



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for July 4, 2021
“Majoring in the Minors: Sent”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3

Storytelling

Stories, we all have them. They share the joy and pain of our lives. Stories form the very fabric of who we are and need to be shared. We all love a good story, particularly those we can relate to. We are thankful for those stories that challenge us and cause us to take a good look at ourselves.

Scripture is full of stories. For a long time, the stories that make up scripture were those that were told and not so much written down.

A fellow by the name of Caesar Kalinowski asserts that storytelling is the best way to convey scripture. He is all about naturally expressing the good news of the gospel into normal life conversations. He calls it, “*gospel fluency*.”

I spent a day with Kalinowski a few years back, where the group I was with, worked at telling the story of God in clear and concise ways. It was neat to see how easy that story just flowed out of us, particularly when we layered in how that story had impacted our lives.

The Story of Jonah

This morning we encounter a story told by one of the twelve minor prophets. That story reflects the profound ways God had intersected his life. Today, we consider the story of Jonah.

What is contained in four short chapters reads like a wonderful short story. Jonah not only captivates our attention but challenges us in every way.

Like many of the Minor Prophets, Jonah prophesied during the 8th century B.C. Jonah was active in the years following Amos and Hosea, but before the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722/721 B.C.

Jonah is mentioned in II Kings 14:25 where he prophesies about the expansion of Israel’s borders under Jeroboam II. While a time of relative peace, it was also a time when Israel had become very complacent and had lost its way spiritually.

The story Jonah tells is not very different from our own.

A Story about Call

Jonah’s story is a story about call or, better put, refusing a call. Like I said, Jonah’s story is not very different from our own.

To experience call is to be set apart for sacred use. That sort of thing is not just for some, but for everyone. I am of the mind that *“all are called.”* It comes to each of us then to listen for that call and respond accordingly.

For Jonah, hearing God’s call was not the problem. His problem was in responding.

Like I said, Jonah’s story is our story. That brings us to Jonah 1:1-3 and our scripture passage for today.

Jonah 1:1-3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

A Word Against the Ninevites

Jonah was called to bring a word against the Ninevites.

During Jonah’s day there was no love lost between the Jews and the Ninevites, and Jonah was not about to rustle any up. He was of no mind for group hugs or singing, *“Kum Ba Yah.”*

Jonah ran away and headed for Tarshish, about as far as he could go across the Mediterranean in what is now Spain.

Down through the years I have known any number of people who have run from their call. Seminaries are full of *“second career”* folk. They are the ones who sensed a call earlier in life, pursued one career, only to finally accept the call they originally heard.

You can run but can’t hide from the *“the Hound of Heaven.”*

While on board ship a storm brewed. God was pursuing his wayward servant. Eventually, Jonah ended up getting thrown overboard and, as we know, ended up in the belly of a large fish.

Last week it was locusts. This week it is the belly of a large fish. God has a way of getting our attention and then some. You probably heard of the Cape Cod lobster fisherman, Michael Packard, who was scooped up by a humpback whale a couple of weeks ago while diving for lobsters. The chances of that happening are thought to be a trillion to one.

In an interview with Jimmy Kimmel, Packard was clear he was not swallowed. He was only in the whale’s mouth for 30-40 seconds. That’s nothing compared to the three days Jonah spent in the belly of his great fish.

While in the belly of that fish Jonah had a lot to think and pray about. In the end he ended up claiming the mercy and grace of God and offering his thanks in a beautiful prayer recorded in Jonah 2:1-9.

As we know the fish spewed Jonah up on shore. Some versions have the fish *“vomiting”* Jonah on shore. That always gets the attention of the middle school boys.

I like this summary of Jonah in the belly of that great fish.

God said, "Go."

Jonah said, "No."

The fish said, "Oh?"

Jonah said, "Whoa!"

A Story About a Change of Heart

It is at this point that the story becomes a story about a change of heart, at least to some extent. Jonah relents and goes to Nineveh, which was no small trip, think Israel to Iraq.

Nineveh was a great city of some 120,000 people. The scripture shares that the city was so vast that it took three days to visit. Jonah walked to the city's center and preached what I have always thought was a half-hearted sermon.

"Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned," he said.

This was no three points with an introduction and conclusion. It was only seven words after all.

The strangest thing happened. The Ninevites repented. From the king on down the Ninevites turned from their evil ways and Jonah was none too pleased. It just goes to show what God can do when we are the least bit obedient.

God used what Jonah did to great effect, even though his was a half-hearted effort. Jonah was so upset with what transpired that he went out to the desert in sort of classic passive/aggressive fashion to vent his anger to God. How dare God save the Ninevites.

Jonah was roasting in the sun when a broom tree sprung up and provided much needed shade. The next morning the tree died and left Jonah fuming. It was at this point that Jonah engaged God in a pretty intense dialogue with God.

A Story About the Need for Real Change

It is here that the Book of Jonah becomes a story about the need for real change and real obedience.

In venting his frustration over God allowing the Ninevites to repent, Jonah exclaimed, *"Oh Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home?"*

In other words, *"I just knew this is what you would do."*

To which the Lord replied in so many words, *"You care more about this broom tree than you do the 120,000 souls in Nineveh."*

God left Jonah with a lot to think about, just like he does you and me, particularly when it comes to reaching out to those who are different from us, or those we do not necessarily care for. The story just sort of ends there with Jonah stewing over what God had said.

A Whale of a Story

It has been said of the Book of Jonah that it is *"a whale of a story."*

Some have said it is *“the most evangelistic book in the Old Testament.”*

We need Jonah to remind us that God does not let us off the hook when it comes to reaching out to others. God stays after us until our hearts are fully changed, and we find ourselves ready to be truly obedient.

There is no room in God’s Kingdom for a half-hearted or begrudging response.

So, what is the lesson in all of this?

A Sunday School teacher once asked that question to her class of first graders upon finishing a study of the Book of Jonah. It was then that a little boy raised his hand and said, *“The lesson of the Book of Jonah is that people make whales sick.”*

The real lesson of this great story has to do with obedience, obedience that issues from sincere heart.

Obedience that says,

- **Whatever** God says I will do.
- **Wherever** God wants me to go I will go.
- **Whoever** he wants me to reach out to I will.

May it be said of us.