

Singing the Blues with Jonah

Jonah 2:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

March 18, 2007

One of our missionaries has spent most of his entire adult life in Africa. He, along with his wife and two children have some harrowing stories to tell. In addition to being a pastor, he is a missionary pilot and flies to remote villages transporting supplies as well as sick and injured people to hospitals and clinics. A number of years ago when the nation of Zaire (now called Congo) was undergoing the trauma of civil war, he and his family were caught right in the middle.

One day, a Congolese army officer came to his house demanding that the pastor fly him to some distant location. The pastor said that he couldn't do that. The soldiers with the officer then pointed their automatic rifles at the heads of the children and demanded that he fly them.

At this point, I would have been a mass of quivering protoplasm, but this pastor kept his cool. He said that surely the officer understood command structures. He said he couldn't take off in his plane until he received permission from his bishop, and so would the soldiers please wait for a while so that such permission could be obtained? The soldiers got tired of waiting and soon drifted off to another village.

Not too long after that, one of the villagers came running to the pastor's house, telling him that soldiers were coming. They had express instructions from the leader of the insurrection to kill his whole family. They immediately dropped what they were doing, left their home and everything in it, ran out to their airplane, and took off to a neighboring country.

A year or so later, after hostilities had died down and the family was able to get back into the country, the pastor attended the dedication of a new hospital. Numerous government officials had been invited. As it so happened, the pastor was seated next to the army officer who demanded the use of his airplane, and whose soldiers had threatened the life of his children. The officer saw him, erupted in a big smile, and gave him a great big hug saying, "Ah, how are you my friend?"

The pastor later said that it was the hardest thing in the world to be hugged by this man who, shortly before, wanted him dead. This pastor doesn't throw the word "evil" around very often, but in this case, he said that he was confronted by a person who presided over some truly evil acts of war. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was to be in that country, yet, he continued to stay there in order to carry out his work because he felt the strong call of God to be in that place. He was revolted by the violence and by the people who perpetrated it, but answered God's call to stay and minister in that place.

I tell you that story because it reminds me, a little bit, of Jonah. Jonah, after all, was sent to a place about which he didn't care and to a people who revolted him, and given a job that he didn't want. He did his best to run away.

If you read the scholars about the story of Jonah, you will find many contradicting opinions. Some say that it was written as early as the eighth century B.C.E. and others say that it may not have been written until the fourth century before Christ. What kind of literature is it? The opinions are all over the place. Could it be allegory, fable, fairy tale, history, legend, myth, novella, parable, sermon, short story, tragedy, or something all together different yet? Jonah originally ran away to Tarshish. Where is that? Some say Spain. Others say North Africa. Still others say some place in Asia Minor. How big was Nineveh? When the Bible says that it took Jonah three days to walk across it, does that mean diameter or circumference? Was it truly as big as the Bible reports?

I am content to let the scholars argue and debate those details. I'll try to find the meaning of the story for us as we continue our Lenten sermon series on "Singing the Blues" with God's people.

Let's quickly remember the story. God spoke to Jonah one day, telling him that his job was to go over to Nineveh in order to tell them that they were headed for trouble because they were so deeply mired in sin. Now, Nineveh was way over on banks of the Tigris River in what is present day Iraq – very close to the modern day city of Mosul.

Nineveh had a reputation, at least among Israelites, of being filled with violence. It was a city of terrorists. The prophet Nahum said this about Nineveh.

See, I am against you, says the Lord of Hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions: I will cut off your prey from the earth and the voice of your messengers shall be heard no more (2:13).

Ah, city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end to the plunder...(3:1).

...who has ever escaped your endless cruelty? (3:19c).

This was a city that stood for everything that was opposed by God and by God's people. So just imagine Jonah's surprise when he got the call from God to go to Nineveh on a preaching mission.

During my senior year of seminary, I got a call from a District Superintendent from Western Nebraska. He said he wanted to buy me lunch and talk about some possibilities following my graduation. So I drove up to Cheyenne, Wyoming to meet him at the Bob Evans. Now, there is a whole lot of nothing between Denver and Cheyenne. I was asked if I would consider joining the Nebraska Annual Conference and serving a church in the far south-western part of the state. I understand that there are parts of Nebraska that are really pretty, but not where they wanted to send me. There is less than a whole lot of nothing there.

We had a really nice lunch together, but I decided on the way home that I was willing to go pretty much anyplace God wanted me to go. But I wouldn't go to Nebraska.

Jonah felt the same way. He was probably willing to go anyplace God would decide to send him, except Nineveh. He didn't want to go so bad, in fact, that he ran the other way. He made his way down to Joppa and jumped on a ship bound for Tarshish. Now, wherever Tarshish was located, it was in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh.

Shortly after Jonah got on board his ship, there rose a tremendous storm at sea. The seasoned sailors on board couldn't control the ship and they were in real danger of sinking. Finally, Jonah told them that he was the problem because he was running away from God. So he told them to throw him overboard. They were reluctant to do that, but finally tossed him into the sea.

The really interesting part of this sea saga – at least for me – is that when the great storm arose and the sailors were doing everything they could do to keep the ship keel down, Jonah was down in the hold sleeping. They had to go down and wake him up.

As I read that, I wondered if this was a sign that Jonah was depressed, that he was singing the blues because of his situation. We know that sleep patterns are often disturbed when one is depressed. Some people can't sleep at all, while others fall asleep at the drop of a hat and can remain sleeping for hours on end.

He was unconcerned that the others were fighting for their lives. He withdrew from others to be alone, even in the midst of a terrible storm. He didn't seem to feel the same fear that the others on the ship felt. He just wanted to be alone, to sleep and not to pay any attention to anything going on around him. Sleep can be a way to avoid the pain of reality.

God had called him to do something that he found repulsive, and so he withdrew into himself. He was humiliated at being asked to do something so unthinkable, and so he crawled inside his own little protective shell.

So when Jonah told the sailors to throw him into the sea, I don't think he cared anymore. I don't think it mattered what happened to him anymore. He was ready to accept his fate because nothing else was going right for him.

So they pitched him over the side of the ship, but God was not through with Jonah yet. God called over a great fish which swallowed Jonah in one gulp. It is interesting that when he indeed met death face-to-face, his attitude changed. One minute, he was up on deck not caring if he died, and the next minute, he found himself sitting on a fish's kidney wondering where he had gone wrong.

Inside that great fish, Jonah opened up to God in honest prayer. It was a prayer of thanksgiving for saving his life. It was recognition that he owed everything to God. It was a testimony to the fact that Jonah realized that without God, he was nothing, could

accomplish nothing, and was worth nothing. He tells the story of how he was thrown into the sea, but then ends his prayer with “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” Then the fish coughed him up on the beach.

Now, one would think that after this rather dramatic rescue, Jonah’s spirits would have been lifted and that his feelings of depression would be gone forever. But not with this guy. God told him to go to Nineveh again and this time, he grudgingly started off. When he got to the city, he proclaimed the message God had given him, and lo and behold, the people of the city repented. Jonah told them that if they didn’t get their act together, they would be destroyed in forty days. So they confessed their sins, right then and there, and got right with God. And God changed his mind and didn’t destroy the city.

Jonah was really honked off. He was enraged. He couldn’t handle the fact that God could forgive these horrible people. Not too long before this, he had repented of his own sin and fully accepted God’s forgiveness, but couldn’t stomach the fact that such forgiveness could be offered to other sinners as well.

In chapter 4 vs. 2, he says, “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.” That was the truth, but to paraphrase a Jack Nicholson movie, “He couldn’t handle the truth.”

So he said, “Please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (4:3). Does that sound familiar? Remember the Moses and Elijah said the same thing when things didn’t go their way. Jonah is back to being depressed again because he can’t get his way. I can understand Moses being depressed. I can understand Elijah being depressed. But Jonah is just pouting and acting like a spoiled child. I just want to say to Jonah, “Lighten up. Get a Grip. Chill out. Give me a break. Get over it”

The problem is that most depressed people don’t respond to that sort of encouragement. You don’t just tell a depressed person not to be depressed anymore. It just isn’t that easy. The things that are petty and irrational to other people, don’t seem petty and irrational to someone who is depressed. So God chose a different approach.

God started with a simple approach. He grew a bush under which Jonah could rest and enjoy the shade. But the next morning, God caused the bush to wither and die. Jonah renewed his complaining: “It is better for me to die than to live” (4:8). So God then asked a question. “Is it right for you to be angry...?” (4:9). Did it make sense to want to die over a wilted plant?

It was time for some truth telling on God’s part, so he pointed out the contrast. He told Jonah that he needed to put some things into perspective. Jonah was white-hot mad because of a dead bush, but showed no concern for the lives of one hundred twenty thousand people of Nineveh. There is no appropriate scale to compare the two events.

One of the frustrating parts of Jonah's story for me is that we don't know what happened. We don't know what Jonah did. We don't know if his heart was changed. We don't know if he came to his senses. We don't know if he went on to do great things for God. We don't know those things, because the story ends and doesn't tell us.

So what do we do with this depressed, blues-singing prophet? Perhaps we should be asking ourselves some questions. First of all, are we like Jonah? Are we hampered by Jonah's lack of grace?

If you would get to heaven this evening, would there be anyone there who you would not want to see? What if the business partner who defrauded you was there? What if your ex-spouse was there? What if a former fellow student was there who received a scholarship for which you were better qualified? What if your neighbor was there; the one who constantly allowed his dog to do his business in your front yard?

Perhaps we ought to be asking ourselves some of those questions. How do we view grace? Are we as willing to grant grace as we are to receive it? Are we as willing to give grace as God is willing to give grace? Those are important questions. They need an honest answer. What would we say?