

Jonah is so true to life!
19 Pentecost A

“God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” Jonah 3:11

The Bible is the last place readers would look for a laugh. The main reason we fail to find humor there, is that the Bible is the last place we would look. Humor can be found in every book of the Bible and can lead us sometimes to laugh right out loud. It's remarkable how we manage to overlook it. It's also unfortunate. To miss the humor of the Bible is to miss not only much of its fun, but much of its meaning.

There is Jonah for example. Every chapter in this prophetic book invites a smile — the scene of the recalcitrant prophet, for example, fresh from the belly of the whale: reeking of whale vomit, trailing seaweed and barnacles and old fish heads, bleached of all his color by gastric juices, his robe shrunk up to his knees and elbows, a way bad hair day, not only disheveled but seriously disgruntled. In a foul mood he treks into Nineveh muttering his message of doom in a language the Ninevites can't even understand.

Jonah is the picture of an ancient “Fiddler on the Roof,” shaking his fists and cursing his luck – yet God chose him to bring His message. From the beginning Jonah tells God that the Ninevites are not worth the effort. He runs away from God's call and instead of responding he takes the local water taxi and goes on vacation. Jonah is one of the best characters for a Broadway play that the Bible has to offer. He is *both* a tragic figure in that he is pessimistic of human nature's ability to change and he is a bigot. And Jonah has no capacity for mercy. He is a world class curmudgeon. Yet, he has a lot to teach us about ourselves.

Truth is that more often than not, God is calling us to do things that are hard, even daring things like loving our enemies and moving out of our comfort zones to serve people who are different than we are and that we may not like. Jonah tried to escape the responsibility by running, but he found out that there's nowhere to hide when it's God who's doing the searching. Better that we move toward the unsettling voice of our uncertainty when God calls us, than to run screaming in the other direction! No matter where we go, God goes with us. A prophet should know that. So I hope, should we. Yet the “escape pod in our spaceship” is always a temptation like it was for Jonah. When God's call comes, is the escape pod the first thing that comes to mind? Is our ship packed and ready when we are asked to consider running for an office in the church or being a member of a ministry team such as hospitality toward visitors?

Jonah takes the escape pod option. A storm creates a panic on the ship. It's interesting that the person who should be sounding the alarm is actually getting some serious rack time at the critical moment. The sailors are trembling with fear but Jonah is snoring into oblivion. The pagan seamen wake him to have him call on

“his god.” Jonah knows exactly what’s going on and seems resigned to his fate. His response is, “I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you,” says Jonah to his shipmates (v. 12).

Is it not interesting that it’s the pagan sailors who pray to God in this moment, while Jonah himself won’t say anything to God. He’d rather cling to the ship and die than go to Nineveh. And yet he is fully aware that his own rebellion is the cause of this disaster.

Sometimes it’s difficult to admit that we’re wrong; painful as that admission may be. When that happens, we can resign ourselves to a fatalistic way of thinking or we can repent and give our awareness of God’s presence and make our confession to God. He is the only one who can stop the storm of sin raging within us.

Finally, Jonah hits rock bottom in the belly of the great fish. Talk of “hitting rock bottom” can be heard from men such as those who meet in our Social Hall at the Tuesday evening AA meeting. They are not alone. I believe every human being hits that bottom at some point in life. Many of us have been there. But the good news here is that while there’s no place we can run from God, there’s also no place so far away or so disgusting that God does not hear us when we cry out for Him. When the fish barfs up Jonah on dry land it’s a form of gastrointestinal grace. Jonah, as with anyone who runs away from a call to ministry, gets another try as the 911 operator for Nineveh.

Jonah hauls his fishy-smelling and seaweed-draped carcass off the beach and goes to Nineveh as God told him after hearing His call a “second time.” Jonah begins to preach the message of impending doom upon the huge capital city and, surprise of surprises, the people actually believed what Jonah was telling them and repented before God. It’s pretty clear from the text that this wasn’t part of Jonah’s plan. Perhaps he thought doing his duty would not make much difference. Perhaps he would just sit back to watch God smoke these pagans. It didn’t happen. God’s word actually worked!

So does Jonah accept this news of heart-felt change among the people joyfully? Nope! He wants to die instead of going down to the city and having a block party. He rants at God for following through with his promise of mercy on these horrible people. Instead, Jonah sits in a shelter waiting for the end of Nineveh’s world and it doesn’t come.

In the final scene, God twice asks why Jonah is angry. Jonah leaves the shelter in frustration. So God creates a bush to give some shade and rest from His messenger’s exhaustion. Jonah is more comfortable and is pleased. Yet God wants Jonah to learn an important lesson. It’s as if God is playing with Jonah’s mind and He sends a worm to kill the bush that is giving him shade. God says to Jonah, “Is it

right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah is so peeved and says, "Yes, angry enough to die."

Then God gives Jonah some comparative religion. He compares Jonah's tree hugging love for a bush for which Jonah is grieving; to God's concern and grief over 120 thousand human beings who don't know right from wrong (plus their animals). The fourth and final chapter of Jonah's story ends with a question, "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?" Jonah had nothing to do with that bush – it was a gift from God. Yet he blames God for taking away the gift.

We often want God to act according to the scripts we've laid out for our lives, and we sometimes want God to bless our tendency toward feeling superior to others who may be worse sinners than we are. We get angry when God doesn't bless our plans, and when that happens, we have two choices: We can sulk, or we can ask God to show us where He's going with His plan and tell us how we can get on board.

Biblically speaking, we do a whole lot better when we stop whining and start singing in praise; stop complaining about our mission and start explaining our mission.

So where is our "Nineveh"? Amen.