

SLD01.22.12 3rd Ordinary
Jonah 3:1-5
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“Damned if you do....”

We had a staff planning retreat Friday and Saturday at my house, with a meal Friday night compliments of Rose, for which we were very grateful. On our staff retreats, especially the one in January, we tackle the program and worship calendar for the whole year, with a particular focus, in this case, on Outreach, the season of Lent, and the strategic future of this church, a topic you’ll be hearing more about in the coming months.

These times of the staff stepping out of the routine demands of our lives and the church and focusing on the bigger picture are challenging relationally, intellectually, and theologically, but as we developed them over the years, they strike me as deeply important to our esprit de corps as a team, to the quality of our worship and discipleship at this church, and to growth and development of this community as God’s body of Christ at 1886 N. Decatur Rd.

They’re pretty intense. In fact, they wear me out. Seriously. I can’t really prepare and deliver what I regard as a “full-fledged sermon” after a staff planning retreat. I can’t really do anything, frankly, but sit in front of the television and watch the old reruns of the West Wing with which Karen supplies me. Staff planning events are really worth it; they just don’t leave me with much left over.

Tom, on the other hand, eats it up and asks for more. So he’ll be preaching after our next planning retreat in May.

Anyway, during these weeks in between the highs of our Covenant service and Martin Luther King Day, and the season of Lent which begins on the last Sunday of February, we'll be focusing on the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, offered by lectionary. And today's lection is from the book of Jonah, chapter 3, verses 1-5. I'm going to be reading from the new Common English Bible that David Petersen is responsible for editing, so it might read a little differently than your pew Bibles. I'll give you a minute to find Jonah. I had to look him up in the table of contents. It's sort of in toward the back of the Old Testament, in the middle of the minor prophets, right before Micah.

So the lection text reads thusly:

³ The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: ² "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." ³ And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)

⁴ Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

Obviously lectionary has us stepping right into the middle of Jonah's story – "the Lord's word came to Jonah a second time" – what was the Lord's Word to Jonah the first time? And the bible rarely does things in twosies – what's the Lord's Word going to be to Jonah the third time, I wondered.

I mean, we all know the story of Jonah and the whale but when was the last time you read the whole book of Jonah? It's been years for me. It's not long, only four chapters. But just how reflective of it is today's lection? If this were all we heard, we might be tempted to think Jonah and God were best buddies, always getting along,

always paying attention to each other, Jonah always doing what God says. And that sort of spin doesn't do justice at all to the relationship between God and ole Jonah. In fact, given the complexities and disappointments of their relationship, I thought it'd do us all good to hear the whole story.

I mean, two weeks ago we recommitted our lives to Christ. Last week we acted out that commitment in service to a family whose house needed major intervention for safe function, never mind for aesthetics. So all's just hunky dory between us and God, right? Hm. I doubt it. Most of us know that, for all our proclamations and right actions, a life of discipleship is full of ups and downs and disappointments, of indifference, resistance, and plain ole misunderstanding. That's how it was for Jonah, too.

Let's listen to his whole story.

1 The LORD's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: ² " Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention. "

³ So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD ! He went down to Jaffa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD . ⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. ⁵ The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter.

Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. ⁶ The ship's officer came and said to him, " How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won't perish. "

⁷ Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, " Come on, let's cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that's happening to us. " They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they said to him, " Tell us, since you're

the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What's your country and of what people are you? ”

⁹ He said to them, “ I'm a Hebrew. I worship the LORD , the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land. ”

¹⁰ Then the men were terrified and said to him, “ What have you done? ” (The men knew that that Jonah was fleeing from the LORD , because he had told them.)

¹¹ They said to him, “ What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us? ” (The sea was continuing to rage.)

¹² He said to them, “ Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you. ”

¹³ The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. ¹⁴ So they called on the LORD , saying, “ Please, LORD , don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the LORD : whatever you want, you can do. ” ¹⁵ Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. ¹⁶ The men worshipped the LORD with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made solemn promises.

^{17a} Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

2 Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:

? ² “ I called out to the LORD in my distress, and he answered me.

? From the belly of the underworld^b

? I cried out for help;

? you have heard my voice.

? ³ You had cast me into the depths

? in the heart of the seas,

? and the flood surrounds me.

? All your strong waves and rushing water passed over me.

? ⁴ So I said, “I have been driven

? away from your sight.

? Will I ever again look

? on your holy temple?

? ⁵ Waters have grasped me

? to the point of death;
? the deep surrounds me.
? Seaweed is wrapped around my head
? ⁶ at the base of the undersea^c mountains.
? I have sunk down to the underworld;
? its bars held me
? with no end in sight.
? But you brought me out of the pit.’
? ⁷ When my endurance^d was weakening,
? I remembered the LORD ,
? and my prayer came to you,
? to your holy temple.
? ⁸ Those deceived by worthless things
? lose their chance for mercy.^e
? ⁹ But me, I will offer a sacrifice to you
? with a voice of thanks.
? That which I have promised,
? I will pay.
? Deliverance belongs to the LORD ! ”

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

3 The LORD ‘s word came to Jonah a second time: ² “ Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you. ” ³ And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD “s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days” walk across.)

⁴ Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “ Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown! ” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

⁶ When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he announced, “ In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water! ⁸ Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that’s under their control! ” ⁹ He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish.^f

¹⁰ God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it.

4 But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD , “ Come on, LORD ! Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. ³ At this point, LORD , you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live. ”

⁴ The LORD responded, “ Is your anger a good thing? ” ⁵ But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city.

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a shrub,⁹ and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. ⁷ But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. ⁸ Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, “ It’s better for me to die than to live. ”

⁹ God said to Jonah, “ Is your anger about the shrub a good thing? ”

Jonah said, “ Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death! ”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “ You “pitied” the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ Yet for my part, can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals? ”

In other words, where’s your compassion? Where’s your humility? And where do you get off anyway thinking you know better than I how things should go? These Ninevens are nincompoops. They can’t tell their right hand from their left. But they had the good sense to listen to the word I sent them through you, and repent. You gotta give ‘em that, Jonah. *I* gotta give ‘em that.

But Jonah’s mad, mad as Job at what appears to be God’s caprice. Jonah feels set up, jerked around, made to look the fool. And you know what? Maybe he was. It

wouldn't be the first time God set somebody up. It could've been worse, I guess. At least Jonah's misery wasn't the result of a silly bet between God and the devil.

Anyway, I'm not sure I'd feel just a whole lot different than Jonah about the whole affair. Would you?

Certainly we get no indication from the text that he and God work things out. Maybe they did; they'd done it before; work things out. Or maybe Jonah just stayed mad.

What do you think?

To the glory of God. Amen.