

A Whale of a Tale

January 21, 2018



The Prophet Jonah before the Walls of Nineveh - Rembrandt

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:14-20

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The Bible tells us that Jonah, the man we've heard was swallowed by a whale, was actually a prophet. So here are three things to know about prophets: (1) being a prophet is never easy; (2) prophets are called to be truth-tellers, not fortune-tellers; and (3) everyone – not just a special few – has a call to prophesy.

(1) Being a prophet is never easy.

Today's lessons (at least, the portions we've heard this morning) make being a prophet look easy. Jonah saves 120,000 people (not to mention every animal) in the enemy's city. Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee and calls disciples, and they immediately drop everything to follow him.

But would you really want to be a prophet? (Just look at the Gospel again – Jesus' story begins with John the Baptist's arrest by Herod.) Everyone knows that being a prophet is never easy.

We all know about Jonah, the man who is said to have survived in the belly of a whale, but we don't much else about him. Actually, the story of Jonah was originally a legend that circulated all around the Middle East. When we lived in there in the sixties, we visited two beach towns – one in Lebanon, the other in Syria, which called themselves "Nebi Yunis," (the Prophet Jonah in Arabic) – each town proclaiming that it was the very place where the whale coughed Jonah up.

How can a human being survive for three days in the belly of a whale? That's the question the name of Jonah usually raises. Biblical literalists still argue that Jonah really survived his time in the whale, thinking this old story is about miracles. But it's not a story about miracles at all – it's a story that points out how hard it is to be a prophet. It's even a story that makes fun of prophets.

(Here are some more reasons not to be a prophet – you might be killed; you might be thrown into jail; you might be hated; and you certainly will be laughed at.)

After centuries of being told as an oral legend in various languages around the Middle East, the Hebrew book of Jonah was written around 500 years before Jesus was born. The writer takes the old legend and turns it into a short story. It's a very short story, only four chapters long.

God calls Jonah to be a prophet, but Jonah doesn't want to do it. The whole idea of going all the way from Israel to Ninevah, a big city in today's Iraq, to be a prophet turns Jonah off. He is absolutely sure that no one in Ninevah, a great foreign power, will listen to him.

So Jonah runs away to Joppa, a city still on Israel's Mediterranean coast today, and there he boards a ship heading for Turkey. He thinks he's escaped God's call, and falls asleep happily in his bunk on the ship. And while Jonah sleeps, God stirs up a great storm. The ship's crew becomes desperate, and each sailor falls on his knees, begging his own god to save them. Finally, after a couple of stormy days, the ship's captain comes down and wakes Jonah up from his nap, asking him to pray to his God, too. Maybe Jonah's God will stop the storm.

But Jonah already knows why the storm has blown up – God's angry at him. So Jonah talks the crew into throwing him overboard, thinking that this punishment will take away God's anger. And Jonah is right – the storm is calmed and the ship survives.

But now a great sea creature (which we call a whale) is sent by God to swallow Jonah. For three days and three nights Jonah suffers inside the fish's belly. He finally confesses his disobedience, and he begs God for mercy. Then God speaks to the sea creature, which spits Jonah out onto dry land.

Now, after his rescue, Jonah knows he has to go to Ninevah, to tell the people there to repent. So he walks the thousand miles to Ninevah, muttering all the way that no one will listen to him. But when he gets there, he hurries through the streets calling people to repent – and to his surprise, they do! The people beg for forgiveness – and God, being a forgiving God, does forgive them. What a great outcome to Jonah’s hard work!

(2) Prophets are called to be truth-tellers.

But Jonah is furious, and he angrily tells God this is the reason he tried to run away. He says,

“Oh Lord, Isn’t this what I told you when I was still in my own country? Isn’t this why I ran away? For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

(What Jonah meant was this: “I knew that you would be merciful to the Ninevites, even though they are foreigners and don’t believe in you!”)

So Jonah finishes by saying, “Now, O Lord, just put me out of my misery.” And in his snit, Jonah goes outside the city and sits down in the scorching sun, prepared to die. But God makes a bush to grow up over Jonah, to give him shade. And Jonah is happy for the shade. But the next day, a worm comes and attacks the bush, and it withers away. Then the sun rises, a great east wind comes up, and the hot sun beats down on Jonah’s head, and once again he begs God to let him die.

Then God says to Jonah: “So you are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people and also many animals?” And Jonah says to God: “I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.... But who is getting your mercy? Me? Or these foreigners, who don’t even believe in you?”

(3) Everyone, not just a special few, has a call to prophesy.

Here’s the way my sermon started: (1) Being a prophet is never easy. (2) Prophets are truth-tellers, not fortune-tellers. (3) Everyone, not just a special few, has a call to prophesy.

Increasingly in this nation, we are becoming foreign countries to each other. Many of us, like Jonah, are beginning to think that God should have no mercy on the foreigners, the illegal aliens, or the lazy poor. Others are thinking that God should have no mercy on the haters, the prejudiced, and the penny-pinchers who won’t spend an extra cent to help the poor.

And most of us still think that one person, the right person, will make all the difference and lead us to the promised land.

So here’s the task ahead of us: we don’t need any lone prophets, we need a multitude of prophets to speak the truth.

So, what prophetic word is God giving to you?