

Sermon for July 9, 2017
Series: A Summer of Heroes
"Jesus and the Whale"

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Today's sermon is the second in a series of sermons about heroes in the Bible. Last week we talked about the courage of Daniel to stand up to the king and remain faithful to God. I was thinking about what other heroes in the Bible I might preach on. And the story of Jonah came to mind. It is always a popular story for children and has a very important message for adults. I remember that when Mary was about 3 years old our Sunday dinner entertainment was to ask her what she learned in Sunday School that morning. You would be amazed at some of the things she learned. I remember one Sunday we asked her what she learned in Sunday School. She replied simply, "Bout Jesus and the Whale."

I tell this story because we all do the same thing to some extent. Like Mary we get the idea of the story, but we get it a little mixed up when it comes to the meaning. But it's not your fault. It is the fault of us preachers who have failed to preach the main point of the story. For instance when I say, "Jonah" what's the first thing you think of? That's right we think of Jonah and the whale. But the whale is only a minor character in the story. The whale, actually the Bible says "big fish," is important to the story, but it's still a minor character. The story is really about Jonah and God's call to go to Nineveh. The whale is merely one of the means God used to convince Jonah to answer that call.

In case you have forgotten the basic flow of the story of Jonah, let me refresh your memory. God comes to Jonah and says, "Go to Nineveh and proclaim my word." But Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh, so he boards a boat going in the opposite direction. God, determined to get Jonah to Nineveh, uses a storm and a whale to take him there. Once in Nineveh, Jonah proclaims God's word.

That is the basic chain of events of the story, but there is more to it. To really understand the story you have to know why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. The key to understanding why he didn't want to go to Nineveh lies in what Nineveh was to him and those of his nation and time.

So what was Nineveh to Jonah? I am glad you asked. According to The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria from about 700 BC to 612 BC. Nineveh was where the Emperor of the Assyrian Empire lived. The name "Nineveh" was associated with all that the empire did. When you say "Washington" you think of the United States government. When our government does something we say, "Washington did this or that." It is the same with "Moscow" or "London". Nineveh was not just the capital of Assyrian government, it was the symbolic embodiment of everything that the Assyrian Empire did.

One of the things that Assyria or Nineveh did was conquer Israel, Jonah's home. Repeatedly Assyria attacked Israel killing its people and destroying its cities. In 721 BC Assyria carried off the best and the brightest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity. It was Nineveh who planned those military campaigns and ordered that killing and enslaving of the Israelites. Jonah and his fellow Israelites saw Nineveh as an enemy to God and God's people.

Now God called Jonah, a Jew, to go to Nineveh. To go to the people he saw as his mortal enemy and proclaim the word of God. What was that word? God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim to it God's word of judgment and destruction for all they had done.

Wait a minute. Something's not right here! Let me get this straight. Jonah hated Nineveh and saw it as his mortal enemy. God tells Jonah to prophesy its destruction. It seems to me that Jonah would jump at the chance to go to Nineveh and proclaim this message, right? This was a golden opportunity for Jonah to tell Nineveh off. Here was a Divine sanction to go to Nineveh and say, "God'll get you for that."

So why didn't Jonah want to go? Because, despite his prejudice and hatred toward Nineveh, he knew God too well. Jonah knew that if he warned the Ninevites of their destruction, then they might repent. If they repented, then God would surely be merciful and spare them. Jonah didn't want to see Nineveh spared. He wanted to see it totally and utterly destroyed by God's wrath rained down on it from heaven.

So Jonah figured that if he doesn't tell Nineveh about God's judgment, they will not be warned. If they are not warned, they can't repent. If they don't repent, God won't spare them. Boom! Nineveh is destroyed. So, Jonah sets out to put as much distance between himself and Nineveh as he can. He books passage for the opposite end of the known world: Tarshish in modern day Spain.

This is where that whale comes in. God couldn't just let Jonah get away with his little scheme. So God orchestrated a storm at sea to get Jonah thrown overboard. Then God ordered a big fish, perhaps a whale, to swallow Jonah and take him to Nineveh making Jonah the first submariner. When they arrive at Nineveh the

whale beached itself and spits Jonah out on Nineveh Municipal Beach. Proving once and for all that you can't keep a good man down.

During his ride to Nineveh, Jonah did some thinking. He realized that he could not get away with running away from his calling. So he decides to do just enough to say he did what God was calling him to do and no more. A good prophet would go to the palace and dramatically proclaim God's judgment before the king and all his officials. A good preacher would enumerate all the sins that Nineveh had committed against God: "You have murdered God's people and destroyed God's temple and committed barbaric atrocities against the people of the world..." Then a good preacher would have graphically described the impending judgment and punishment of God: "Nineveh will be destroyed in a day. Fire will fall from the sky and the earth will open up a swallow it. It will be as if it never existed. In days to come one will say 'what is Nineveh?' and another will say 'It never existed. It is just a story.'" But Jonah endeavored to be neither a good prophet nor a good preacher. He only did what he had to, to get by.

For starters, he only went one day's journey into Nineveh. We are told that Nineveh was three days journey in width. He only goes a third of the way in. He is still in the suburbs of the Greater Metropolitan Nineveh area. If you will excuse an analogy with Washington, he is just barely inside the beltway. Then he just speaks one sentence: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown." He doesn't even tell them that it is God who will overthrow them or why. Just one sentence, and somehow I get the feeling he didn't say that very loud.

Then Jonah's worst nightmares come true. The people repent! In sackcloth and ashes no less! Maybe the incident with the fish on beach got around or something. I don't know. Somehow God convicted the people of their sin and moved them to repent. And someone told the King about it and he ordered a fast for all the people, and livestock, in Nineveh. Despite Jonah's halfhearted preaching, God moved the people to repent. And much to Jonah's chagrin, God spared Nineveh.

The book of Jonah tells a story about events sometime in the 7th or 8th century, but it spoke to events that happened centuries later. In the 6th century BC Babylon attacked the southern Kingdom of Judah. They sacked Jerusalem and carried the scholars and royalty to Babylon. Most Bible scholars believe that this exile was the crisis that caused the formation of what we know as the Old Testament. In order to preserve their religious heritage in exile, they consolidated their history and religious writings in a form close to what we see in the Old Testament today.

How might Jonah have sounded to these exiles in captivity in Babylon? While they sat by the rivers in Babylon and were tormented with calls to sing the songs of Zion, they must have hated the Babylonians. Then they read the book of the anti-prophet Jonah. Jonah must have hated the Ninevites as much as they hated the Babylonians. But the book of Jonah tells them that God cares for the Ninevites, and their cattle, and that God wants them to live and thrive. Maybe they could see themselves as prophets come to share the good news of that loving God with the Babylonians.

Centuries later when they had returned to Israel and were occupied by the Greeks or the Romans the book still spoke to them. If God cared about the Ninevites who did wrong to the people of Israel, perhaps they can care about the Greeks and Romans too. Instead of harboring hatred like Jonah did, they could heed the call to go to Nineveh, both literally and metaphorically, and proclaim the word of the Lord. Perhaps they could care enough to share their religious heritage with others who could be enlightened by it. If God can care about the Ninevites, then they could care about the Greeks and Romans.

And what about us today. Well, I am sure there are any number of names we can put in the place of Nineveh. God cares about the Soviets and their livestock. God cares about the Iranians and their livestock. God cares about the Iraqis and their livestock. God cares about Al-Qaeda and their livestock. Am I stepping on any toes? God cares about ISIS and their livestock.

Maybe I need to get personal. All of you on the right side of the congregation: God cares about all those on the left side, with their leftwing politics and liberal theology, and their pets. All of you on the left side of the congregation: God cares about all the people on the right side of the congregation, with their right wing politics and conservative theology, and their pets. Have I stepped on any toes now?

It is only natural for people to hate those they feel have wronged them. It is understandable that Jonah didn't want the Ninevites to repent and be spared. And we are only human to hate those we see as our enemies. But God calls us to something better. God calls us to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. And if we have problems with loving our enemies, then maybe we're the ones who need to repent!