

Anger Management  
Jonah 4: 1-5  
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The Rev. Joseph Dye  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

When I was asked to preach a sermon today I was offered a choice between two stories for subjects, I took Jonah and Patrick took Esther. He did a great sermon with Esther last week and I am trying to make a passable sermon out of Jonah this week. You might think Jonah would be easier since it covers only two and a half pages in my New Revised Standard Bible. It has four chapters, one of which is given over to Jonah's prayer from the belly of the big fish. (I'm sorry to disappoint you but there is no whale in this book.) And the other three chapters are clearly fictional, even though they contain a story with, I trust, a couple of morals.

Actually, the story is pretty interesting even though it is apocryphal. It is an extended battle between Jahweh and Jonah, his most reluctant servant. Jahweh wants Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, and preach to the population which he describes as so ignorant they don't know their left hand from their right. He expects that Jonah will convert the whole population and to help him Jahweh says to tell them that if they don't come around in forty days He will destroy the place with fire and brimstone.

Now Jonah remembers the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel and the deportation of its inhabitants by Assyria two hundred years before this story takes place and he has a world class hatred for anything Assyrian. He would rather die than do this job.

What he does instead is take ship for Spain so he won't have to preach to the Ninevites. He apparently thinks Jahweh's power doesn't extend beyond the boundaries of the Holy Land. He is about to find out the hard way that this is not true. God sends a great storm on the water which terrifies the crew of the boat and after unsuccessfully praying to their local gods they determine that Jonah, the stranger, must be the cause. He tells them that Jahweh is after him and they immediately convert to belief in Jahweh. That's a fast conversion in any faith but it was accomplished by fear not wisdom. Maybe no one cared about how it happened in those days.

Nevertheless, since the storm has gotten worse, Jonah gallantly tells the crew that they have to get rid of him if they want to live. So they wrap him in a

blanket and cast him overboard and the storm goes away. Now Jahweh apparently expected this result so he sends a big fish (not a whale) which swallows Jonah before he can drown. Obviously God really needs Jonah for this job in Nineveh. Jonah stays in the fish for three days and three nights and then God has the fish deliver him to the place he left. Those of you who are New Testament scholars will find that time span used in another, more tragic, story.

So Jonah sets off reluctantly to fulfill God's mission. And now our unknown story teller brings in another miracle. Jonah's preaching literally had miraculous results. He converted the entire town of 120,000 people and Jahweh decided not to destroy the place.

Jonah was outraged. He had a tantrum like many children who don't get their way. He explained that he was afraid that God would relent from punishing the people and let them live. And thus his hatred would not be fed.

Now we come to the reasoning of the bigot who was Jonah and the many bigots who have followed him. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "bigot" as "one who is obstinately and unreasonably wedded to a particular cause or opinion". I am sure that we have all seen and heard enough bigotry to last a life time. Our history since the Civil War has been rife with bigotry, often in relation to blacks and black culture and that hatred was fed by bigotry of both races. We can also remember the hatred and killing of the Native Americans both in American society and in Hispanic society. As immigration became a source of badly needed labor in the nineteenth century all kinds of bigoted statements started to float around the society. For example the famous signs in Boston and elsewhere saying, "No Irish Need Apply".

These strains of bigotry may have been pushed underground in some areas. But they lie just below the surface of a seemingly orderly nation. Of course it has never really stopped. I know people who live around here who will resort to stereotyping and pre-judging people who do not meet their standards for looks or behavior.

And it can happen in church. As an interim I have moved around to churches where the members were so bigoted they would not ride public transportation for fear of encounters with people who weren't their kind of folks. When the judicatory presented a black man for election as a monitor of churches, in a room of perhaps 200 people the only two persons to vote against

him were from that church. And proud of it. Some of these folks had never been to the Loop for fear of something, who knew what. And no amount of preaching could change their behavior. At least Jonah wanted the violence to be against him.

But there's more to come in this story of Jonah. Hoping that the people of Nineveh would back-slide and be destroyed after all, and not wanting to miss the action Jonah went up on a hill and built a tent or a booth as the story tells it. Jahweh caused a plant to grow over-night to shade him and Jonah was grateful. But when morning came Jahweh caused the plant to be destroyed by a worm. Once more Jonah had a tantrum and wanted to die. He asked God to take his life. And God said to him here as he did before, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And Jonah said, "Yes, angry enough to die." And God said to him, "You are concerned about the bush for which you did not labor and you did not grow. Should I not be concerned about the life of this great city?"

And here we find the second teaching of this little story. Jahweh is trying to teach this obnoxious prophet that anger is not a good response to disappointment. This is something most of us spend a fair amount of time teaching our children, sometimes at home and, hopefully, in the schools and Sunday school. We want them not to be poor losers but gracious in both defeat and victory. It is apparent to any viewer of the Olympics that some folks did not learn this lesson very well. I fear that the urge to win at all costs is taught by some parents at every athletic contest. The urge to win overcomes their sense of good behavior. You parents have all seen it and I trust deplored it. Sometimes we forget that this gracious God is present at games as well as in times of loss and pain.

Jonah is hardly a hero but his predicaments can teach us all and remind us of God's continuing love for us and what we do.

And so our story ends with an affirmation of God's gracious effort to change the Ninevites and Jonah and bring them into the fold of God's love.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Comforter, the Holy One.

Amen