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“Acceptance, Or Not: Jonah’s Temper Tantrum”
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A moment or two ago we heard just a snippet of the story of Jonah. It was just a small part of the story, and it was from the very end of the story – and taken out of context it can be hard to explain why isn’t an anti-climactic ending. So let’s not take it out of context.

Jonah. In the Hebrew Scriptures he’s one of the lesser prophets, and his story is sandwiched in between the books of Obadiah and Micah. And yet, his story is more of a morality tale than the record of a prophet. In fact, in different points, Jonah’s tale is so larger than life it seems to be a parody of the thing itself – but not a parody that mocks, rather a parody that teaches, a parody that shows the truth because it is larger than life, much like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart is for us, today.

But let’s recap, because perhaps you are like many people, and the only thing you can recall clearly about the story of Jonah is a whale.

God has a message for the people. God calls on a prophet to go deliver this message, and the message is along the following lines: ‘You’ve ignored all that is good and holy in this world, so it’s time for you to be wiped from the earth.’

Now, for a moment if you will, encapsulate this image of a vengeful and violent god and put it over here, remembering that we’re looking at Jonah as a morality tale or sorts, and that the story is following a certain form which was very, very common for the time. All sorts of gods in that time were promising vengeance and violence in ways that would not conform to even our most liberal interpretation of a just war theory.

With this concept over here for a moment, what I’d really like you to focus on is that God has a message for the people, and The People *aren’t the Hebrew People*. The people in this story are a completely different group, which have led scholars to debate that this story, like the story of Job, may not actually be original to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now, at this point in the story, what we would normally expect would be a chapter or two (or fifty) of poetry – the actual prophesy – which might have a long discourse on just how evil and degenerate the people have gotten, possibly in colorful language that doesn’t translate well, followed by a gentler, happier description of God’s dream for humanity. And maybe after that there’s a brief description about whether or not the prophet was successful, and if the evil king and his people repented, or if the king was disposed and replaced by a marginally less evil king.

What we actually get with Jonah at this point is a temper tantrum. Instead of several chapters of poetic-prophetic discourse spoken in first person from God’s point of view,

we get a multi-level temper tantrum from a prophet who thinks that his God is entirely too gentle and kind hearted. When God says, 'go, and prophesy to Nineveh' and gives the message of vengeance and violence, Jonah's response is this: 'Vengeance! Violence! You say that *now*, but I know you! All they have to do is 'repent', sit around in burlap and wallow in their firepits for a bit and you'll just go and *forgive* them! And they're awful people! They've done *awful things*! I hate them! And I'm not going to be the instrument of their forgiveness, so there!' And he caught the first ship in the opposite direction.

Now, given that instead of a long poetic-prophetic discourse we get the prophet having a temper tantrum, it shouldn't surprise us in this story that instead of miracles happening to change the mind of the people, as they did with the original and archetypal Hebrew prophet, Moses, we get miracles to change the mind of the prophet.

First there's the storm. A horrible storm at sea where it looks like everyone is going to die, and the captain is exhorting everyone to pray to their own god to see if anyone's listening, and to see if someone has deeply annoyed their god, because now is definitely the time to kiss and make up.

And if the storm was a miraculous event, then so was it's end: the moment Jonah coughs up his treacherous act against his god, the storm is over like it never existed.

And then we see Jonah's transport to Nineveh: it's large, it's fishy, and it's completely improbable. I remember images from childhood that were largely a whale skeleton with skin over it – ignoring any internal organs that might be necessary, Jonah had a lit candle stump and room to stretch out – in some of the pictures, he even had room to throw a football. I point this out because whether or not you're sitting there trying to suss out exactly how a whale could swallow an adult human being whole and hold said human without digesting him for three days of swimming (and perhaps your wondering which *type* of whale would be necessary and appropriate for the job and the geographic location), or if you're sitting there thinking, 'if she thinks I'm going to swallow that, then she's got another think coming' – I say to you both: it's a parody. It's meant to be slightly ridiculous; it's meant to take the familiar theme of a divine miracle and up the ante. But the miracles don't stop there.

Jonah gets spit out at Nineveh, but he sits outside the city for three days, brooding. And it's disgustingly hot out, and though he seeks shelter, there isn't much to be had. But God causes a plant to grow to ginormous proportions overnight and it provides shade, and saves Jonah from dying of the heat. And then God causes the plant to die, and Jonah has another temper tantrum, which God then uses as an object lesson.

'You mourn the plant's passing,' says God, 'yet it was only a plant, and you only had it for a short period of time. How can you wonder that I mourn Nineveh's passing, full of people that I have had for so long?'

And then the end of the story: Jonah concedes that God may, in fact, have a point and goes to prophesy to Nineveh, who promptly, en masse, repent, God forgives them, and everyone goes home happy – except Jonah.

Now, there are many different lessons we can draw from this story:

We could see that perhaps God – even in the old days – was a lot more forgiving than his press led one to believe.

We could see that it does no good to hold resentments, like Jonah held against Nineveh.

We could see that God is ready to forgive people much sooner than we are, and the sooner we get onto forgiving people, the happier God will be.

We could see that these stories really aren't about the miracles, they're about the people.

We could see that this was a story not about God, or a People who needed to repent, or even about a prophesy, or even about a prophet – this was a story about a person who like you and I, was going about living his life in the best way he knew how, making decisions he saw as reasonable, defensible, and just – and yet, they were still unhelpful. This was a story about how someone changed – grudgingly, and because of his attitude, with great suffering. Where most prophets have a moment of doubt – ‘how can I, I’m too young?’ ‘how can I? I’m too corrupt?’ – which they quickly get over, Jonah struggles throughout the entire story, which perhaps you and I can identify with. And in the background of this one man who struggles, and suffers because of his inability to leave his baggage behind, we have a whole city full of people who are just waiting for the opportunity to change, who embrace it gladly, and find it easy and smooth. It looks a little like a lone rockstar, pained and suffering for his art, standing before an entire choir who make a beautiful sound and are just happy to be singing.

And that is the choice before us, always, at every turn: We can choose to easily embrace the change in our lives and find out what good thing will come from it, or we can be dragged along with the current having – perhaps a toned down version – of a temper tantrum in the belly of a whale. And we're all familiar with both responses – the times in our lives when we have dug in our heels, scrunched up our faces and said, ‘No!’ And the times when we've taken a deep breath, smiled, and said, ‘Okay.’

“Okay.”

This Sunday marks my last Sunday at Trinity. Next week the current carries me off to the next adventure, but before I go, it would be horribly remiss of me not to tell you how much I love you, how much I value the time and effort you put into training me for ministry – whether you realized you were doing that or not – and how grateful I am to have been here, in this time, and in this place. So, thank you.

Amen.

