priorities and values of God our own, we must be willing the salvation of *all* of humanity, as the Lord does. Those who are most distant and estranged from God, those who are farthest from salvation, are those most in need of God's mercy and of our prayers. We lose nothing by their inclusion in the Kingdom of God – in fact we gain with every increase in the harvest of repentant sinners: the world has become more Godly, more fulfilled, and more reconciled with its true nature.

To be concerned that those who have led lives of serious sin are not given justice by God in a manner that seems adequate to us is not only to second-guess the Almighty,

but also to declare our own allegiance to the values of the world. It is to admit that we are in fact jealous of the sinner's sinning. It is to reveal that we, somewhere deep down, still treasure the things of the world as ends and values in themselves, rather than as aspects and manifestations of the power, majesty and goodness of God. It is to say that on some level, we wish we could be living the life of sin, worshipping ourselves as our own god, or some thing in the world in place of our Lord. Though we may even follow all the rules, our heart is not given entirely to God.

Our Lord calls us to live out a deep faith. He asks us for nothing short of a total commitment and the complete giving of ourselves to Him. The gift that He gives to us, the 'reward' for living a Godly, moral, and pious life, does not simply come at the end of our lives, when we are permitted to enter into heaven, into life everlasting in the Presence of God. No -- it is in giving ourselves totally to God that we come to find ourselves, our *true* selves, in the here-and-now. The life lived in service to God is itself a part of the 'reward:' the Abundant Life freely offered us by God starts **Now**, and depends only on our decision to accept the gift. Ah, but there's the catch – we must decide to accept the gift completely, to give ourselves over fully into the service of God, and to hold nothing of ourselves back. We cannot 'hedge our bets,' as they say, we must 'put all of our eggs' into God's basket. One cannot serve two masters (Luke 16:13).

The necessity that our commitment to God be total is repeated frequently in the Gospels: "Whoever seeks to save his life shall lose it" (Matthew 16:25) – if we seek to hold back anything of our loyalty in order to bestow it upon anything within God's creation, if we seek to 'save' to ourselves anything that we value rather than valuing and enjoying it in the light of God, we lose

it all. "Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also .. cannot be my disciple"(Luke 14:27) – 'failure to hate' here meaning loving something within creation *for itself*, and not as it is given us by God; it means to worship, even in part, a creature rather than the creator. And, at Luke 16:13, we are told that we cannot worship both God and Mammon – where 'Mammon' represents far more than simply money, but rather earthly things taken as values in themselves, without reference to God as their creator, sustainer, and bestower. Whatever demands our worship and subordination other than God (be it material possessions, prestige, a person, power or a false sense of self and self-protection) that is our Mammon. To paraphrase Matt. 6:21, where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.

The story of Jonah, I suggest to you, is less about reward and punishment than it is about what it means to live as God intends us to live. It is about becoming who we are meant by God to be. And it is about the transformation that the total commitment of ourselves to God brings about in us. It is about beginning to see (as Jonah did not) the world and our fellow human beings more as God does and less under the false categories of world-worship. One of the effects caused by our becoming who we are meant to be --- our becoming people who live authentically as God's people – is life eternal in God's Kingdom. But another – and prior – effect of our becoming God's own is our having more abundant, joyful and authentic life right now. It is not enough simply to love God, to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and to follow the 'rules' to the best of our ability. That is simply a start along the path of the Life in the Spirit and nothing more. We are called to walk with Jesus in a journey of deepening faith, relationship, and understanding. Coming to know Jesus – to Know Almighty God – more and more is less

a matter of emotion than it is of increased understanding and awareness --- awareness of God, of His relationship to His creation, and of our part in it. With deeper understanding comes deeper love of the Lord as the Source of our Being, with deeper love comes singleness of heart and of mind and Life Abundant.

Poor Jonah. When the story ends, we find him sitting under a withered gourd, spewing forth words of self-pity and resentment. He is so angry that the Ninevites have repented and that God has spared them that he no longer wants to go on living. He has the 'me first' attitude of the world-bound, natural man: if the Ninevites get to share in salvation, then I don't want any -- it's only supposed to be given to me and to mine. He is vengeful; he wants the people of Nineveh to suffer and for himself to be deemed virtuous in contrast. He is hypocritical, viewing himself as superior to the Ninevites, forgetting the fact that God forgave him when he repented of the Tarshish fiasco. He is jealously resentful that the Ninevites have not 'toiled' by living a god-fearing life to win their salvation, for he sees the moral life as a giving-up of what he really would enjoy, and serving God as the dreary and hard work done to earn a reward. He doesn't realize that God loved him so much. He had the treasure of a wonderful and fulfilling life right under his nose, and stubbornly failed to see it.

Sin really comes down to what we love, to what we, at bottom, worship, does it not? Even when our actions are good ones, what is in our heart? Is there a bit of world-worship we would secretly really like to be

doing, if only God would allow it? When we keep a part of our heart from God and make something in the world our god, all these things flow from it: greed for power, gain, importance, status, disregard for others and blindness to the wonder and beauty of God's Kingdom. Upon these terms -- the terms which value the world and its things outside their relationship to God, -- we can never begin to understand God's Justice, or to practice sincere forgiveness.

Let us ask ourselves this day: does our love of God extend itself to our fellow human beings? Do we wish all of humanity to share in the joy of salvation and abundant life? And have we given over our lives -- our very identities -- so completely to our Lord and Saviour that we love our lives and the world *in Christ* and never *instead of Christ*? Which aspects of our lives in the world present problems for us and threaten to distract our love and loyalty from its proper focal point in God?

To close this time of reflection today, I would like to share with you a prayer which is said by Roman Catholics and some Anglicans. In it, we pray for our own redemption and that of those who are right now most distant from the Light of God:

O My Jesus, Forgive us our sins, Save us from the fires of hell, Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Thy Mercy. Amen.

Vicki Frappollo

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