

Roots
God's Messenger

As I've thought about this story this week, I've come to believe that this really is the perfect children's story. I don't say that simply because kids love the idea of being swallowed up by a large fish, though that is certainly entertaining. I say it more as an adult really, and looking at this story and seeing just how characteristic this story is of a child. And I don't really mean the good child-like faith that we often talk about, but more of the childishness of Jonah. Maybe it's just because I now have children of my own and got back earlier this week from spending 20 hours in a van with them (!) but again and again as I looked at this story I saw Jonah in my 2, 3 and 5 year-olds.

From the beginning of the story we see this. God, the parent says to go in one direction and Jonah, the child, goes in the exact opposite away. God's error, of course, is that he didn't ask Jonah to take his hand, because everyone knows the best way to get your child to go in the direction you want is to take the child by the hand and force that child to go in the same direction.

And then, of course, because Jonah disobeys God he ends up in the belly of a whale or large fish. And we all know what that is; it's being put in time out. Now, three days may seem like a bit long to be in time out, but quite honestly I've been tempted to put our kids in time out for that length of time and there have been times when I've actually forgotten they're in time out and 45 minutes later I hear a "Daddy, can we get out of time out!"

And so, Jonah finally gets out of time out and he decides to change his ways after a 2nd time ("How many times do I have to tell you?!") God tells him to go to Nineveh. But even then Jonah's actions are less than impressive, it's clear that he's not really that into it. Much like when one sibling says to another, "I'm sorry" and the apology is less than enthusiastic or heartfelt, we see Jonah's time in Nineveh as, to put it lightly, less than enthusiastic. The city is a three day's walk across, but Jonah, well, he gets in there that first day and he seems to just be too tired to walk any further. "Ah, this is far enough." "I'm tired. "I'll just stop here and say what I have to say."

And when he does speak, again there's little energy or exuberance behind it. There are these begrudging words, only 5 words in Hebrew: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." One wonders if he even just sort of mumbled it, hoping that no one would hear it. And then he seems to just shuffle his feet back out of the city waiting to see what will happen, waiting for the cool fireworks.

But then, of course, God decides not to destroy the city. And Jonah, well, Jonah the child is upset. I knew it, Jonah will say in the 4th chapter. I knew you wouldn't

destroy them. And then in this great act of melodrama he says, "O Lord, take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live." This is one of the best temper tantrums I've seen, quite frankly. When things don't go your way, when you don't get what you want, then well, let's just fall down, cry and say we wish we were dead.

This is, in so many ways, the story of a petulant child who doesn't want to do what he's told, who needs a three-day-long timeout, who (after given a 2nd chance) does what he's told to do only grudgingly and who, when he doesn't get his way, cries and shouts out that he wishes he was dead. And so one of the questions that we have to ask is why in the world is this story included in the Bible at all. When you're a kid you don't necessarily care about that question because most of us as children are so star struck by being inside of the whale that you could care less why the story is in there you're just glad it is. But as adults we can't be sidetracked by the size of the fish, but instead have to question if there is a point beyond just scratching our heads and laughing at Jonah's childish ways.

Of course, there is one easy lesson that jumps off the pages of this story. Which is the fact that if God can use Jonah, then God can use almost anybody. So often we like to set the people of the Bible up on a pedestal and act as if they're so much better than we could ever be and this is why God uses them for his kingdom work. And yet here we have Jonah who only grudgingly follows after God (finally!) and yet God uses Jonah in a remarkable way, leading to the biggest conversion we see in all of scripture. When we talked about David and Goliath a few weeks ago we discussed how God can use our ordinary gifts to do remarkable things for him.

And so this week we are reminded of the fact that not only can God use our normal gifts and talents, but God can use them even when we are remarkably childish and stubborn and whiny. What this means is that for those of you who think that God could never use you to do his work because of how many times you've turned away from him or run away from him or were angry at him or complained to him or questioned him that God can still use you. Jonah is your patron saint, so to speak, and you should hold this story close to you.

Of course, it is also a lesson to those of us who get frustrated by people we think are immature in their faith or who seem to wax and wane when it comes to God. We can easily internally or externally scoff at or bemoan those who come to church only when it suits them or who turn to God when things are either going really well or really poorly. Or what about those who will be making their one appearance at ZPC this coming Christmas Eve? There will be many Jonahs, I promise you, who will come in here shuffling and grumbling on that night. How often do we easily dismiss them and their faith? How often, if we're honest, do we question whether God is with someone like them or at least we begin to question whether or not they will really change or if God can use them. And yet, this story reminds us that before we climb up on our pedestals on the evening of December 24th and begin judging those who we only see on Christmas Eve and Easter that perhaps we should remember this story and pray that those who struggle in their faith and in their relationship

with God would see the ways that God can use them in spite of those struggles. That they might be encouraged by the fact that God will never give up on them even when they might want to give up on God.

There is one last thing that struck me as I read this unique “children’s story” this week. When we think about children’s books one of the things we often think about are the pictures. A good children’s story always has a good picture in it. It seems to me that this story of Jonah certainly has that. But the picture I’m thinking about is not one shown in our Jesus Storybook Bible. It’s not of Jonah going to “Not Nineveh” or of the boat caught up in a storm or the pictures of a fish’s ribs or the beach upon which Jonah was, well, placed upon. No, it’s a picture that is painted in the 4th and final chapter of Jonah. He’s already complained about the fact that God hasn’t destroyed Nineveh and now he’s complaining about how hot it is. And so God sends a bush or a plant to give Jonah shade and so Jonah is able to cool down a bit. But then the next morning (as a sign of the fact that God has a great sense of humor) God sends a worm that eats the plant so that it dies, leaving Jonah hot and bothered all over again. So much so that he starts whining again about how he wished he could be dead.

To which God then responds to Jonah: “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

This is the picture that I’m talking about. Imagine that the camera is focused in on Jonah, caught up in his own little world, angry that his plant has died and that he is hot and feeling faint. And then as the picture pans out from hot Jonah and his dead plant this massive city of 120,000 begins to unfurl before our eyes. Men and women, children and animals. And yet, with this massive city full of people that God loves and cares for, there is Jonah staring at his dead plant, holding it up, mourning it, with little concern for the city that is just down the road. He is so caught up in himself, in his own predicament and state that he is unable or unwilling to consider the people of the city. It is, honestly, a ridiculous picture. It is quite possible the most childish thing that we see Jonah do in the whole story.

And yet, if we are honest, it is something that we all wrestle with: getting so caught up in our own little worlds that we fail to see, or at least care about, the outsiders, the cities or towns that are in need of the light of God. I’ll be honest in saying that the thing Megan and I were most concerned about in coming here to ZPC was not its’ recent history or following in the footsteps of a great pastor like Glenn McDonald, it was the Zionsville/Carmel bubble. We were and are frightened for ourselves, and

especially for our children. And because of that bubble in which we so easily find ourselves it makes it absolutely mandatory that we are intentional in investing in those outside of our bubble. We do this because, as we've said before, we are blessed to be a blessing, but we also do it, make no mistake about it, for the sake of our own spiritual lives, for the maturing of our own discipleship.

That is why we, as individuals and as a church, have to keep giving away large amounts of money that we could spend on ourselves. This year we as a congregation will be sending over \$400,000 to those who are ministering in towns and cities from Lebanon to Indianapolis to Egypt and Spain and Mexico and beyond. And it is pivotal that we continue to give to things like the Alternative Christmas Market and Totes for kids who need lunches during the Christmas break. And again, it's important, not just because of what it does for them, but because of how it forces us to make sure that we aren't caught up in our own little world.

But, of course, it means not just giving of our money, but of our very selves even, quite honestly, if we don't really want to. Remember God will use us even when we go kicking and screaming. ZPC got involved in Shepherd Community so that we would have opportunities to be in places that are different than our own, a place that quite honestly will remind you of how embarrassing it is that we get caught up in our own dead plants. It's why we go to places, like I talked about a few weeks ago, like prisons. It's also why we go to Kentucky, where people of all ages can give and be reminded of the world outside of our bubble. And one of the things that the Mission Commission is now working on is helping to find other opportunities for us at ZPC to give of our lives to the cities and towns around us, knowing that if God is concerned about the city, then we are to be concerned about the city. If God is passionate about the outsiders around us, then we must be passionate about the outsiders around us. Otherwise we become that ridiculous picture of a group of people moaning over our dead plant, oblivious to the city just outside our walls in desperate need of the light of Christ.

Sisters and brother, the story of Jonah is a great reminder to us of the reality that our faith must mature. As we grow in our discipleship we begin to see that God can use us even when we are not at our best. A maturing Christian is not one who casts aspersions on those who struggle in their faith and commitment to Christ, but one who prays for them, knowing that God will never give up. And a group of God-followers will be those who gather together to worship, but who are always aware of the city around them and who won't be content until the light of God is shone upon every square inch of our world. To the glory of the one who never gives up on us. Amen.