

Sermon, September 20, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends Liz and Jeff Gilbert, and my good wife Laura for special music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are still rising, and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Even if they don't care for the service, I bet they would just like seeing you.

Meanwhile, if you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Now today's stupid joke.

A teacher was teaching her first graders about whales, and a little girl raised her hand and said, "My mommy says Jonah was swallowed by a whale." The teacher said, "Well, whales are very large animals, but they actually have small throats and couldn't possibly swallow a human being." The girl said, "When I get to heaven, I'll ask Jonah myself." The teacher said, "Well what if Jonah didn't make it to heaven and went instead to the other place?" The little girl said, "Then YOU ask him." Hold that thought.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual lovingkindness to us, your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

A reading from the Book of Jonah, the third chapter and fourth chapters.

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. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "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." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live.

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 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twentieth chapter.

[Jesus said to the disciples] "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Yeah, my joke was an old joke, but I think still a good one for the one time every few years that the lectionary lets me read from the book of Jonah. I admit it's among my favorite books of the Bible. Our first lesson consists of the final scenes in the narrative of Jonah, and like most biblical excerpts it is best understood in light of the book as a whole.

Jonah is one of the *trei asar*, that is "the twelve," referring to the twelve minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible, which is our Old Testament. As I have mentioned before, the term "Minor" in Minor Prophets was never meant to indicate lesser importance. The twelve are called MINOR prophets only because the books are short in length. In fact, when the twelve are written on the same scroll, as had been the tradition since at

least the second century BCE, that scroll is just about the same length as each of the so-called MAJOR prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Why lump all twelve together? Well, when you do that and remove the arbitrary divisions Christians imposed on the books of Kings, Samuel and Chronicles, and then combine Ezra and Nehemiah into one book as they originally were, then the Hebrew Bible contains twenty-two books.

And if you are a student of biblical numerology like most ancient Near Easterners, that number is “golden.” Twenty-two is the same number of specific things said to be created by God in the first chapters of Genesis, and the same number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Jonah has always been a favorite Bible book among children. It’s short - only four short chapters long, and you can read it in less than five minutes. Go ahead. I’ll wait. Or maybe I should just give you the Cliff’s Notes version. Jonah was called by God from Israel to prophesy against Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Assyria in its heyday was Israel’s worst and most bloodthirsty enemy on earth.

Jonah tried to flee from the task, but God called-up a storm that threatened to sink the boat he was running away on, a boat heading in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. Jonah’s shipmates tossed him overboard in an attempt to calm the storm. Don’t worry—it was his idea. And I bet you know what happened next: Jonah was swallowed by a ...Dag. That’s the Hebrew word for fish.

Actually the book says Jonah was swallowed by a dag gadohl, a “great fish,” a “big fish,” or in this case, a “great big fish.” “Whale” crept into this story only through a later mistranslation. But that’s another sermon. The dag gadohl vomited up Jonah three days later. He was fine.

And finally, just as God asked him to do in the first place, Jonah prophesied against the Ninevites. Saying a total of only four words—
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(Ahr-eh-BAH'yim yom v'-nee-neh-VAH' neh-h'PAH'-ket,)

A phrase we translate into English in eight words: “Forty Days More and Nineveh Will Be Overthrown!” When the Ninevites heard Jonah’s four words they did one of the rarest things in the Bible—they actually repented! Even though Jonah didn’t demand, or even suggest that.

The repentance was ordered and overseen by the so-called King of Nineveh. In light of their repentance, God spared the hated Ninevites. And that ticked-off Jonah so much, he just wanted to die. End of story. Like our gospel reading, Jonah is about the evil of envy, one of our faith’s traditional so-called, “Seven deadly sins.”

Jonah the book actually has little in common with the other Minor Prophets, or for that matter any other book of the Bible. The prophets are books made-up mostly of prophecy with little-to-no narrative. Jonah, on the other hand, is virtually ALL narrative plus a song, and those four words of prophecy.

The other prophets embraced God’s call to prophecy, even if reluctantly. Not Jonah! He flat-out ran away. The other prophets were called to speak to God’s people. Jonah to their worst enemies. The others called God’s people to repentance. Not Jonah, who seems to have delighted in the Ninevites’ pending doom.

Nobody listened to the other prophets, so Israel was destroyed. Everybody listened to Jonah, so Israel’s worst enemies were spared. While the other prophets lament that Israel did NOT repent, Jonah was furious because the Ninevites DID.

The Ninevites are presented as bumbling idiots. Or as God puts it in Jonah, “they are a people who do not know their right hand from their left.” Believe me, history indicates otherwise.

The city of Nineveh is exaggerated in the book to more than ten times its actual size. And by the time scholars say the book of Jonah was put to paper, the city of Nineveh lay in ruins, leveled centuries earlier by the Babylonians.

As to the featured “King of Nineveh”—nobody ever bore such a title. And when said king called on his subjects to repent, even the cows and sheep dressed in sackcloth and ashes to show their remorse. The Prophet’s name even makes me grin. Yo-nah in Hebrew means Dove. Yet Jonah the prophet is arguably the Bible’s staunchest hawk. Now if you think the entire story of Jonah sounds kind of silly, don’t worry. It is supposed to.

Most scholars agree that the short four-chapter book of Jonah is a satire of the other prophets, written in the fairy-tale form of a children’s story. And while that teacher I mentioned earlier in my joke may be correct in saying Jonah probably isn’t exactly factual. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

True, in that when people are asked to do God’s work, they really DO often turn and run away. True, in that we also think of God as our own private property, forgetting at times that our God is the God of other people too. Even people who don’t look, act, or think like us and sometimes folks we don’t really care for. True, in that just like Jonah and the Ninevites, God gives US second chances all the time, and is pretty darned patient with us, always responding to our prayers even though we don’t always like the response.

True, in that God is compassionate to the point that God might even set aside the rules of fairness and justice in order to give us a break. True, in that God is first and foremost merciful and slow to anger. And especially true, in that when God appears to show favor to people other than us, WE don't like it one bit! A truth that conveniently resonates in today's Gospel reading from Matthew.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is a tough one. The landowner doesn't sound fair, and in other Matthew parables landowners invariably represent God. Shouldn't God be fair? Nothing against unmerited grace, mind you. But as the good guys—you know—God's "chosen"—shouldn't WE get more of it than anyone else?

To really "get" the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, I think you need to consider its literary context. These verses come just after Peter asked what special reward he would get for leaving everything behind and following Jesus from the beginning. And it comes just before James and John ALSO seek special honors for themselves in the coming kingdom. Jesus assures Peter he'll receive salvation and eternal life, just like everybody else. And told James and John they'll have the honor of being servants to all.

You see, none of them deserved spending eternity with the God who created and loved them in the first place. Nobody does. So what in the world made them think they deserved even more? Besides--what is MORE than eternity and perpetual joy?

You also have to wonder who would dare to read themselves into the parable as the early morning or even the nine o'clock crew. (I mean besides all of us.) Truth of the matter is we're all really part of the evening shift, who don't really deserve ANYTHING from God.

Yet God considers us special in spite of ourselves and rewards us by grace through faith, and not because of anything we do. Which, as you may recall, was kind of the motto of the Reformation, wasn't it? I knew it all along. Jesus was Lutheran.

Truth is, God today asks so little of us and probably expects even less. Yet like Jonah, we also, when asked, would rather look the other way. Or even turn and run. Nothing could be easier than being a Christian in this time and place. It's just a matter of loving your neighbor, honoring God in all you do and supporting the ministries of your church. Still we all keep coming up short. Thankfully God sticks with us anyway, giving us countless second chances.

Which reminds me of my pastor friend who was giving a Children's sermon on the story of Jonah a few years back. She was stressing how God doesn't give up on us, even when we disappoint him. She asked the kids, "What does it mean to us that the giant fish vomited Jonah up on dry land?" One of the kids said, "It means God never gives up on us." But then another kid disagreed, saying, "It means even fish can't stomach a bad preacher." Which is probably also true...

Amen.
