

“A Fish Tale”

The Jonah¹ story is fairly well known or at least part of it is. At least many people would be able to match Jonah with a story about a whale or big fish, perhaps with a little coaching. Of course, there is the song “It Ain’t Necessarily So” from the opera “Porgy and Bess.”² In that song the character Sportin’ Life sings “Oh Jonah he lived in a whale, Oh Jonah he lived in a whale. He made his home in that fish’s abdomen. Oh Jonah he lived in a whale.” But the Book of Jonah is about so much more than Jonah’s adventure in the belly of a big fish.

The fable is about how Jonah was called by God to go to the city of Nineveh and preach repentance to them. Jonah did not like the Ninevites. He thought that they should be punished by God for their many sins. So instead of going to Nineveh Jonah goes to the boat docks and gets on a ship going in the opposite direction from Nineveh toward the city of Tarshish.³

It is worth noting that this is a great reversal of the typical call story for a prophet in the Hebrew Bible. In those situations the one called would say he could not go because he was not worthy to speak God’s word. The prophet relents when God provides him with a solution to the problem e.g. cleansed lips or a brother to speak for him. Only in the case of Jonah do we have a prophet who does not refuse out of humility, he refuses because he is afraid that the prophecy will work.

It is the result of Jonah’s running away that he ends up in the sea, swallowed by a large fish, and then vomited onto the shore next to Nineveh. Having now been put in Nineveh by God Jonah preaches repentance to the city. His sermon is half-hearted, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”⁴ but it works. The entire city, people and animals, puts on sackcloth and ashes, fasts from food and drink repents of their sins and turns to the Lord. Jonah should be proud that his eight-word sermon has been so effective. But instead he goes out of the city and sulks.

He complains that he knew God would forgive these people if they repented.⁵ He wanted them punished for their sins. Jonah is so disappointed that he asks God to let him die.

I find this story rather funny. If you heard the word of God would you do the exact opposite thing God asks you to do? Would you be disappointed that what you were asked to do was so successful despite your half-hearted attempt? Of course, this is a fable so the characters do not act rationally. The purpose is for us to learn a lesson about life or about ourselves. (It is important to remember that there are many literary styles in the Bible. We should be careful to determine what we are reading as that will help us understand and reflect on it.)

So if it is a fable what do you suppose we should learn from reading this? What do you think? [Repeat the responses as they are given.] Thank you for all of your thoughts.

¹ Oddly the name Jonah means “dove” in Hebrew.

² A jazz/pop version was recorded by Bronski Beat in the 1980s. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxJi9lWbyfg>

³ Jonah 1:3 NRSV

⁴ Jonah 3:4b NRSV

⁵ Jonah 4:2 “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.” NRSV

Let me focus on one of these for the next few minutes. In Jonah's prayer he says to God, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." When Jonah prays this it is both a statement of fact, perhaps even a complement to God, but Jonah is also expressing disappointment. Why in the world would Jonah or anyone be disappointed in God's mercy, love, and reluctance to punish?

Sadly, the answer for Jonah and for you and me seems rather obvious. We don't want God's justice so much as we want our justice. You and I know who needs punishment and who needs forgiveness and we want God to do our will. Instead of God being the creator and we being God's creatures, we want to control God. One of Jesus' most human times in the Gospels is when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup may pass him by. But Jesus answers his own plea when he says, "not my will, but thy will be done."⁶

We are so eager to have our way in the world that we forget that we are not in charge. We forget that we are not the one who created and sustains the world. We forget that we do not have the big picture. As I have said before we are ALL beloved of God. Not just the people from our town, or those who follow our rules, or those who do and think the way we do. We are ALL beloved. When God calls each of us to offer our gifts to the world, the gifts our lives were created for, God calls us to share those gifts extravagantly, abundantly, prodigally, even compulsively. If you have the gift of healing, then heal every person you can. If you have the gift of teaching then enlighten every person you can. If you have the gift of financial acumen then help every person you can get a loan to start a business or to build a house, and make sure the system that is in place is fair for everyone regardless of race, belief, social status, or gender.

That is what our Laurie⁷ did. She took the life she was given with all of her limitations and refused to live that way. Then she took the gifts she was given and helped people in the US and abroad to build better lives. She shared the gifts she was given for the good of everyone. She did not ask if they voted as she did, believed in her God, looked like she did, or had to overcome the difficulties she did. She heard God's call and unlike Jonah she took it and ran into the fray.

That is what God is calling each of us to today and every day. God says, "Go to Nineveh and save thousands. Do not ask if they deserve it. They are my children of course they deserve it. Leave your ego and your ideas of who is deserving behind. Do the work that I ask of you. That is all I ask. Do your best and do not worry about the outcome, because that is in my hands."

Thankfully, God does not ask us to be God. For despite all of our knowledge and skill we do not have that capacity. But we can, like Laurie, do the best with what we are given and know the results are not up to us but to God. I, for one, think that is Good News.

⁶ Luke 22:42

⁷ Laurie Maggiano who died January 7, 2018. Learn more about this amazing woman at this website.
<http://www.roystonfuneralhome.net/obituaries/Laurie-Maggiano/#!/Obituary>