

A Fish Story

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 20, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:9-11, NRSV)

A man leaving a lake with two buckets of fish was once stopped by a game warden. The game warden asked the man, "Do you have a license to catch those fish?"

The man answered, "No, sir. These are my *pet* fish."

"Pet fish?!" the warden replied.

"Yes, sir. Every night I take these here fish down to the lake and let them swim around for a while. And then, after they've had a good-ole time, I whistle and they jump back into their buckets, and I take 'em home."

"That's a bunch of hooey! Fish can't do that!"

The man looked at the game warden for a moment, and then said, "Here, I'll show you. It really works."

"OK, mister, I've GOT to see this!" The game warden was curious now.

The man poured the fish in to the river and then stood and waited. Several long minutes passed, until finally the game warden turned to the man and said, "Well?"

"Well, what?" the man responded.

"When are you going to call them back?"

"Call *who* back?" The man asked.

"The FISH."

"What fish?"

That bit about the "pet fish" turns out to be a good, old-fashioned "fish story" ... a whopper of a tall tale! Far-fetched stories are always fun to hear, especially when they're told as *if* they were true, as if the storyteller *really* expects you to *believe* them. *That's* what makes a fish story a fish story!

And so, both figuratively and literally, this morning's scripture reading surely must be one of the greatest fish stories of all time! At the center of the tale, of course, is the prophet Jonah getting swallowed by a great big fish and camping out in its belly for three days and three nights. There are other stories in the Bible which involve some pretty far-out stuff, but this has got to be near the top of the list!

Of course, how he gets into that great fish's belly is pretty far-out too! The story begins with him being called by God to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the feared and hated Assyrian Empire, and to prophesy judgment against it. Nineveh was Ground Zero for the ancient Axis of Evil. The Assyrians were the Jewish people's most vile enemies in the 7th and 8th centuries BC – guilty of the most barbaric acts of cruelty. They made Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like candy stripers.

Now, as far-fetched as God's command may seem, Jonah's response isn't. He does exactly what anyone in his place would want to do: *he runs away!* He boards a ship bound for Tarshish, which is to say as *far* away as anyone in Jonah's time knew to run away.

But of course, trying to escape God *is* a bit foolish, isn't it? And so, God causes a storm to arise at sea, threatening the ship which Jonah was on. The ship's sailors panic and each pray to their own gods, and when the captain realizes that Jonah is asleep in the inner part of the ship, he wakes him up, ordering him to pray too! They then cast lots to determine who is responsible for all this, and of course, it comes up Jonah!

Jonah, to his credit, comes clean and tells them the truth ... that he is running from God to avoid God's command, and even suggests that he be thrown into the sea and left behind in order to still the storm, which was growing more and more violent with every passing second. The sailors resist that idea at first, and re-double their efforts to wrest back control of the ship by trying to row it to land, but they can't, and so, begging Jonah's God not to hold this against them, they *do* throw Jonah overboard – and sure enough, the storm ceases and the sea goes quiet. Amazed and grateful to be alive, the sailors make a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God and make vows of loyalty and obedience. And so, they sail away, happily ever after, out of the story.

But poor Jonah's troubles have only started. Here this biblical fish story *literally* becomes a *fish* story! Enter the *big fish* ... and it swallows Jonah whole! And there, Jonah stays for three days and three nights. And again, he does exactly what you or I would do (assuming we weren't catatonic, paralyzed, and curled up in a fetal position): he *prays* ... From the belly of the big fish, he calls on the Lord to hear him – and the Lord does. And so, perhaps troubled by a sudden bit of indigestion, the big fish spews Jonah out onto the dry land.

A second chance! And so, the Lord commands Jonah again – to go to Nineveh, and there, declare to the inhabitants of the cruel city the word of coming divine judgment. He does so, and begins to walk through the city, itself a three-day journey across, and shouting in his angriest voice of prophetic indignation, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" If he *must* be there, at least he can savor the thought of his words coming true! No city, no empire, no enemy of God's people had ever deserved this judgment more, and few have equaled its deserving since.

But then the *truly* impossible happens. No, the big fish doesn't suddenly re-appear to tell Jonah that he's sorry about the whole swallowing-him-thing. No, something *far, far* more far-fetched

than that: The Ninevites *actually listen* to Jonah's message! They are cut to the quick, and turn to God in mass repentance, crying out for mercy! Even the ruthless king of Nineveh rises from his throne, removes his robe, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes, calling on all his subjects to fast and pray on the impossible hope that God may let up and change his mind; and turn from his wrath, and spare them.

Relating the simply unbelievable as if it really were true is the mark of any good fish story. And as we've seen, this one has *all* the marks, but it just *can't* get any more ridiculous than this. It just can't – *or can it?* The next verse gives the answer:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

(Jonah 3:10, NRSV)

Keep in mind that this isn't about some people who from time to time steal bubble gum or lie about how old they are. These are the *Ninevites* ... this is the *Assyrian Empire* ... in Jonah's time, the mortal enemies of God's people ... a bloodthirsty warrior race who would wipe God's own off the face of the earth in a heartbeat if it served their interest to do so. And yet, in response to heartfelt repentance, God is willing to spare even *them*!

If anyone had told this to any of Jonah's people – that the Lord is ready to forgive and redeem even these monsters – they would be laughed out of town, or more likely, stoned to death for insulting God! Such an idea ... that God could desire mercy and turn aside from what these wretches so richly deserve ... would be seen as absurd and offensive! And we ourselves would join them in that righteous indignation if we but substituted the Ninevites in the story with those who might be compared with them today – and Lord knows there are plenty we could choose from.

And so, this seals it. With this insane notion, that God could love even the Ninevites after all they had done ... that God could still desire their good and not their harm ... this surely becomes the most far-fetched tale ever told. Surely only a fool would believe *this* fish story.

But you see, Jonah is *God's* fool: Not because he's trapped and made to run a fool's errand, but because *he* believed – correctly – from the beginning that this *biggest* fish story of all is *actually true*! Seething with rage, he knew from the beginning that this would happen, that God would do the unthinkable:

"O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:2-3, NRSV)

This is why he didn't want to go: Not because he was ever afraid for his life, *but because he was sure that God would be gracious ... that God would be God!*

But perhaps even now, all is not lost. Perhaps there is still hope that God will do the right thing and start smiting people, and give the Ninevites what they deserve, and so, Jonah walks out of the city and sits in a booth he made for himself to see what might still happen. Perhaps he hopes that this whole Nineveh fiasco may have started out as a fish story, but that it doesn't have to end as one.

But as he fears to see to his disgust, God's amazing grace, God's passion for mercy, is no fish story. God causes a bush to grow quickly up over Jonah to give him shade over his head, giving him much comfort from the relentless sun. But then, the next day, God causes a worm to attack the bush so that it withers and dies, and Jonah is left with no relief. In his misery, in his self-pity and anger, he desires his own death. Like we often do, Jonah needs a swift kick, but then, God is riding a wave of *mercy* and brings it all home:

"You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left ..." (Jonah 4:10-11, NRSV)

What astonishing words! Jonah never labored over that bush, but *God* has labored and striven with the people of Nineveh ... God created even them in his own image, and has walked with them, struggled with them, suffered with them, suffered *because* of them. Can you hear the divine pain, the hurt in God's vast heart over their lostness, not knowing "their right hand from their left"? Can you hear the divine longing for them to come home?

Nineveh and its empire would, one day, fall – all domination systems eventually fall under the weight of their own oppression. But its people, however lost, are still ever-called back, still welcome, still beloved – not because of who *they* are, but because of who *God* is.

And as with them long ago, so it is with our world today ... so it is with us. The very heart of the gospel is this far-fetched, impossible, offensive, *amazing* grace of God, which desires to set every human heart free, no matter how warped or lost or broken ... to bring them all home. And if this is who God is and what God is about, then it is who *we* are called to be and what *we* are to be about. It turns out to be the best fish story of them all, not just because it's impossible – but also because it's *true*.

To the glory of God! Amen.