

Sermon: 4 Lessons from the 4 Chapters of Jonah**Scripture: The Book of Jonah****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 20, 2024**

What a story we have in Jonah. One reason there's such value in returning to these texts week after week, year after year, and why we call them sacred is because their being written thousands of years ago has not diminished how they continue teaching us about us. Apparently we and our problems are not as unique as we sometimes imagine they are, US as humans living collectively in this world and US as individuals with our particular psyches that lift us and sink us and bless and torture us. And so into your life right now in 2024 with all its particularities and concerns and hopes and sorrows and joys and struggles walks Jonah and we ask what he has to teach us. There is SO much here but for this morning here are 4 lessons that come from the 4 chapters of the little Book of Jonah.

In chapter 1 God calls Jonah. God has a purpose for Jonah, a need for Jonah to fulfill that apparently only Jonah can. "Go to Nineveh," God says, "and preach to them that they must repent or they will be destroyed." And Jonah says "uh uh, no way!" and gets on a ship heading away from Nineveh.

The comedian and professed atheist, Ricky Gervais says this about our existence:

It always comes back to us - why are we here? Well, we just happened to be here, we couldn't choose it. The chance of us being born - that sperm hitting that egg - is 400 trillion to 1. We're not special, we're just lucky; and this is a holiday. We didn't exist for 14 and a half billion years. Then we get 80 or 90 years if we're lucky, and then we'll never exist again. We should make the most of it.

400 trillion to 1 are the chances that you and I actually come into an existence. To an atheist it's random chance and "just being lucky" while to a believer it suggests just that, that we are special to God and that there's a reason, a purpose for us to be. However miniscule that purpose is, ideally we discover it and embrace it. But we can also resist it, deny it, avoid it because we are free to do so, made by a God of love in God's image, not puppets or machines to be controlled or to run until broken down. So Jonah hears God's call and runs in the opposite direction. And so can we. But God's call is there nonetheless in big terms of "what we are to do with our lives?" and in smaller terms of "what is asked of us in a given moment?" And we can resist it too.

So what is the shape of your life's call - Laura, Jane, Matt, Robin, etc... as heard by the voice of the Divine speaking to you, His beloved? And how are you doing living into that? Or what is being asked of you this day, this month, this year - Sarah, Janet, Karen, Jonathan, etc... what is the voice of God, the promptings of Love asking of you, Her Beloved, these days? And how are you doing living into that? If you wonder that yourself or don't have a ready answer, one approach is to ask the people around you how you are doing. You're not in this alone. We all have our calls and our struggles therein. The sailors on that boat helped Jonah discern his call and threw him overboard to find it. So do be careful what you ask for! *The lesson of chapter 1 is that we are called and can answer or not.*

Chapter 2 of the little book of Jonah finds Jonah swallowed by a large fish, in the belly of a whale, and from inside that darkness he turns from his willful resistance to an open receptivity to God and God's call. God is our All in All and yet in the human

experience we feel a separation from this All. The Sufi poet Hafiz names it in this way:

We are
like lutes
Once held by God.
Being away from His warm body
Fully explains
This
Constant
Yearning.

These yearnings for God, for the Divine All, for some reason lead us to turn towards things which exacerbate the yearnings, increase the desires, and make more trouble for ourselves and everyone around us. For Jonah, the disordered desire that he is invited to face in the dark belly of the whale is his zero-sum perspective that there are winners and losers, the rewarded and the punished, the favored and the disfavored and how it all runs aground in the face of God's mercy and grace.

When he's at the precipice of his own death he can see it better. When he has nothing left to lose he's more open to the truth that his spiteful spirit is small and fleeting and God's mercy is large and eternal. In the darkness of the belly of the whale, Jonah could see more clearly. God had to bring him into that darkness to lead him to where he needed to go, to help him understand what needed to be understood.

While we are free and God will not control us because we are not puppets or machines, God is apparently also persistent and will suffer us much longer than we tend to suffer one another. And so it's worth asking when we are in a particularly baffling or obscured or confusing or difficult time in our lives if it might just be a necessary time of obscurity and difficulty for us to realize something we are unaware of, to remember something we had forgotten, to gain some new insight that we could not gain had God not gone dark on us and our way, lost.

As the psychologist and theologian Gerald May said, could it be that

deep in the darkness,
 way beneath our senses,
 God is instilling 'another better love'
 and 'deeper more urgent longings'
 that will eventually bring us to
 Where we need to be?

That's what happened to Jonah in the belly of the whale. Could be that's what's happening to you as well.

“Be patient with all that is unsolved in your heart,”
 is what Rilke said,
 “and try to love the questions themselves...
 perhaps then gradually without noticing it you'll live
 along some distant day into the answer.”
 (Rainer Rilke, from Letters to a Young Poet).

God's call is persistent, is lesson 2 and sometimes conditions are created to help us hear and do what God is needing.

So the whale vomits Jonah onto the shore, and in chapter 3 God tries again with Jonah. “Go to Nineveh, Jonah, and warn them.” And Jonah does it. He warns them

and the king and all the people and even the animals of Nineveh repent. And... God spares them! Lesson 3 is quite simply this: our purpose and our calling from God will necessarily, because of the nature of who God is, be a blessing to others. It's somehow easy to forget that we are here because we are special and we are special because we are made to be a very particular kind of blessing to others and Jonah forgets this at the beginning, remembers it in the belly of the whale, and in the finale of Chapter 4, he forgets it again.

After God's mercy is bestowed upon Nineveh and spares them in this beautiful gracious moment we read: "But to Jonah this seemed VERY wrong and he was angry." Jonah rails at God: "Isn't this what I said when I was still at home?! And what I tried to forestall by going to Tarshish? I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity! I knew it, I knew it!" He's so mad that he tells God to kill him right then and there.

What a turkey Jonah is.

After all that, he's back to his small vengeful outraged self, this prophet of God. And the book ends with a question from God: "really Jonah, these people and all their animals should have been destroyed?" That's how the book ends and you imagine Jonah just sitting there sulking. And you want to say thank God we have gracious and patient God! A God so full of second and third and however many chances. And like Jonah we'll always to some extent need to be in a process of repentance, of turning back towards God when we've turned away, turning back towards mercy and love when we've gotten caught again in our anger and selfishness and judgements. We never fully are turned towards God in this lifetime, no matter how deeply the lesson hits in our lives,

there's always the turning back away. It was Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark, "repent for the Kingdom of God is near." All of life is a constant journey of turning and returning to God, of falling away once more and needing to turn again and God is infinitely patient with us.

What is the turning that is needed this day for each of us?

What do we need to repent of? Cause there is always something.

Thank God that we have a God who calls and respects our freedom respond, who is persistent and involved enough to teach us in the difficulties of our lives, who seeks to bless others through us and is patient enough to suffer us to the end, amen.