
How Merciful is Your God?

[Click here for the podcast](#)

The Reverend Canon Elizabeth C. Knowlton
January 25, 2009
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

Last Monday at noon, CNN played the entire "I have a Dream Speech" by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It is rarely showed in its entirety, so I made a point of sitting down to watch it with my children. I was moved by his words and I was moved by the throngs of people shown when the camera panned the Mall. As my eight year old son looked at me incredulously when I described segregation, I was reminded that for many of us, what we know of Dr. King, we know from school, or his writings.

The civil rights movement seems far more removed for us, than for those of you who were there. Particularly in Atlanta, these events were local events. We still remember them, or know people who were there in flesh and blood. But, that is changing. An elementary school teacher recently said to me, "You know I am finding that the children I work with are having a hard time keeping MLK and Barack Obama straight."

As we move away from flesh and blood towards textual or even video accounts, we lose something of the fullness of these individuals of history. I remember being rather surprised in seminary to discover that MLK was a preacher. Don't laugh, I did know he was a minister. But in the accounts I learned in school I had heard far more about non-violent civil disobedience than scripture laden sermons. I had not really learned about Martin Luther King as a prophet.

And he was a modern day prophet. But like the lessons I learned in civics class, we usually get a pretty stripped down view of the fullness of the prophets when we encounter them in scripture. They are not flesh and blood, but removed servants of God. Not so with the prophet Jonah. In four short chapters that make up this book of the bible, we get a very human, very flawed view of the prophetic life.

When the lector stood up this morning and said, "A reading from the book of Jonah," I'm willing to bet at least some of you immediately thought of...the whale.

If we were taught the story as children, it went something like this. Jonah was supposed to carry a message of God to the people of Nineveh. This was part of his calling as a prophet. However, unlike some of the other more responsive prophets, he didn't want to go. In fact, he did not just ignore the invitation. He decided to go in the opposite direction, on a boat no less.

God didn't like this, so there was a horrible storm that threatened everyone on the ship. The crew throws him overboard and he gets swallowed up by the whale. After sitting in the prophet's equivalent of a "time out" for three days, Jonah repents and asks God's forgiveness. Jonah is then spit up on the shore. He has survived.

Well this story has all the kind of great imagery that can leave children fascinated for days. How was Jonah able to live in

the belly of the whale? Wouldn't it have been awfully gross in there? Why a whale? Wasn't there some other way that God could get Jonah's attention? Wasn't it mean for the other sailors to throw him overboard?

This story also is often told to children in a fairly innocuous way. We hide the scary parts. We've cleaned up the reality of sitting in a whale's stomach to look far more like Disney's version of Pinocchio. It is not unlike Noah's ark. Think of all of the saccharine images of cute animals. Think of the plastic playsets. Look at enough of them, sing the song about an arky, arky. You might forget all about those people that got wiped out in the flood.

No some children's stories really have a darker undertone. Failing to do God's will and ending up in the belly of a whale makes us just one step away from being fish bait. No wonder we rush to cover up that idea with stick figure Jonah's standing in the whale as if it is the most natural thing in the world.

As children we probably didn't wonder what happened to Jonah next. I suspect however, we would all hope that the post-whale Jonah would be much improved. We would want him after surviving the trauma of his rebellion and ultimate repentance, be a new man. A better prophet. If he was called on again, he'd immediately respond and head in the proper direction.

"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." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord ." (Jonah 3: 1-2)

So today we get the passage that has the rest of the story. God did give Jonah a second chance. Jonah did respond. And he certainly was convincing. As he wandered the city warning the people, even the king came off his throne and sat in the dirt in a gesture of humility. So compelling was their repentance, the scripture actually says,

"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." (Jonah 3:10)

Wow. We can imagine that Jonah must have been thrilled beyond belief. He's gone from being recalcitrant prophet to superstar. He's right up there with Abraham, who also changed God's mind. Not bad. Not bad at all.

This softens the scary whale imagery, because redemption is so clear. Jonah got a chance to try again, with completely different results. Isn't that what we so often want and need? Another chance. An opportunity to respond better, to be more faithful. We know we can't always get it right the first time, but scripture is filled with second chances.

It would be so nice to stay here. And, to go on to read the next verse of the Book of Jonah. I could even hide behind the lectionary. We could leave Jonah as this wonderful icon of redemption. But to do so would be to continue the caricature. We might as well be back in the belly of the whale. So, God has changed God's mind and spared the people of Nineveh. So what did our superstar prophet say?

"But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "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." Jonah 4:1-2

Huh? The whole reason he fled in the first place was he was afraid God was going to be too gracious? He only wanted to give the message of impending doom if was going to come to pass? Did he assume the Ninevites were beyond salvation?

How terrible. We all want God's mercy, don't we? Yes, at least intellectually. We desire God's mercy and we want it available to all.

But God has a funny way of pushing us into Nineveh. We are confronted with those who seem impossible to love and beyond any genuine repentance. We are witness to genuine evil in the world. We are called to be a prophetic voice for God's anger and rage at the destruction of God's creation. We see unnecessary suffering, poverty, war, and destruction of the environment. We sense a human culpability we cannot quite put our finger on. But we also need to be cautious. Otherwise our calls for justice can become one-sided and we can forget about repentance and reconciliation.

What if those who seem the furthest from God's ways really repent? What if they really want a new way of life? Are we able to shift gears like God? Or are we dissatisfied that they didn't get what was coming to them. Like Jonah, we turn inward rather than take the risk of confronting our own pride and idolatry. We have decided we'd rather be in control than be under the safety of God's grace and mercy.

We find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of needing to learn the message of God's mercy over and over again. We need not only second chances; we need thirds, fourths, and beyond. We still need God. And we need a grace that is far more expansive than what we can muster on our own. The truth is, if God can forgive those we consider beyond God's favor, this is good news for us. If we can let go of the feelings of unfairness, we might discover those darkest places in ourselves are also subject to that same mercy.

We just need to be willing to turn---to turn towards this God of love and mercy. We may need more than one chance to get it right. But luckily, God is far more willing to accept our repentance than we are even to offer it. I wish I knew the rest of the story of Jonah. When God confronts him with his own lack of mercy, did he turn? I hope he did. And I hope we do as well.

Amen

Comments? Contact Beth Knowlton at: BKnowlton@stphilipscathedral.org