

Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet

On the surface the two readings today seem unconnected. In Mark's narrative we have the story of Jesus' beginning to gather those around him who would become his disciples, those whom he would teach. The book of Jonah also tells a story of God placing a call upon someone, but what happens after the call is received is very different. First, what happens when Jesus issues his call. Simon and his brother Andrew are fishermen going about their daily activities, they are casting nets into the reeds along the shoreline; James and John the sons of Zebedee are nearby but are not actively fishing. They are in a boat mending nets along with their father so that they can again go fishing. Both sets of brothers are working at their trade as fishermen. Jesus, walking along the shore calls out to them saying, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And all four men respond to this summons by following Jesus. Not only do they answer the call positively, but they do so immediately leaving their nets behind, even leaving Zebedee sitting in that boat. Immediate and positive are the responses to the call given to them by Jesus. Now the narrative story of Jonah is very different. The complete text consists of only four chapters. Our passage is not the beginning of Jonah's story but is actually near the end. To understand better the connection between these passages, we need to revisit the beginning of Jonah. Because in many ways both passages reveal something important about human responses when God calls. Chapter 1 tells us that the word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it for their wickedness has come up before me." When those fishermen receive the invitation to come and follow Jesus, their response is immediate. When God's word comes to Jonah, it comes with a sense of urgency...Go at once. Yes, Jonah's response is also immediate, but it is not to go as instructed but is to flee—not to just stay where he was—but to go in the opposite direction. He heads to Tar'shish. This leads to the story from Jonah most familiar to us—God's refusal to let him flee the assigned mission. Jonah's adventure in the belly of the great fish the Lord sends forms a well-known story found in most Sunday School curriculum. Jonah repents of his disobedience and this is the point at which our passage begins. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Some background about Nineveh might be helpful—it was the capital city of Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were infamous for their brutality in a world where brutality was commonplace. Nineveh and the Assyrians were reviled as the rapist, the murderer of children, the burner of wheat fields, an imperial monster and the enemy of Israel. The nearest comparison in modern history would be the Third Reich. It is to this place, hated by Jonah and all Israelites that God sends Jonah with a warning. God tells Jonah, twice, that he needs to warn them that disaster is imminent and they need to repent—to change their ways. What explains Jonah's reluctance? It could of course be that he is afraid of these brutal Ninevites. Or it could be that he felt that it was a type of mission impossible, so why even try. Assyria did not recognize Yahweh, so why would they pay attention to a message given to Jonah by Yahweh to relay to them. But at God's insistence he travels to Nineveh and begins what must be counted as both the shortest and most effective sermon ever proclaimed. Jonah has accepted his task, sort of. He does take the day's walk to Nineveh and begins shouting the warning message God has given him. In Hebrew what Jonah shouts is only five words. In English, it's a little longer, but not much: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" You would think that

Jonah would actually enjoy bringing this message—Israel’s God is about to overthrow Israel’s enemy. Pronouncing condemnation on an enemy would seem a task that would be relished. Jonah’s message does not offer any hope that anything but destruction is possible. Jonah’s utterance does not issue a call for repentance or transformation. Did Jonah count on the brevity of the message to satisfy the Lord and thus accomplish his mission without risking Nineveh’s repentance? Whatever Jonah’s plan or intention the results provide a twist to the narrative. Because what happens when Jonah enters the city with this message from God is a series of events that Jonah not only doesn’t relish—he bitterly resents. For the people of Nineveh accept his message as truth and believe that God could and will overthrow them. The brief message shouted by Jonah takes root in them and causes a transformation. With his five words uttered as he walked through the city, Jonah becomes the most successful prophet in the entire canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jonah turns an entire city to the ways of God. The Ninevites’ reaction is to proclaim a fast; to put on sackcloth—those symbols of repentance in the ancient world. This response of all the people, including the king, is astounding in its completeness. Not only do the people show their repentance, but the king gets up from his throne, removes his robe—a sign of his status and power—he covers himself in sackcloth and then sits down in ashes. He then issues a decree that all within Nineveh shall fast—including the animals. He further declares that all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. This image the feared enemy and fierce occupier of lands not their own is transformed into a rather comic picture of a supplicant. Not only are the people clothed in sackcloth, but also they also drape the animals in sackcloth. The animals are put on an enforced fast—not only can the people not eat or drink, but neither can the animals. Despite there being no indication of reprieve from Jonah’s declaration, the king’s proclamation contained a sense that the king was hopeful. He says, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” The final verse before us today relates that the king’s hope was answered. “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.” As previously indicated, this passage does not end the story of Jonah. Jonah is not pleased with the success of the warning he brought to Nineveh. He did not consider what happened a success for he wanted God to smite Nineveh. In fact, Jonah is mad. The next and last chapter of Jonah begins this way: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tar’shish 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.” The Hebrew is more explicit about Jonah’s feelings about God’s mercy—a literal translation would read more like this: It was evil to Jonah, a great evil and his anger burned. Jonah is angry at God for the very attributes of God that Israel always had depended upon for its own salvation. The Book of Jonah is read in the Jewish Calendar on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Jews are called to confess their sin against God and neighbor. When we read Jonah’s story it can serve to remind us that we too depend upon mercy, that steadfast love and the desire of God to relent from punishing, to affirm and grant life. The message here for us may be more than a fantastic tale of a whale, or the presentation of the powerful king made to look comic. It tells us that we, like Jonah, have to let God be God. Salvation is pure gift and grace. We do not own that grace, nor is it ours to

dole out as we wish or to those we think have repented and thus deserve it. God will always be forgiving because that is the very heart of God. We need to understand and face the ways we like Jonah try to lay claim to God and God's gift of grace. If we believe that God can and will save even the most foul of humans, then we can believe in God's power to save our souls. We understand that God is God and does not act as we think the Almighty should act. The response to God's message to these people was one of forgiveness because they chose to change their evil ways. So in good faith we need to answer the call to follow where God calls bring the message to all—and in doing so we will find that there are no people, and no place in God's creation, not even in the Ninevehs of the world that can be really termed God-forsaken. When we encounter someone who is difficult in our lives, someone with whom we disagree, someone we believe must be one of those who are doing and acting in unacceptable ways, we need to remember this about God: God does not see them that way, so perhaps we should try to see them as God does—as God's creation—as God's beloved capable of responding positively to God. We need to practice being more like those Jesus called by the Sea of Galilee—leaving behind our nets containing our understanding of who God loves and immediately following Jesus and offering the message that all are loved by God. Thanks be to God for God's amazing grace.