

Jonah 1:1-4; 3:1-4:2

Sermon Title *The 'Yes, And' of Scripture*

Jonah 1:1-4; 3:1-4:2

Narrator: Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,

Women: ²**'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'**

Narrator: ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. ⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up....(Chapter 3)
The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying,

Women: ²**'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'** ³

Narrator: So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out,

Men: 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

Narrator: ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh:

KING: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? Maybe God will have a change of mind and relent; perhaps God's burning wrath will be withdrawn so that we don't perish.'

Narrator: ¹⁰God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior. And God relented by not inflicting on them the disaster that threatened them. ¹But Jonah grew indignant and fell into a rage. ²He prayed to the Lord and said,

Men: '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.'

For Reflection

“Whenever we pick up the Bible, read it, put it down, and say, “That’s just what I thought,” we are probably in trouble.”

— Ellen F. Davis, *The Art of Reading Scripture*

I wonder if any of you, when you learned this story in Sunday School as children, if you were told that the message of Jonah was essentially, “there is nowhere you can go where God cannot see or find you?” That “we cannot hide from God.” I remember as a kid, we had an audio tape of Jonah, a dramatized version read by actors with sounds of the sea, and when the big fish would come and swallow up Jonah, well, that is what I thought the story was about – that I could not hide from God. I was awed by this story – a fish swallowing a man whole – a man staying alive inside a fish for three days. This story both put me in awe of God and, at the same time, made me a bit nervous about God. I did not concern myself too much with the Ninevities as I would lay on the carpet in our living room listening to “Jonah”, I just thought about that storm and that fish and how I could never hide from God.

The conclusion that the message of the book of Jonah is that “we cannot hide from God,” well, that this not a false conclusion – my childhood self was not wrong, and yet, it is certainly not the whole picture either. It is not wrong, and yet, if that was the only interpretation – well, there is much we would be missing as well – it certainly is not the entire picture.

A year or two ago we did a series in worship called, “the language of belief” or something along those lines, and each week we would look at a different “loaded” word/term of our faith and try to unpack it a little bit – words like sin, salvation, forgiveness. Words that we use a lot inside these walls and we assume we know what we mean when we utter these words. As part of that series, one week I asked, “how would you summarize the story of the Bible in one word.” For

some this was an easy task: *love* – the most common response; *peace* – for others; *justice* – still for others. I remember that one of you told me that you asked a friend this question, and their answer was different, their answer was *holiness*.

Who is correct? Who is right? Is this book about love, or peace, or holiness? It would of course depend on who we asked. Jonah, the prophet, I think he would have answered “holiness”, at least before his incident with the whale. But is only one answer correct? Can only one be correct?

Much of scripture is taken up with the experience of exile that the people of Israel suffer through – they are defeated by the empire of Babylon and for about sixty years forced to live away from their homeland – forced to move away and work in the service of the enemy that has conquered them. And so page after page of the Bible references this experience in one way or another, this major crisis of faith for the people of Israel. The major prophets concentrate on either keeping them from going into the coming exile, speaking comfort during exile, or illuminating a new way forward after exile. Exile dominates the Biblical narrative of the Old Testament: How did this happen to them? How could they have been defeated? Does it mean that God has abandoned them? Does it mean their God is actually not the one true God?

It is a crisis of faith. It is the major crisis of the Old Testament.

And sixty years later, when they are finally able to return home, they have a determination – NEVER AGAIN. What must they do to ensure that this will never happen to them again; how must they act to ensure they will never again be forced into exile; what type of people must they be; what type of nation must they be.

And so, what we find happening in their history at this time is a renewed and fervent (passionate) sense of nationalism. They believe that they primarily went into exile because they ceased being faithful to the law and covenant of God – that they forgot God and they worshipped other gods. And so to keep this from happening again, they ban intermarriage, the leaders say that they cannot marry outside of the Jewish tribes, because marrying others will lead us to eventually worshipping the gods of other lands. There is a sense that they must put up their national boundaries, that they must focus on the rebuilding of Jerusalem first – that they must be primarily concerned with their people first. This will keep them safe. This will keep them from once again experiencing exile. This will keep them in God’s favor. And so this is what we find happening in the historical books of *Nehemiah* and *Ezra* at this time in the life of Israel (directly after the Babylonian exile).

And it is into this nationalistic setting that the book of *Jonah* is speaking. Many scholars date the book of *Jonah* to the same time as the return of exile, about 500 years before the birth of Christ. That into this renewed sense of impassioned nationalism, the story of Jonah starts being told. The story of a nationalistic prophet. A prophet who remembers the words that God has spoken to the people of Israel, “You alone of all the nations of the earth have I called.” A prophet who knows that God is the God of the whole earth, and yet his strong nationalism bleeds through – it dominates his actions and his views.

And so into this time of strong and zealous nationalism, the book of *Jonah* speaks as a minority voice, it speaks offering a different perspective. The book of *Jonah* says, “Yes, God cares for our nation, AND God cares about all of God’s children and animals too.” “Should I not

be concerned” says God at the end of this story, “about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 of my children living?”

Jonah is the “Yes, And” to the larger story happening all around him in his day. To the main discourse of nationalism hanging over this period of time, the story of Jonah whispers, “that is not the whole story.” As the larger story is urging for a focus on rebuilding the wall and the temple and keeping their nation pure and right, the story of Jonah whispers, “God’s care is for all nations and all people.”

And so this, to not be subtle, is the larger point I want to make about scripture this morning. The Bible is a book – we bound it together and think about it as one book, one story. And it is one book, the pieces work together – AND, it is a book of many books, 66 books in our Bible – more if you are Catholic or Orthodox or Ethiopian. A book with many authors. And scripture tells us one grand story, it offers us a Meta-narrative for making meaning of life, of our world – for our life with God. And in different parts of scripture different story lines dominate the landscape, different story lines determine how the story is told – how the history is written.

But within that dominant pattern of storytelling, we meet stories like Jonah that are in conversation with the rest, parts that say, “yes, that is true, AND that is not the whole story.” There are pieces throughout scripture that seek to be in conversation with other pieces of scripture – one author offering a different perspective than another author – one story seeking to illuminate other parts of God; to offer other answers to the questions of life with God.

This type of dialectical storytelling, it begins in the very beginning where we have two different accounts of creation. **In Genesis 1:** God creates in six days beginning with light and ending with the creation of humans. God creates with word – God speaks and it is done. In this account men & women are created at the same time, both in the image of God.

And then, just one chapter later, **In Genesis 2 we have a second account.** God creates in a single day. God creates humans before plants and animals, not last. God creates us by forming us from dust and breathes into our nostrils, the breath of life. In this account there is one earth creature made first, and a second made later from the rib of the first.

So, which is correct? Was it six days or one day? Was it word or was it dust and breath? Were we made first or last? Were men and women made at the same time?

One of the beautiful things about the Bible is that no one ever went back and said, “we can’t have both of these stories here – they are contradictory.” They didn’t go back and say, “we can’t have four gospels of Jesus, they aren’t all the same, it will hurt the credibility of the story.” The ancient mind seemed to be able to hold multiple truths and ideas at one time, without insistence that only one was correct. They were left in because they are both true. In the Creation stories: one tells more of God’s power and might – of a transcendent God – of a God far away creating out of love; the other tells of the nearness of God, of God breathing into us, of God walking in the Garden with us and speaking to us. God is powerful and mighty and far away – and God is here among us, walking with us and speaking in us and through us. Yes, they are both true. They

both describe different aspects of who God is, they both describe ways that we experience God, and they both don't tell the whole picture on their own.

We have much to learn from our scriptural authors: that there is not always a binary of one being correct and one being false – of one factual account and one fictional account – they are seeking to communicate different truths about God, about who God is and our lives with God. They work together. We need both pieces. We need an understanding of both pieces to have the fullest view of God and ourselves – to have the deepest answers that keep us coming back again and again.

I wonder if perhaps some of this is what we are being called to in our time and our place, not the triumph of being right and another wrong, but in looking for the “yes, and” of those with whom we disagree and with those with whom we are struggling. To seek a deeper understanding of others who also care deeply about their faith, but tell a much different story about God and our lives with God; of understanding others who care about our country and tell a different story about that. Other people of faith we are perhaps emphasizing the holiness of God. And the challenge for us is perhaps not to say, “no the Bible is not about holiness, it is about love.” Rather to say, “YES, God is Holy, AND God is Love.”

These past weeks there is a renewed debate about in our country about favoring Christian refugees entering our country. The challenge for me is not to respond just by shouting “No!” But to try and also recognize a piece that I might be missing, for me to have more of a posture of, “Yes, God loves Christians all around the world; God does not want Christians to suffer and die;

AND, God loves Muslims and Jewish and Hindus and those of no faith; God does not want them to suffer and die.”

Seeking the “yes, and” with other Christians, with other people of faith – I think this is the way of scripture. Well, at least the way of some Biblical authors who add their counter-testimony to the larger testimony of their day – to ass their minority voice to the more dominate voice.

It is the recognition that God has gifted us with a beautiful and utterly necessary part of the story that we must share, that we must raise our minority voice of love and peace. AND, we must remember that it is not the entire story.

I often let you draw your own conclusions to my sermons and story, I try to not too often do all the work for you, but hope you might draw your own personal conclusions. So today, as I conclude: am I asking you to share your piece of the truth to those who see different? To make sure that our minority voice is being heard among the dominant rhetoric of our day? To ensure we are offering the counter-story of love and acceptance to the dominate story of nationalism growing in our day? To make sure among this growing and fervent nationalism we need to be the story-tellers of *Jonah*, offering the story that God loves and cares for all God’s children (and animals too).

Or, am I calling us to go to Ninevah, to listen to those we are avoiding – to go and hear the pieces of the story that we usually do not tell in our circles – to go and learn not just about the

Bible of love and justice and peace, but to learn of holiness as well? To go to those who feel like our enemies and seek to hear their “yes and.”

Yes. Yes.

Sending Blessing

And now as you go from this place, may the God of love go with you – empowering us to speak the truth we have to share to do so boldly, and opening us to know that this is not the whole story – that healing and hope might flow through us into the world. Go in peace. Amen.