

Epiphany 3B: Jonah 3.1-5,10**January 21, 2024****The Rev. Scott Walters**

My first thought when Memphis gets a good snow is that everybody else should stay off the roads. But I'm a late middle aged guy with a Subaru, so there's a good chance that the next thing I'll feel is a sudden need to venture out into the storm myself, because ... I don't know ... maybe it's time to replace the pancake spatula or our stockpile of binder clips is running low. But when the storm blew in last Sunday afternoon, I actually had a legitimate reason to be out in it. Ardelle's flight from New York had been delayed. So off I went, intrepid arctic traveler that I am, into the half inch of powder that had already fallen.

As I said, the problem with winter driving in Memphis is not any of us. It's all the other idiots on the roads. And, sure enough, as I headed south on East Parkway at exactly the speed everyone else should have been traveling, some fool sped up behind me and started tailgating. Somewhere around the Liberty Bowl he swung angrily into the left lane and raced by at a very irresponsible speed.

In that moment, pious, Christian person that I am, a prayer of sorts arose within me. For the safety of others, of course, and also to help balance the scales of justice in the universe, I prayed that that guy would end up in the ditch. I really hoped I'd get to see his wheels spinning impotently until he gave up and called an Uber. But here's the kicker and the climax of this gripping story, which I can see has you on the edge of your pew (or couch). He didn't. I caught up with him at every one of the 25 or 26 red traffic lights we hit on the road to the airport, and, as far as I know, the miserable sinner got to his destination safe and sound. Isn't that infuriating? Or at least deeply unsatisfying as a story or, come to think of it, as a sermon illustration?

Well, I wasted a few minutes of your time with that non-story because this is roughly the plot line of the book of Jonah. If you haven't read Jonah since childhood, you may think it sounds like a tale made for the big screen. There's the recalcitrant prophet who runs from God when he's told to carry a message of repentance to Nineveh. He ends up on a ship headed for Tarshish in the opposite direction, and when the sailors realize that his defiance of the gods is what's brought on a terrible storm, they throw him overboard where he's swallowed by a giant fish. He lives three days and three nights in the belly of that fish, prays a psalm of gratitude about how God has delivered him, and, sure enough God does. God speaks to the fish, and it spews Jonah out onto the dry land.

That's the part you remember from Sunday School, right? Great story. Except it's not the whole story. That's just the first two chapters and there are four. What we read this morning is what follows immediately after Jonah gets belched back into his life. It's as if the writer of Jonah knew exactly what we want in a story and was determined not to give it to us.

Jonah, you see, gets a second chance to take his message to Nineveh, and this time he does. I mean, being half digested by a fish does have a way of getting one's attention. But Jonah is only one day into a three day walk across the great big city when the thing happens that never happens in any story worth telling. The people ... all of them, great and small, say,

"You make a good point, Mr. Prophet guy who smells not so faintly of fish. We'll repent and do better." And that's just what they do. God calls off the calamity, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Well, everyone except one person. Jonah knows that this is no way to tell a story. The people who've done wrong need to suffer, not just say they're sorry and sit in sackcloth for a minute. So Jonah becomes irate that everyone's gotten off the hook he'd been commissioned by God to hang them on. And he prays, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; 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."

It's as if God, unlike us, has no interest in giving people what they deserve. All God seems to care about is that God's world become a more just and merciful place, and has no need to see anyone spinning their tires in a snowy ditch. If we're honest, there are moments when we agree with Jonah that the only thing more infuriating than an angry, vengeful God is a merciful and forgiving one. And least when God is merciful and forgiving to the wrong people.

It makes sense that forgiveness is described in economic terms in the Bible at times. As a debt of sin that's been cancelled, for instance. We get the analogy. Our sins and failings do have a way of piling up on each other like an unfortunate form of compounding interest. The problem with these metaphors is that they can make forgiveness sound like a matter of getting back to even, when forgiveness is actually, as a monk named David Steindl-Rast once put it, "the most intensive form of giving." Forgiveness is a generative and creative force, a deposit of something powerfully new into the world, if we're going to stick to the realm of money for our metaphors.

So when you and I and Jonah go through life needing scores to be settled, we simply have not yet, as Paul would put it later, "let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ." Our minds are held captive by the severe accountants of scarcity rather than that most intensive form of giving we see in the forgiving ways of Jesus.

This is the day of our annual parish meeting. I'm not sure I would have chosen the story of Jonah for today if I got to choose. But I'm glad the lectionary dropped it into our laps. Because it crystallizes something essential to the way Christians and Jews are meant to live, both as individuals and as communities. There's a contrast that couldn't be starker in Jonah's story. In chapter two we find him in the belly of a fish, reciting a psalm of gratitude for the saving ways of God. In chapter four, he's been delivered from the fish. But now he's angry and miserable, sulking under a withered bush in the sun, because some people didn't pay the consequences for their actions he thought they needed to pay.

Let's be truthful. We know that we Christians, collectively and as individuals, have looked like each of these versions of Jonah at times. Christians have met the most difficult and dire circumstances with gratitude and hope and resilience. Even renovation projects, I've heard! Christians have also been scolding cranks at times, who think we know exactly what all those miserable sinners out there need to set them straight.

At an annual meeting, we look back over a year with thankfulness to God for what's passed through our lives and into the world. In 2023, in all sorts of ways and through all sorts of people, time and again, you met the challenges and opportunities we encountered here at Calvary with mercy and kindness, prayer and beauty, with justice and hospitality and friendship and more.

Thankfulness comes pretty naturally on days like these, as we celebrate the gifts you've offered to the world. But the second step is surely to see that world as a gifted place and to see all people as containers of gifts the world needs. All people bear gifts, even those whose lives have taken a tragic turn in the wrong direction. Wrong like our sulking, miserable prophet's perhaps, or wrong like lives that have turned violent and destructive in our city. All lives are containers of divine gift. And the work God is still most interested in, if I'm reading our scriptures rightly at all, is not adding more shame and judgment and self-righteousness to the world. It's in helping the buried gifts in our lives and in the lives of every person we meet, come forth and flourish. Isn't that what it must mean to make God's love visible here and now?

As the story of Jonah comes to a close, Jonah does not get the message and change his ways or his mind. He's added to his rage about God's forgiveness of Nineveh only more rage about the bean plant that shaded him for a day and then died. Rage can spread like spilt water into the low places of our hearts, especially when our hearts have been laid low. But God says to our despondent prophet whom God, please note, has still not abandoned ... God says, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night... Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

God's desire for Nineveh was not that people settle up some debt for their sins. It was only that they turn from their destructive ways of being in the world and come more fully alive. All of them. Right down to the livestock. God has no need to be proven right or to have God's righteous anger validated. God just wants the gifts embedded in Nineveh to come forth into the world. That's all.

And that is all, my friends, that God wants for you and for me and for Calvary and for every last person we encounter on our journey for another year through this city, through this world, through this life. God wants us to learn the strange ways of forgiveness, because God wants us to create the conditions in which the gifts God has planted in all people can finally be given fully away.