

Prayer: We admit, God, that sometimes we don't like the gift of having choices. We think life would be much easier if everything was laid out for us, a clear roadmap for our lives. Help us to remember that you have given us the gift of free will so that we must think, make mistakes and grow as your children. May your Spirit guide us in the choices we make, so that we do not need to be afraid but rather can trust that you are with us as we live into those decisions with peace. Amen.

PROPHET JONAH AS A MODEL FOR US IN LENT

Who can run from God? Or who can run from His call on their life? Looks like Jonah sure tried; and feels like we try as well. Listen to get a better handle on why we might do this, and how to overcome the temptation.

When is the last time you read the little book of the prophet Jonah? It's one of the most vivid short stories in the Old Testament, with many colorful and even humorous touches to it. I think of this book in Lent because Jonah is truly a model for us of God's grace triumphing over human weakness and sin.

Jonah shows us many typical weaknesses: running away from God's calling; refusing His demands; sleeping instead of staying vigilant; moaning in self-pity; feeling angry with God's will; having a mean spirit about God's generosity and mercy towards others. Basically, all the pettiest reactions we can have in the face of God are demonstrated by Jonah, and yet God does not give up on him, but keeps pursuing him, keeps giving him the grace to get up again after a fall — the grace of continual, albeit painful, conversion. Jonah's conversion, moreover, does not go in a straight line from victory to victory, but in a crooked, wavering line, from failure to success to failure again. He is a man who breaks down more than once and seems to be, so to speak, discontented with the role God has assigned him, or the results he gets in his work.

He is, in this way, utterly typical of ourselves. We often do not like the role we are assigned in the drama of history. It reminds me of auditioning for plays or musicals in high school. There were only a few really glorious parts you could get, and the rest were scrappy and trivial. We often feel like we've been given the scrappy, trivial parts of the drama of life, not the glorious ones in which we flatter ourselves we could really shine with all our talents.

Notice, too, how slow Jonah is to get the point. God has not treated him gently. He seizes him, throws him into the ocean, abandons him to a whale's belly, and then rescues him from the same beast. And yet, after all this, Jonah is still not submissive to God's will, he still kicks against the goads (Acts 26:14), complaining that the Ninevites will be spared on account of their repentance, complaining that his cherished gourd plant has been wasted by a worm. It reminds one of the Jews who saw the raising of Lazarus and yet still could not put their faith in Jesus, but plotted His death.

"Jonah was very happy over the plant" (4:6). Isn't this just like us, too? Here is Jonah, whose rather dull preaching (at least from the scraps recorded of it) has, by God's grace, resulted in the repentance and rescue of thousands of souls, feeling very happy about a plant, instead of feeling very happy about Nineveh. Don't we find ourselves growing attached to little things, and growing upset when they are not available — a certain kind of tea or coffee, a particular schedule for the day, the friendly words of a certain person we like — and forgetting about the immense blessings

that Almighty God is pouring out on us and on our neighbors every day? How often do we think about the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the soul of the just person? If you are in a state of sanctifying grace, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are making their home within your immortal intellectual soul. You are greater than the greatest temple built by human hands. Now: what was that complaint of yours?

As in the stirring poem, *The Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson, God relentlessly pursues Jonah because He loves him and knows that he can actually change, or better, be changed. God will not let Jonah's limited personality, his flaws, his disobedience, get the better of him, be the final word on his tombstone. No, in some sense Jonah is going to be a saint in spite of himself, because God is the one who accomplishes this work in us. As we read in the Psalms, "It is He who made us, not we ourselves" (Psalm 99:3). Humanity does not make themselves saints, it is God who makes us saints.

Yet there is something required of us — the willingness to be seized by God and shaped by Him, the willingness to be clay in the potter's hands. Whatever might be said against old Jonah, he finally surrendered to God. Though he grumbled about it, he let the Almighty shape him. The book of Jonah ends with a question; it does not tell us how Jonah answered it. We can presume that God is successful in making his point, and that Jonah, too, is mastered by the divine patience. He learns who God is, and what, therefore, he himself has to be. God has not abandoned him up to this point, and God will not abandon him now. Jonah will become a saint because he is not going to keep himself fixed in a stance of resistance and rebellion, like Lucifer, but is willing to learn and to change.

That is why we are all fortunate to be human and not angels. If we were angels, we might have been Lucifers. If we are human, we can be Jonah's. Even Judas, as we know, could have repented, and his tragedy consists precisely in his chosen failure to do so. Peter, who did something no less evil than Judas, repented and went on to become a martyr, a perfect witness, one who followed Christ perfectly. As angels, one act of rebellion would be our everlasting death. As humans, a daily act of repentance will be our everlasting life. Let us not lose this chance to gain life — the Lord is a cheerful giver who readily gives life. Let ours be the prayer of Jonah deep within the belly of the whale:

When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord;
My prayer reached you in your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols forsake the source of mercy.
But I, with resounding praise, will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed, I will pay: deliverance is from the Lord. (2:8-10)
Amen.