

Jonah: When Outsiders Get It Right

Jonah 1:11-15

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 29, 2012, on the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria. The sermon is the second in a series of four on the Book of Jonah.

Focus Text

Then [the sailors] said to [Jonah,]

‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?’

For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

[Jonah] said to them,

‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’

Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

Then they cried out to the LORD,

‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea;

and the sea ceased from its raging.

When we read a short story or novel, we normally identify with the main character:

- Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*
- Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*
- *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

By the same token, when we read the Bible, we most often identify with the main character of the book we are reading. That character is usually the person serving God. The character with whom we are most likely to identify is the heroic person of faith, who encounters and seeks to serve God in ways we yearn to encounter and serve.

I.

But in the book of Jonah, this identification is flipped on its head. As you doubtless surmised if you were present for last week's telling of the story of Jonah, the main character in this story is a reluctant prophet at best, a narrow-minded, churlish bigot at worst.

- God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn the despised Ninevehites of their upcoming destruction. Rightly fearful that the Ninevehites will repent and, if they do, receive God's mercy, Jonah spends his own money to sail to Tarshish, the farthest point in the known world away from Nineveh.
- After being thrown out of the boat because his fugitive presence causes a storm to arise, Jonah is rescued by a giant fish (or whale) and given a second chance to deliver God's message to Nineveh. This time Jonah delivers the message to the Ninevehites, but only in five words tokenly spoken: "In forty days, Nineveh destroyed."
- When the Ninevehites indeed repent, as Jonah had predicted, Jonah sulks, and asks God to relieve him of his life, for indeed, Jonah would rather not live than be alive in a world in which those who have done his people great harm for centuries receive the favor of God.

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In contrast to Jonah's resistance to God's will, every other character in this short and funny book does precisely what God asks or expects.

Initially, it is the sailors who embody God's will, almost by instinct:

- While Jonah sleeps his way through the storm at sea, the sailors pray *to their gods* for deliverance and protection.
- The sailors throw cargo overboard to try to lighten the load.
- The storm still raging, the sailors cast lots to determine who is the cause of the storm, a traditional way of consulting the divine in their day.
- When the lot falls on Jonah, they confront him, yet row harder and harder, seeking not to have to resort to throwing him overboard.
- When their more stringent rowing does not succeed, they pray again, this time *to Jonah's God*.
- In desperation, they ask God not to adjudge them guilty, and they throw Jonah overboard, and immediately offer a sacrifice and make vows to Jonah's God.

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Next, it is the Ninevehites who do the right thing.

When after three days and three nights in the belly of the whale Jonah receives a second chance to go to Nineveh, he deposits his five-word message there and leaves.

Yet the results are phenomenal:

- The Ninevehites believe God.
- They fast.

- Everyone of them, great and small, put on sackcloth, a sign of repentance.

Not only do the citizens repent, but also the King.

- He rises from his throne.
- He removes his royal robe.
- He covers himself with sackcloth.
- He sits in ashes.
- He decrees a fast.
- He orders all the people and animals of Nineveh to be covered in sackcloth, to pray to Jonah's God, and to repent of their evil and violent ways.

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Not only do the sailors, the Ninevehites, and the king obey God – but so do the elements of nature.

- The wind obeys God, creating a storm, abating, and bringing a sultry sun to beat down on the head of Jonah.
- A large fish (or whale) obeys God, rescuing Jonah from the sea, providing Jonah safe haven for three days and three nights, and then spewing Jonah out on dry land.
- In addition, a bush obeys God by covering Jonah with shade and a worm obeys God by attacking the bush.

Virtually all the people and elements of nature in the book do the right thing.

All, that is, except Jonah.

At the end of the book, Jonah is once again sitting, this time outside Nineveh. He is stewing that the Ninevehites have repented and received God's forgiveness. Like the older brother in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jonah is invited to join in the celebration, but he simply cannot go in join the music and dancing. While everyone else in the story either receives forgiveness or is an agent of forgiveness, Jonah sulks. Everyone does the right thing but Jonah.

So what gives here?

II.

Last week I presented some questions I promised to answer:

- What does it mean that those who are outside the people of God – the sailors and the Ninevehites – embody God's will more than Jonah, who despite his reluctance is clearly a Hebrew prophet?
- Is it possible that sometimes those outside the people of God, outside the covenant community, outside the church, are closer to what God calls believers to be and do than those of us spend every Sunday in worship, every Thursday at choir practice, and every paycheck tithing?
- Are there times “when outsiders get it right” while those of us inside the church sleep or sulk, like Jonah?

III.

In my experience the answer to the latter questions is “yes.” There are times when outsiders get it right while we on the inside don't. But if that is the case, what does it mean? What are its implications for us?

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On one level, it can be *assuring* to us personally that those outside the church, outside the faith, sometimes get it right.

- There are people in our families – spouses, children, parents – who may not be members of the church, who may not have been baptized

or receive communion, who worship in a different tradition, or who may simply have no explicit religious faith – yet who are as moral, compassionate, and courageous as anyone next to whom we sit in the pews.

- There are people in our neighborhoods who reach out with a warmth and compassion which we admire but have not yet attained.
- There are people with whom we work who do not share our religious commitments or sentiments but who are as courageous and bold in the way they live as any persons of faith we know.

Bonhoeffer writes that when the Bible says: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” the Bible does not exclusively refer to persecution for the sake of Jesus Christ. “It is the beautification of those who are persecuted for the sake of a just cause...for the sake of a true, good, and human cause” that is occurring in these words.¹

Bonhoeffer then quotes First Peter twice:

- If you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. (I Peter 3:14)
- If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. (I Peter 2:20)

Without the accoutrements of faith, such persons seem to embody faith’s best aims. We may call such persons “anonymous Christians.” We may call them members of the “invisible church.” We may call them “secular saints.” No matter what name we bestow upon them, by them and through them the world becomes a richer place. One does not have to be part of the identified people of God – even the *self*-identified people of God – to do the right thing in the world God has created.

One thing this can mean is that as we live and work in the world, we can and should join with others who are working toward things that are just and humane, no matter their religious affiliation or motivation.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ and Good People,” an unfinished essay in *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1955), 60-63.

- Like the sailors on the way to Tarshish, those who do the right thing may be as much servants of God as we are.
- The same is true for members of our family: when we legitimately mourn that our spouses, our children, our siblings, do not value life in the church the way we do and yet remain strong and steadfast human beings, we can take some comfort that they are more in God's hands than we realize.

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On another level, the reality that those outside the church or faith often get it right can *challenge* us.

It is no secret that some movements for good in history originate primarily outside the church yet come to be affirmed by the church, which in hindsight sees the hand of God in the particular historical movement, even though the church did not lend its own hand in leadership at the outset.

- For example, most historians would doubtless recognize that the history of freedom and equality in the world has mixed sources. In many ways, Christianity contributed to the breakdown of medieval economic and social stratification at the end of the Middle Ages, to movements toward democracy in the 1700s and 1800s, to the causes of the abolition of slavery and equality for women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to a greater acceptance of people across lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation which has marked recent decades.
- But in many ways, as we know, the church has been slow to encourage to such movements, cautious about them, or in some instances directly opposed. Sometimes we have been slow out of fear, sometimes out of a genuine matter of conscience, sometimes out of misreading our own texts or tradition.

The extent to which the church leads, follows, or resists social changes is a mixed historical bag. But the point is this: In the story of Jonah, God's offer of redemption to the Ninevehites prevails, whether Jonah is reluctant or willing, whether Jonah succeeds or fails. The will and way of God will prevail whether individual believers and churches are on board or not. The

promise of God goes forward. It does not turn back. “His truth is marching on.” It is we who decide whether to join the march of God’s history through our streets and cities, our homes and families, our workplaces and houses of worship, or, like Jonah, sit on the sidelines and sulk while others receive blessing.

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Third, in the story of Jonah, sailors in their innate goodness and Ninevehites in their repentance all come around to believing in the God in whom Jonah believes but whose message Jonah resists. In other words, they all embrace the God of Israel.

Does this mean that it is religious conversion that leads them to do the right thing?

Possibly.

But not necessarily.

- Most of the moral reactions the sailors undertake occur before they pray to Jonah’s God.
- And certainly the whale, the wind, the bush and the worm don’t exactly answer an altar call before obeying and serving God’s purposes.

What I believe is this:

- All human good has its origin in God our creator.
- All good comes from and ultimately relates back to God.
- But such direct relation between goodness and God may only occur at the end of history, at the return of Christ.

In the meantime, there is a provisional value to good that is good in and of itself, to good people who are good in and of themselves. The church can

affirm, work with, and indeed celebrate that goodness without seeking its explicit conversion.

As Christians, we can work side by side with human beings who share our aims and goals, and often, as did Jonah, we have the opportunity to learn from them.

- It is naive to think that we will always lead, and it is arrogant to think that God will limit the living out of his will to those who explicitly claim him.
- In the good God does, God will not be limited to the degree of willingness with which the church joins him. God does have other hands than ours.
- Sometimes, the secular world gets it right when the church doesn't; sometimes sailors get it right when we Jonah's are asleep.

But God uses the sailors and he uses us Jonahs – and ultimately, God will prevail.

Amen.