

Epiphany 3 2021
Rev. Adam T. Trambley
Jonah; Mark 1:14-20
January 24, 2021, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service

Our nation has experienced tumultuous times of late, and we are hearing renewed, important calls for unity and reconciliation. Reconciliation is difficult, however, when people are walking, and shouting, in opposite directions. We aren't going to be reconciled unless we stop and turn around toward each other. Stopping and turning around is a more straightforward way of speaking about repentance and conversion. This morning's first reading from Jonah speaks about conversion of heart and reconciliation and what it takes to get there.

In the book of Jonah, we mostly get Jonah's perspective. He is where the action is. Jonah is a powerful prophet of the God of Israel. God tells him to go to Nineveh to give them a message of repentance. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the super-power of the Middle East in those days. They were a military threat to Israel. They also worshipped foreign gods and did not have a sense of ethics that we or the people of Israel would respect. Their very society was built on lies about how the world was made and who they were. The Ninevites and the rest of the Assyrians were the kind of people that you would write off as beyond the pale, at least you would if you weren't so afraid of them. But God sends Jonah to them.

Jonah, of course, doesn't go. He gets on a ship sailing in the other direction. Some things happen that result in both the sailors on that ship praising the God of Israel and throwing Jonah into the sea where he is swallowed by a big fish. The fish part is the most familiar part of Jonah's story, of course. After three days in the fish's belly, the fish spits Jonah out onto the beach. Then Jonah finally decides to go to Nineveh.

Nineveh is described as being so big, it took three days to walk across it. Jonah starts delivering his message that God will destroy Nineveh for its wickedness within forty days. Before Jonah has finished his first day of preaching, the king of Nineveh has called for a fast of every person and creature in the city. They are all in sackcloth and ashes, turning aside from their wickedness and crying out to God. Seeing this repentance and conversion of heart, God decides not to destroy them.

At this point, we see what is on Jonah's heart. He is angry at God for deciding not to destroy Nineveh. Jonah doesn't like Nineveh. He doesn't like the city. He doesn't like the people, He probably doesn't like the food. And I don't think he is crazy about the weather. Jonah sits outside city to wait, hoping God will still destroy it. God tries to reason with him, but the book of Jonah ends with Jonah sitting outside the city, in the hot desert sun, telling God that he would rather die than have Nineveh saved.

Jonah is an unwilling agent of conversion because he is not converted himself. He is an important and powerful prophet who acts effectively for God. Yet, Jonah cannot overcome his own prejudices and worldview. He can tell other people what to do in ways that are genuinely transformative, but he cannot bring himself to love them.

If we look at this story from the perspective of the people of Nineveh, we see something else. Here is an entire city, the capital of an entire nation, doing everything wrong. Except in their eyes, they are probably doing a lot of things right. They are the capital of a thriving empire with lots of wealth, status, military power, and the perks that come with such a position. Yet somehow, for whatever reason, they are able to hear God's call to repentance even when it comes from this weird, grumpy, foreign dude. When faced with a prophetic word that God is going to destroy them if they don't change, they change. They take on the painful inconvenience of not eating anything and sitting in ashes until God changes his mind. They reform their wicked ways. They are open to being different. There is a repentance and conversion in Nineveh that is astounding. We hear this repentance as the response to a powerful call from God to people whom he wants to save.

Notice here that the people of Nineveh are willing to move and change, and they do change their relationship with God. We don't get all the details, but we get enough to know that they are fasting and God saves them. God and Nineveh achieve reconciliation.

Imagine, too, if you dare, what this story might be from God's perspective. He sees a huge city where there are a hundred and twenty thousand people who are lost and confused. As God says to Jonah, "who do not know their right hand from their left." God also is concerned for Nineveh's animals. Scripture doesn't elaborate, but when God is telling Jonah about why he doesn't want to destroy Nineveh he mentions all their cattle. God knows it's a shame to waste fresh milk and good steak. God takes his most effective prophet, and sends him a significant distance from home, because he wants to save the people and animals of Nineveh that much. God wants Nineveh's repentance and, we would assume, reconciliation.

But Jonah is unable to accept what God is really asking him to do. God has to send a storm and a whale to get Jonah back on track, and even then Jonah is unwilling to embrace his call. He does what he has to do, but the message of love he proclaims doesn't reach his own heart. And, by the way, the message of coming destruction is a message of love – of a loving God who wants people to know that they are on a course towards death and that God is desperate for them to turn things around. Jonah knows he has a message of love, which is why he didn't want to go in the first place. He wants Nineveh blown up with divine pyrotechnics, not brought to repentance and saved.

Nineveh is saved. But imagine if Jonah had also been open to repentance and conversion. Imagine a story where Jonah was willing not only to bring his body into the city, but also his heart. What might have happened if Jonah had gone up to the king's palace, sat in sackcloth with him, and shared their stories and maybe even photos of his grandkids. Jonah and the King of Nineveh becoming friends on Facebook and sending birthday cards. Reconciliation might even have been able to happen between Nineveh and Jonah's people, Israel. I think that reconciliation is what God would have really wanted. Not just two people reconciled to God, but also reconciled to each other. At the end of the story when God is sharing his love for the people of Nineveh, I think God wants Jonah to share that love, too, and do the rest of the very difficult work God is calling him to do.

In our divided nation, I believe God wants the same things for us that he wanted for Nineveh and the people of Israel. To turn from wickedness and behaviors that are self-destructive and other destructive, and to live as brothers and sisters. God is calling us in a variety of ways to live into his reconciliation and love.

Sometimes that call is like his call to Jonah. To stop running away from God and each other. To turn around and to bring a message of love, even if it is tough love. Yet, as we see in Jonah, a message of God's saving love is not about us yelling at other people about what they are doing wrong. We have plenty of people yelling at each other with no love. A message of love is telling people God's truth and sticking with them as they change, however slowly, and being the presence of God in their lives.

Sometimes that call comes to us as it did to the King of Nineveh and we have to recognize that we are not doing what we need to do, even if the person bringing that message is not a person we really want to hear from. Our call then is to turn things around. To change. If we aren't entirely sure what to do, to stop and fast and pray and call out to God until things become clearer. There is really no downside to stopping and praying, and even fasting or sitting in ashes if we think there is even a chance that we need to repent and turn things around. The church has Lent every year because we know that we mess up and have to change, and once we get things on track it doesn't take us long to mess up again. Once we have things turned around and are walking again toward God and neighbor, we can be grateful to those who call us to repentance and growth, even if we aren't initially all that thrilled about what they are telling us.

We cannot continue as a nation and as a world the way we have been carrying on. God is calling us to repentance and reconciliation. We get to decide whether we answer God's call or not. The world needs those willing to bring God's message of love and the world also needs us to respond when God's sends people to us with a message of repentance and conversion. The ending of the Jonah story is tragic and incomplete. Our story doesn't have to be.