

Sermon
Jan. 21, 2018
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10
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Jonah was not the greatest prophet of all time. Today we are going to spend some time looking at this great story that we find in the scriptures. It is an amazing story, full of lively characters, of incredible and memorable scenes, and some deep questions about the character of God, the one who is both a judge and full of mercy, the one who can be persuaded to change course, a God who responds to us. So much could be said about this story. But I want us to focus on Jonah, his attitude, the way he went about responding to God's call on his life to go and proclaim God's message. I want us to focus on this because this series of sermons I am preaching are building on each other. A few weeks ago we reflected on how God is with us always, surrounding us as light, whether it be the bright light of the sun or the softer light of the moon, the light of God's presence is with us. Last week we looked at the call of Samuel, and how Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." We thought about how God speaks to us, but we have to listen for what God may be speaking into our heart. God is with us. God speaks to us. Today, we will think about how God calls us to go and speak God's message. What is that message? What attitude should we have when we go forth and speak? Jonah gives us an example of how *not* to go about this. Sometimes we learn from bad examples, and Jonah is one of those bad examples.

When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against it because their wickedness had gotten God's attention, Jonah's response was to go the opposite direction of Nineveh. Now Jonah is not the first person to resist God's call. Moses is a great example of those who tried to avoid it. He came up with all kinds of excuses. But God patiently negotiated with Moses to get him to finally get to the point that he was willing to do what God wanted him to do. Isaiah also pleaded with God that he wasn't able to go and proclaim the message, famously saying, "I

am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Then the angel took a live coal from the fire on the altar and touched Isaiah’s lips with the burning hot coal, saying “now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then, God calls again for volunteers to go and speak God’s message, asking the question, “Who will go for us?” And Isaiah answered with the words, “Here I am, send me!” In both of these examples, Moses and Isaiah, they had their argument with God directly and worked it out.

But Jonah was different in his resistance to God’s call. He did not argue with God. Instead, he just got up and went in the opposite direction, hiring a boat to take him across the sea. But God wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easily. God sends up a strong storm that threatens to sink the boat. The crew and passengers are panicking, doing everything they can to save their lives. But what is Jonah doing? He’s deep in the hold sleeping. He apparently could care less what happens to him or everyone else on board. His detachment and hard heartedness is astonishing. So our initial impression of Jonah is that he is not interested in engaging with God or anyone else. He’s going to do what he wants to do, no matter whose lives are put in jeopardy, including his own. Not good.

The crew finally get out of Jonah that he is the cause of the problem and that they should just throw him overboard. There’s no point in arguing with God. There’s no reason to figure out some way to make sure everyone makes it out alive. Not only does Jonah not really care about their lives, he doesn’t care about his own. I just get the impression that Jonah just doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to be obedient to God’s call on his life. And if that means getting tossed into the sea and drown, so be it. Wow.

How little does Jonah know that in spite of his bad attitude, God still hasn’t given up on him. God is persistent. God won’t let up when God has in mind for someone to do something. This is where we get the unbelievable situation where a big fish swallows up Jonah preventing him from drowning. Jonah spends three days and nights locked up inside the fish’s stomach. During that time inside the fish, Jonah prays an amazing prayer. There’s more to Jonah than his stubborn disobedience

and lack of caring for anyone. He also has the capacity to come to his senses, to realize that God is his deliverer, that God really cares for him. And God responds to Jonah's change of heart by whispering into the fish's ear to cough him up.

Now that God has literally saved his life, Jonah decides to go to Nineveh now that God has asked him a second time to go do it. Jonah realizes that would be pretty sad if, right after God saved his life, that he should keep on resisting God's call to go and speak. So, Jonah goes to Nineveh and proclaims the weakest prophetic message in the Bible. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That is only five words in Hebrew. No, "Thus says the Lord." No, "Unless you turn from your wicked ways, God's wrath will destroy you." He just tells them that in forty days they will be overthrown. Saying it would be in forty days is interesting. It's possible that Jonah meant a literal forty days. But the phrase "forty days" was a common rhetorical device that means "a long unspecified period of time." In other words, Jonah could have said, "It will be awhile but one of these days you are going to get wiped out." Not exactly a sense of urgency in that message. It's almost as if Jonah is sort of hoping that the Ninevites won't act on the warning, thinking to themselves, "so I guess we have some time to keep doing what we do. We don't have to change right now. We'll just put that off." It's like he doesn't want them to repent, that he would rather the Ninevites get wiped out. Whether that was in Jonah's mind or not, he definitely gave a dud of a message of judgment.

Nevertheless, the people immediately responded to Jonah's message with an unbelievable amount of urgency and singleness of purpose. The people responded so quickly that it got the king's attention. And he responds by calling for all the people and animals to not eat or drink and put on sackcloth and repent of their wicked ways *right now*. I mean, it's just unbelievable the immediate and dramatic response. In spite of the lamest prophetic message ever given in scripture, the response is the most sudden and total. In spite of himself, Jonah's message was a spectacular success. And God, who saw this unbelievable response, was persuaded not to wipe out Nineveh. God changed God's mind. It would not have been just for God to wipe out a whole group of

people, 120,000 people plus much livestock, if they all repented. And let me add, they did this without any assurance that God would be persuaded. The king said, “We are going to do this. Who knows? Maybe God will change God’s mind and relent.” They didn’t know how it would turn out. But they did what they believed was the right thing to do and then hoped that God would do the right thing. And, of course, God relented because God is more interested in being loved and worshipped than wiping people out. God is love. God is merciful. That’s just who God is. God’s patience is long and it takes very little for God to forgive. And that is good news for sure.

But instead of being impressed by the success of his message, and relief that all those people didn’t get wiped out, Jonah is angry! What he wanted to happen didn’t happen. He wanted the no good wicked Ninevites to be wiped out. He did everything he could to manipulate the situation to get what he wanted. But guess what? The Ninevites were more than ready to respond with repentance. And God was more than ready to forgive. Even with the weakest prophetic message ever, things worked out great for everyone. And Jonah was not happy about it. He just could not shake his bad attitude.

Why did Jonah have such a bad attitude? We are left to guess. Maybe he just didn’t like the Ninevites. Maybe he just felt that God should just wipe out everyone else so that Israel could be at the top of the heap. Maybe he was just self-centered. He only cared about what made him comfortable and when faced with times of discomfort he is quick to shut down and give up. He didn’t want the hassle of going to Nineveh and proclaiming the message so he bailed. When everyone’s life was threatened on the ship he said, “Just let me die.” When the plant that God had given him to provide him shelter was then suddenly taken away and he started getting hot he just called out to God to kill him now. It’s so strange. If Jonah isn’t comfortable but is put out in any way, he just wants to blow everything up. He was happy if he got saved from destruction but he could care less about anyone else and if things don’t go the way he wants he throws a tantrum and wishes he could die. Pretty sad. You may even wonder why God would have anything to do with Jonah. That says something about God. He knew Jonah’s heart. He knew

Jonah wasn't perfect, that Jonah had an attitude. But in spite of all his flaws and lack of maturity, God called him anyway. God told him to go and proclaim the message anyway. And if God persistently calls on Jonah, could he not be calling on us to go and proclaim the message? I think so. But what is the message? What is God calling us to go and proclaim?

I don't believe the message we are sent to deliver is what Jonah gave. We are not called to give out a lame message that one of these days in the long off future God's going to wipe everyone out. That's a bad message. It's woefully inadequate. The basic prophetic message is better than what Jonah said. The basic message goes something like this: "God sees your wicked ways, how you abuse and take advantage of the poor, how you cheat one another, worship false gods, and the like. And God will not hold back God's wrath forever. God will deliver the oppressed from your oppression. So unless you repent, change your ways, and go back to love God and neighbor, you will suffer God's wrath. Your choice." That's the basic prophetic message. Should that be our message?

I think so. I think it is our responsibility to speak up for those whose voices are not heard. I think we should call out what is wrong, even evil, in these days. But our words of condemnation need to be balanced with an assurance of God's steadfast love and mercy. God is just but God is also merciful. What God desires above all else is a world where people love and care for one another. Yes, God gets angry. Yes, God hurts when God sees people getting hurt. But God is love. God loves us, all of us, and not just us but all that lives. God is the source of life itself. So the message that people need to hear is that no matter how much you have messed up you are loved by God. It is possible for you to change your ways. You can make better choices. And you are not alone in this struggle to do the right thing.

So what should our message be when we are prompted to go and speak to others? I can't tell you specifically what that would be. Every situation is different. The person you find yourself in conversation with has their own sets of challenges. Maybe you have heard the phrase that we should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That might

sound good but it misses the mark. It comes across too simplistically, that there are good people and bad people. The truth is, each person is a mixture of good and bad. We are all made in the image of God so we are fundamentally good. But we also have the capacity to fail at being our best selves in any given situation. People are complicated and life isn't always black and white. We have to muddle our way through somehow.

So what we say in any given situation is going to be different. There isn't a tract, or a stock phrase, or a memorized speech, no cookie cutter answers or tried and true sayings. We have to try to listen for what God is putting on our hearts to say. But whatever it is that we are prompted by God to go and tell, that message will be consistent with what Jonah himself said about God in the midst of one of his temper tantrums: "God is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." That is who God is and whatever we say on God's behalf should be consistent with who God is.