***Making An Old Story New***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 21, 2024*

*based on Jonah 3:1-5*

Jonah, son of Amittai, prophet of Israel, received a word from God to go and preach at Ninevah, a great city about 175 miles northwest of the present city of Baghdad on the river, Tigris. It is a city in the ancient nation of Assyria, a great enemy of Israel. And God said, “The wickedness of that city stinks to high heaven, which means I can smell it. So, go and preach against it.”

But Jonah refused to go. Instead he caught a ship going west and north to Tarshish, another name for Spain. But God would not let Jonah get away so easily. God sent a great storm and troubled the ship and the sailors on it, and they were so afraid they thought they were going to drown.

So, with the storm raging these very superstitious fellows called on every god they could think of. They even polled all the passengers on the ship to see who they worshipped, and that done, they cast lots to see whose god might be angry enough to want to kill them with such a storm.

Well, they all have secrets sins, you know, every sailor and passenger among them, but it’s Jonah who fesses up and says it’s likely that he’s the cause, and the captain and crew reluctantly toss Jonah overboard. But that’s not the end of the story. It should be the end of Jonah at least, but it goes on to say, “God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah” whole.

No biting. Only swallowing. He goes down like a raw oyster.

So Jonah ends up alive, in a fish’s stomach. Imagine that.

Now, we all know that in Walt Disney’s version of this story as it comes to us tucked in the middle of the movie, *Pinocchio*, the great fish happens to be a whale, which is why many folks just say whale. But who knows, maybe the author had in mind a huge ocean-going bass.

In any case, three days later, poor Jonah is belched out onto someone’s beach property, and, with no alternative apparent to him, but still reluctant, Jonah goes to Ninevah to preach against it. Yeah, and he no doubt smells worse than all the sins of the Ninevites put together.

Now Jonah is man of profound faith and commitment. His faith is very deep. It’s Abraham and Sarah deep. It’s Moses deep. He has the faith of his parents and his grandparents and their parents, as well.

Here is a man who loves his country and is faithful to its institutions and to the God who called them to be God’s people. “You alone of all the earth have I called,” says this Old Testament God to Israel. That’s Jonah’s faith.

So why is Jonah so angry at the Ninevites? Well, as I said, Ninevah is a city in the nation of Assyria, and Assyria had, in 722 B.C. defeated the nation of Israel in a war.

Pardon me for inserting this background side-bar, but this is critical information. Israel was, at this time, a Jewish nation located to the north of another Jewish nation called Judah, and the sad thing was that that northern nation (containing 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel) disappeared as a result of their defeat. Completely. Here is how that happened.

Once the Assyrians won their little war against Israel, they set in motion a method of making sure Israel would never retaliate against them, They forced something like **half** of the Jews in Israel to migrate to another country they had subjugated earlier, and at the same time they forced many of the people in THOSE countries to relocate to Israel.

Yes, and then they forced them all to intermarry. This way there would be no full-blood Jews left – not by killing them, but simply by changing their ethnicity over a period of a few generations.

Genocide by marriage. Do you see why Jonah is so angry? The Assyrians could not have done anything worse to the Jewish people in Jonah’s way of thinking. So, if you are a Jew and you are reading this story in 500 B.C. or even 2024 A.D., you get why Jonah is angry.

Jonah is then part of a tiny remnant of a group of Jews who were almost totally wiped out. Therefore, he has the faith of a proud survivor. His is a faith that has been deepened by every ethnic slur he’s heard or overheard at the local 7 - Eleven. His is a faith that is deepened by every insult he got on the playground as a child. It’s a faith that has been deepened even more by ugly things spray-painted on his garage door by cowardly bigots in the night.

His faith is full of “My Country ‘Tis Of Thee.” National exceptionalism is what he is all about. In fact, I doubt that Jonah is even aware of all the components of his faith, just as I am not of mine, nor are you probably aware of yours.

This stuff is in us deep. There are elements that come from our culture, our national poetry and folklore, the sacrifices of our people and our forefathers and foremothers.

In the midst of this patriotism intermixed with our faith there are fears, and hatreds and prejudices we hardly know about, but they are there in the mix, as well. And because Jonah is a special kind of survivor, he has a chip on his shoulder a mile-wide and it makes him kind of lonely. Let me tell you what I mean.

Imagine a small boy standing in front of a ticket-taker at the circus. He wants to go to the circus, but he doesn’t have any money. The ticket taker figures this out from the forlorn look on the kid’s face. So the ticket-taker says, “Son, come by tomorrow after school. We’re having a special matinee, I’ll let you in for free.” Wow, the child is ecstatic. He goes to school the next morning, but he can hardly pay attention, he’s so excited. It’s like the school day lasts forever.

Finally the bell rings and he’s off to the big tent to see the circus. His feet hardly touch the ground on the way.

He doesn’t even notice a couple of dozen other children lining up there too, and then the ticket-taker opens the tent flap and says, “Okay, boys and girls, come on in.” And the little boy is dumb struck as they all rush by him. Why?

Well, he thought an exception was being made for him. That’s not the case – the “special” matinee is for every kid who shows up.

In one second, the little boy is the only child standing outside. The puzzled ticket-taker says, “Come on in son, it’s free.” And the little boy says, “I’m not interested,” and walks away.”

Why? Because there’s something about feeling that you’re the only one invited that is dulled a bit when you find out that the invitation is . . . “for everybody.” That’s Jonah’s story. Now, listen to God’s.

There is a classic rabbinical tale from the Hebrew tradition about the Exodus that pertains here. God was very busy, it was said, at the time of the Exodus, when the Hebrew children were released from bondage and marched toward the Red Sea. So God set up a committee of angels to over-see their safe passage.

When the people reached the edge of the sea, the angels arranged for the waters there to be parted so the children could cross over on dry land, which, of course, they did.

But Pharaoh and his chariots were in hot pursuit, so the angels arranged for the waters to be joined again at the moment the last Hebrew man or woman made it to the other side of the sea. And with the rush of water came the deaths of the Egyptian army, chariots, horses, and all.

Well, the angels clapped and sang in celebration and the noise they made drew God’s attention and so God came asking what the commotion was all about. Well, the angles gleefully told God what had happened, and God was thunder struck and walked away weeping. The angels pursued God asking why God was so saddened by the triumph of the Hebrew children, and God said, “Don’t you see . . . the Egyptians are ALSO my children.”

God will not give up on the Assyrian children either, which is why God will not give up coercing Jonah to go to Ninevah and preach to them.

I mean, look, Jonah is God’s “closer.” Jonah is like the guy they bring in at the car dealership to close the deal with the would-be buyer. He’s maybe not the most ethical guy. God knows he’ll say anything to get his point across to make the sale, but God knows also that … he gets the job done.

So, the text goes on: “And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time to go to Ninevah where the evil that was brewing there displeased God mightily.” And this time Jonah, who had done three days of hard time in a whale’s belly for not following God’s lead, felt he had no choice but to go to Ninevah and preach.

He goes over to Nineveh, and he warns them all of their impending doom. He travels all over the city, three days carrying his sandwich board sign saying, “The End Is Near.” He looks just like any fire-and-brimstone preacher who sets up shop at the Skidmore Fountain on a sunny Saturday Market afternoon.

And an amazing thing happens. They listen. They pay attention. They repent. In fact this is arguably the most successful preaching mission recorded in the Bible.

The Ninevites close the ‘massage parlors,’ the back room bars, and shut down the drug cartels. They stop child abuse and end domestic violence. They decide to provide shelters for the homeless and built affordable housing in the nice areas, not just the warehouse district. They implement a program guaranteeing health care for everyone in the country no matter what, and they start a program that gives the elderly subsidies for their expensive medications – a program they can actually understand.

They root out internet pornography. They give a fair wage to the immigrants who clean the toilets in their hotels, and they also give them hope that their children will one day go to college there, maybe even free.

They put an end to nuclear arms production, and the production of nerve gas. They double down on the Paris agreement about halting CO2 production. They make peace with their neighbors and they outlaw the torture of prisoners in clandestine locations. In every respect they clean up their act.

The king and the cabinet in Nineveh lead the whole thing. In fact, the king himself repents and orders everyone to join him, to put on sackcloth and sit in ashes and pray to Jonah’s god for mercy. And look, these are not even Jews, these are Assyrians, but they believe that Jonah’s God is calling them to repentance, nonetheless, and they repent and turn their lives around.

And as if that isn’t enough, so does God. God repents. That’s the meaning of the word in Hebrew. God saw the sincerity of the Ninevites, the turn-about that they had made, and it moves God, moves God so much that God repents of the idea of destroying them.

Now this is the point at which a lesser story might end with the familiar words,

*and they all lived happily ever after.*

But instead, this story has one more chapter where we find out just how stubborn Jonah’s prejudice against the Assyrians is.

But then the story isn’t really about the Assyrians anyway – like all the best stories in (and out of) the Bible, this is a story about the human heart.

You know, the human heart is an dark and interesting place. People are complex creatures. You just never know what any one person will do or feel.

Among the great varieties of human beings there are those who cannot abide gray areas in life – people like Jonah for whom everyone is either Hitler or Jesus with nothing in between.

I was raised by such a person, but, I have to note that all of us are more like Jonah than we might be ready to admit. We have our systems worked out as to who is favored by God and who is not. We know the good guys from the bad guys. Just like Jonah.

So when God called Jonah’s name and gave him a job to do, bearing a message of repentance to Nineveh, Jonah had more than a sneaking suspicion that if he did what God wanted, he wouldn’t be able to stop God from doing a lily livered, weak-kneed kind of thing ... God being such a bleeding heart.

Jonah says to God, “God, it’s killing me -- you are so gracious and merciful, so slow to anger; abounding in steadfast love, and always ready to relent from punishing.” The very thought of it made Jonah want to die, and he said so.

Jonah is so like the Grinch in Dr. Seuss’s Christmas story. Remember the Grinch whose heart was “two sizes too small?”

The last thing Jonah would ever want God to do would be to give people he hated with a white hot hate, any opportunity to avoid the well-deserved judgment that was coming to them.

After all, they weren’t even Jews. I mean, what is the point of being a chosen race if God does not love you more than God loves your enemies?

If Jonah hated the Ninevites, God should too.

And look, this is the difference between angry Jonah and so many of the angry white evangelicals today who are ranting all the time.

What I mean here is that Jonah **knew** what God’s heart was like.

Had Jonah been reincarnated five hundred years later, he would have looked at Jesus and his love for outcasts and foreigners and he would have said, “Yep, he’s just like the weak-kneed, all-loving God he was so angry with in his previous incarnation.

But look -- In contrast to that, the majority of today’s white evangelicals think Jesus is just like them – they are convinced that he is mad as hell about immigrants, and gay people, and the shrinking white majority in this country as they are.

I once quoted Anne Lamott’s opinion on this subject. She said, “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Well, finding out that God’s heart did not beat to the same tune as his own, Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, “God! I knew it —

I knew this was going to happen! That’s why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were all grace and mercy. “So, God, if you won’t kill our enemies,

kill *me!* I’m better off dead!”

God said, “Now, Jonah, what in the world do you have to be so angry about?”

But Jonah just hung up the phone on God. He went out of the city to the east and sat down in a sulk. He sat there facing the city to see if God might come to God’s senses and change God’s mind and wipe out the Assyrians after all. That’s how stubborn Jonah is. That’s how intoxicated he has gotten on his own anger and bitterness.

But God has a secret little plan for Jonah. God arranges for a broad-leafed tree to spring up overnight. It grows up over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade.

Life was looking up.

But then God sends a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm bores into the trunk of that shade tree and it withers away. The sun comes up and God sends a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beats down on Jonah’s head and he starts to faint.

Just then, Jonah lets out a diatribe against God for killing the shade tree.

Then God says to Jonah, “What right do you have to get so angry about a shade tree?”

Jonah says, “Plenty of right. It’s makes me angry enough to die!”

God says, “Give me a break. You get all huffy about a stupid shade tree that you did nothing to plant or water? It grows up overnight night, and dies the next day. So, why can’t I pity Ninevah at least as much as you pity the shade tree? Ninevah which happens to be a huge city of more than 120,000 people who don’t even *know right from wrong*, to say nothing of all the innocent animals that would be killed if I dropped a bomb on them?”

Well, guess what? The story ends right there. We’re never told how Jonah reacts to this last appeal from God.

In Dr. Seuss’s story, the Grinch’s heart grows three sizes and he’s invited to the Whos’ Christmas feast. Remember? But we never hear another word about Jonah. Why? Because the story isn’t really about Jonah; no more than it’s about the Ninevites.

It’s about us and our hearts.. It’s an appeal to our softer sides when we are tempted to harden our hearts and turn as crabby and craven and bigoted as old Jonah.

The story may be 2500 years old but it still rings true because it’s written with angry people, just like those in this country today, in mind. That’s a sad thing, but that’s how it is.

Anger is the emotion driving so much of our politics today, and that anger is like opium for those intoxicated by it on the right and, yes, on the left, too. Dammit. And we are all suffering mightily because of the addiction.

We need this story more than ever. We need to remember, maybe hourly, how different God’s heart is, compared to our own

Amen