

God of the Second Chance

sermon digest

February 14, 2010

Jonah 3:1-5
carolyn dipboye

As we gathered last Sunday morning it seemed as if hope sprang eternal. As we arrived, warming ourselves with a hot cup of coffee and as we clustered for conversation before heading home to our TV sets, we speculated with some confidence about the final score. Even as the game got off to a start, the football fan in our household observed the apparent mismatch and speculated about the upcoming slaughter. And then came the second half and then the final quarter. Hope began to slip away, and in the final minutes it plummeted as Peyton went down to defeat.

Our feelings were somewhat salvaged as we half listened to after-the-game interviews and Drew Brees' characterization of his team mates who started their careers as "castaways—guys who were obviously free agents because there were plenty of teams out there that didn't want us." What really got our attention, however, was his emotional statement that theirs was not a win for the team, but for Katrina-ravaged New Orleans that was now on its way back to healing. The wild joy when the team returned home and the hastily assembled parade that could have only been pulled off in a town that annually hosts Mardi Gras seemed to seal it for us. New Orleans after its long nightmare, it seems, is "back;" and we can only be grateful. Even the football fan in our house admitted, "If Peyton had to lose, I guess I'm glad it was to New Orleans."

God is the God of the second chance. We all like stories of come-backs, and scripture celebrates God as the God of the second chance. Hebrew scripture depicts Israel's story as a repeated cycle of her calling, failure and defeat, repentance, deliverance and renewed sense of calling. The story of Jesus himself seems to revel in new hope and expectation exactly among those whom respectable society had written off as hopeless.

The story of Jonah reaches its turning point when midway through "the word of the LORD [comes] to Jonah a second time" with exactly the same call with which his story begins: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Only this time, rather than running west when God has pointed him east, he goes to Nineveh and presents God's message—"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"—exactly five words in Hebrew. And everyone, *everyone* puts on sackcloth and repents—the king, all persons great and small, and even the animals. Surely, it must have been a case for the *Guinness Book of Records*—a feat of success deserving of the evangelism hall of fame!

Unlike the eleven other minor prophets, the book of Jonah is not a collection of the prophet's sermons or oracles. He seemingly only had one sermon, and it brief at that. It is a book about Jonah himself. A moral tale on the order of Aesop's fables, it is a story designed to prompt its audience to look within themselves. It is told in exaggerated terms about a *great* city (repeated four times), a great wind, a great storm, all people great and small, and a large fish. It is told with some comic relief—witness the fish which swallows Jonah whole and Jonah's prayer in the fish's belly along with the ridiculous note about animals donning sackcloth and fasting. It utilizes the familiar Hebrew imagery of the large city where evil resides and describes the city as so large (and so evil?) that it took three days just to walk across it. You get an idea of the story's exaggerated claims when you compare Nineveh's supposed size to that of modern day Chicago—a city you could walk across in a day or a day and a half. No ancient city approached that size. Something is center stage here other than historic detail.

Although large and powerful at the height of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh had ceased to exist by the time Jonah's story is told. It did exist, however, as powerful memory. The capital city of the once dreaded Assyria, its memory conjured up memories of northern Israel, which had been so devastated by the Assyrian assault that for all practical purposes, it had ceased to exist. Probably told in the fourth or fifth century B.C.E., Jonah's story unfolds in the shadow of the southern kingdom's own half century of exile and in full view of reminders of the destruction the Assyrians had unleashed upon the beloved Jerusalem. And yet, here God was commissioning Jonah to go and call the Ninevites to repentance? How could that be?

God's forgiveness calls us to become a part of God's reconciling purposes. Rather than chastising Jonah for his cowardice or prejudice, we would do well to put ourselves in his shoes. Interpreting his call in light of a call in our day to go to Osama Bin Laden's compound and issue a call of repentance might help us to be more appreciative of both his plight and the plight of the audience that first encountered his story. If we were summoned to preach before Bin Laden, we, like Jonah, would probably fear for our lives; and also like Jonah, we might well question God's good taste. "Do you not know the amount of suffering this man has caused?" we might ask. "Why on earth would we and even more, *you* assume that he is to be trusted in any way?"

And yet, here the story teller is relating a tale that is truly ironic. Here he is speaking not only of a second chance for Jonah, but speaking to the Jewish people who were themselves being given a second chance. In accordance with their theology of suffering and evil and also in full view of the inequities, presumption and sinful exploits that had accumulated under their monarchy, they had come to see the terrible suffering of destruction and exile as their deserved punishment. Their current opportunity to put life back together again was thus seen as evidence of God's forgiveness—God's giving them another chance. Extending the courtesy of a second chance to their enemy, on the other hand, was not something they were willing to consider.

Once we know ourselves forgiven, what do we do with our enemies? What do we do with those who have harmed

us? What do we do with the failures of others? I recall my major professor in graduate work, Dr. Henlee Barnette, saying, tongue-in-cheek, that the reason he believed in hell was that he thought those who had given it to everyone else on earth deserved to get theirs somewhere. And often it seems, that is just the use to which we put it as we nurture some deep sense of satisfaction at the thought of our enemies, our detractors or just those who are different writhing in hell.

Jonah's story calls us to a different standard. God, the story tells us, is nothing if not persistent; and God, the story tells us, will go to any length to accomplish God's purposes, even to the seemingly comedic point of using a fish and a recalcitrant prophet to get the job done. We, like post-exilic Jerusalem, are ready to give up on taking care of the big old, evil world in which we live. We would rather withdraw into safe confines and just take care of ourselves. That much, we feel, we can do. Yet, as with poor Jonah, our well laid plans keep getting interrupted by a God who is not satisfied with things as they are. As with Jonah, despite our assumption that God should embody the same sense of resignation we embody, "the word of the Lord" keeps coming to us; and surprisingly, it is God's mercy, not God's judgment, that represents most threats our settled worldview. Rather than a God who comes to obliterate all that makes us uncomfortable, God comes as one who shines light on all the darkness, all the suffering, all the enmity in this world that we would rather keep at arm's length. We would prefer that God were more silent, reclusive, and distant, leaving us to be silent, reclusive and distant as well. But this God, in the words of Thomas Currie, "keeps intruding, calling us again and again to speak an impossible word. And [yet] the sea is large; the city vast; the corruption well-known. What is the use of such a pointless errand?" [*Gleanings from the Text*, Jan. 25, 09]. Why does God keep teasing us into becoming involved in this world's great suffering?

This semester I am teaching a course for the Oak Ridge Institute of Continued Learning (ORICL) on "World Religions and Global Efforts on Behalf of Women and Girls." My friend Fran Silver told me that several women had told her they could not take the class because they feared it would be too depressing. And it is. Or much of it is. We have considered some tragic stories and statistics. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

- 70% of the 1,300,000,000 people in the world in poverty are women & children.
- Women produce ½ of the world's food; yet they own only 1% of the world's farmland.
- 2/3's of the 876 million illiterate adults in the world are women.
- 2/3's of the 125 million school age children not in school are girls.

Add to this the fact that for women between 15 and 44 years of age, acts of violence cause more death and disability than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined. According to World Health Organization, 1 in 3 women in the world will experience violence in her lifetime, with rates of up to 70% in some countries – the majority at the hands of husbands, intimate partners or someone they know. Yet according to the 2006 U.N. Secretary General's report, 102 member states have no specific laws on domestic violence.

Why would we even want to know such information? Why would we want our hearts and minds to be torn apart at the thought of such suffering? Perhaps we need to know it for no other reason than because the God we serve knows and suffers this pain as well. And perhaps because the God who comes to us in forgiving love always comes to commission and strengthen us to go in God's name to make a difference.

This week: a word of hope. A bipartisan group of Senators and Representatives introduced on the floor of the Congress the International Violence against Women Act (IVAWA). If passed, it will dramatically affect our foreign policy and foreign aid to reduce violence and help survivors cope by providing programs that engage communities in stemming violence against women and girls and by providing legal, health and social support for survivors. A pipe dream? Out of all reasonable expectation of ever making a difference? Only if we forget those historic battles in our world against slavery, racism, child labor, and sweat shops. Only if we forget where God calls us.