

Jonah 3:1-5,10

January 22, 2012

The God of One More Chance

Jonah----one of the Bible stories we learn as children is about Jonah in the belly of the whale.

It's a funny thing. There is no translation of the Bible that uses the word "whale." It's a big fish. And it seems to me that we don't really know the beginning or the end of the story very well.

We know the middle---when he's swallowed up by the whale---uh----big fish----and then gets vomited out on dry land.

But our childhood memories don't often go much beyond that. And it's a funny thing about that, because the whole book of Jonah is only 4 short chapters and you can read it in less than ten minutes! Even if you add in checking a map of the ancient world to find out exactly where Jonah tried to run to and where he ended up going, it would take you 15 minutes, tops!

So just in case you're like most of us and don't really remember the story of Jonah, I will summarize it for you.

“The word of God came to Jonah” and told him to go to Nineveh and speak to the people there, telling them what God would tell him to say.

Jonah didn’t want to go. He REALLY didn’t want to go. So he took off in the opposite direction. Instead of heading east, he went west and jumped on a boat that was going to some place called Tarshish.

A big storm blew in and threatened to sink the boat. The sailors weren’t Jewish, but they did have a fear of God, so they figured that God was mad at someone on the boat about something. Jonah admitted that God was angry at him and told them to throw him overboard so that the storm would stop.

They didn’t want to be guilty of murder, but in the end they tossed him over, after asking God not to hold them guilty. The storm stopped, and Jonah, sinking to the bottom of the sea, was swallowed up by a big fish. He was safe in the fish’s stomach, and he had a change of heart there. He prayed to God and agreed to do what God had called him to do---go to Nineveh.

The fish then spewed him out on the shore and he went to Nineveh.

When he got there, he told the people what God told him to-----“Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” He didn’t stop and explain. He didn’t say “unless you change your evil ways!” He just said, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!”

The people believed him and they began to fast. They put on sackcloth and sat in ashes to show their repentance. All of them. Every person, even the king, and even the animals! fasted and demonstrated that they believed God.

And scripture tells us that God changed his mind and decided not to destroy Nineveh after all.

Now, Jonah was not too pleased about this change in plan, so he went outside of the city and sat down to pout. It was hot and dry, so God made a little bush grow up and give Jonah some shade. And Jonah was still being critical of God, so the next day God sent a worm to kill the bush and then Jonah was back in the hot sun again!

That made Jonah even madder, so God asked him “You care about this little bush so much and you didn’t create it or help it to grow! And yet you think I shouldn’t care about 120,000 people and their animals!”

And that's the end of the book.

God decided to give the people of Nineveh a warning that their city would be overthrown in 40 days. At least coming out of Jonah's mouth, there was no "unless you repent" or any kind of way to change the plan.

What did Nineveh do to deserve to be destroyed?

It was the capital of the violent, ruthless Assyrian empire. Evidently God had had enough of their cruelty and planned to end the reign of terror.

But God is a God of Second Chances, so Jonah was sent there to give them a warning. They believed the warning, and so the city was spared.

Did Nineveh deserve to be destroyed? Yes, or God would not have planned it. It would have been the punishment the city deserved for killing other people and ruling with force and violence.

But when everyone in the city believed God, he changed his mind and did not wipe the city out.

God is about grace, not retribution. God doesn't care about "evening the score." God wants to have a relationship with all people.

God is a God of Second Chances.

God had given Jonah a second chance, too. Jonah disobeyed and tried to go to Tarshish instead of Nineveh, and God sent a storm. But when Jonah was thrown off the ship, God gave him a second chance by having a big fish swallow him. Jonah should have drowned. It's what he deserved for trying to run away, but God gave him a second chance.

This is God's grace, replacing retribution and punishment.

God's grace---Jonah did not get what he deserved. He got a second chance.

Jonah went to Nineveh then, as he promised. He warned the people that in 40 days the city would be overturned. We are not told that he said anything about repentance or that he confronted anyone one-on-one.

We are not told that he said or did anything other than walk through the city, shouting "Forty more days and this place is gone!"

And yet he was evidently the most effective prophet on record! The whole city repented and turned from evil, sitting in sackcloth and ashes!

And God relented, and did not overthrow the city.

God's grace. God gave the people of the city, all 120,000 of them, plus their animals, a second chance.

But there's more. Afterward, when Jonah sat pouting under the bush as it withered, God spoke to him again.

Jonah was upset because he wanted to see Nineveh fall. He might have had a good reason for that, but it really sounds to me like he felt foolish for prophesying something and then it didn't happen. Maybe he thought he wasted his time or that people were laughing at him because Nineveh was still standing.

Maybe he felt lied to or deceived.

Whatever the reason for his hissy fit, God spoke to him about it, and tried to take care of him, causing a little bush to grow up very quickly and give him some shade.

Jonah still was not happy.

God tried to get him to understand---- God had created these people, too, and cared for them, and the animals as well. Why wouldn't God let them live if they changed their evil ways?

The book ends there. We don't know if Jonah ever caught on to what God was telling him.

But this much is clear---God had already given him a second chance, and then he gave him One More Chance to understand.

To realize that God's grace is for everyone, without any exceptions.

Everyone gets a second chance, and a third, and on and on.

Everyone gets one more chance. And because God is a God of One More Chance (and one more and one more and one more!), we get not just another 40 days, but as much time as it takes.

In Peter's second letter (2 Peter 3:9), he writes, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

So, even though people have been expecting the end times, the second coming of Christ, Judgment Day, whatever you want to call it--- even though people have been waiting and predicting and thinking it would come since shortly after Christ ascended into heaven, the Lord is not slow!

God is waiting, giving us one more chance, and one more chance, and one more and one more and one more, so that EVERYONE will come to repentance.

Even though Jonah was obedient to God in going to Nineveh, he still needed to repent and try to see the world from God's point of view, through God's eyes.

Sometimes those of us who believe in God and who go to church and read the Bible and who are good people still don't quite get it. We think that God should just hurry up and smack down "those other people" over there, those "bad" people who deserve God's punishment.



But that's not what God is about. God is about giving people one more chance---one more chance to believe God, one more chance to understand God's grace, one more chance to repent, one more chance to obey the word of God that comes to us just as it came to Jonah.

Too often we run in the opposite direction when we hear God's voice. We don't want to listen, especially if God is telling us something we don't want to believe.

We don't want to listen because it might mean changing our lives and we're very comfortable just the way we are!

So God gives us another chance and another chance. God is waiting for us to get it right!

God is waiting for us to say yes, send me, use me, tell me what to do, where to go, how to serve. God is waiting for us to say YES!!

And sometimes, while we wait, we spend time in the belly of a big fish, and even though that might seem like a very bad place to be, it's better than sinking deep to the bottom of the sea, never to come up again.

Being in the fish's belly or sitting under a withering bush is God giving us one more chance. It might not be comfortable or fun. It might make us mad or fill us with despair. But hope is found in turning to God.

So, what am I talking about? When things are going wrong, when life just seems to be standing still, when you don't know which way is up or which way to turn, when you are just plodding along doing the same thing and there is no hope, no light, no love, you're in the belly of the fish.

When it seems like the love has dried up, when the one good thing in your life is fading, when the bad people you know seem to be succeeding and you are failing, when you can't feel grateful and instead are just angry about everything, you're sitting under a worm-eaten, withered-up bush.

This is not the abundant life Christ came to bring us! It's an odd kind of limbo, with no joy or peace or hope.

So how do we get out of the belly or back in the shade?

Repent. Repent literally means to turn, to change, to not only be sorry but to start seeing things through the eyes of God! If Jonah could have seen the Ninevites as part of God's creation, as God's precious children, he wouldn't have been sitting under a dead bush!

Do you want to sit under a dead bush? Or would you rather open your heart to understand that God loves all people and wants all people to turn to him?

Do you want to believe that maybe God doesn't consider you to be worthy to be saved, or would you rather believe that God is always, always going to give you a second chance? A third chance? Always one more chance?

It's all about grace, and grace means that no one gets what they deserve. Instead, we all get more love than we could ever imagine!

The love of God means that we all get one more chance---one more chance to see others through God's eyes, one more chance to say yes to God, one more chance to know that God loves us.

Don't close your eyes and ears and heart! Open them and see that the God of One More Chance is waiting for you!

Amen!