

Mercy's Disappointment
Reading from the Old Testament: Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Reading from the New Testament: Mark 1:14-15

The constraints of formal worship force an illusion upon us today. To read the Old Testament lesson as presented here, makes it sound as though what we have in Jonah is the most efficient and effective prophet in the Bible. It's like trusting Steph Curry to make a free throw. *Done. Hey Jonah, go straighten out those heathens in Nineveh. Done.* He completes a three-day job in one day. Before his suitcase even makes it to baggage claim, he's walking through security for his flight back home. All of Nineveh, from the king to the milking cows down in the dairy barn are refreshingly energized by the caffeine of intentional repentance. Today's excerpt makes Jonah sound like the old Fed Ex commercial, *When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight.*

Who is this guy? Well, it turns out that if you read the whole story, Jonah's stock price starts dropping fast. Neither efficient, effective, nor the person you'd choose as partner, Jonah reveals a lot about the dogged mercy of God in working with our combustible emotions and our fitful intentions. Jonah is no first-round draft choice,

but God makes do with him no less than God makes do with us to further God's purposes.

Have you ever had a task, responsibility, project, assignment, meeting, conversation that you dreaded; that you tried to get out of, or pawn off on someone else, but failed; a task that you approached with a bad attitude and an ever-darkening mood; an *I'd rather take a beating* kind of meeting; a task so onerous and odiferous to you that you were tempted (*just tempted?*) to sabotage just so they wouldn't ask you next time? Well, let me introduce you to Jonah. The book of Jonah is more sit-com than prophecy, more parable or fable than history. Jonah would be part Homer Simpson, part Ray Romano, part George Costanza, part Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz. In other words, Jonah was a mess.

In a pre-exilic episode of ESPN's *You had one job*, the story begins, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' Now, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, on the east bank of the Tigris River, across the river from Mosul. Thus, to begin with, the Assyrians, and consequently, the Ninevites did not share the faith of Israel, so I wouldn't expect they'd

take too kindly to being on the receiving end of a cussing out from Israel's God. It is therefore understandable that Jonah might have misgivings about his assignment, and since we don't have access to Jonah's resume, we don't know the level of his experience and training in the art of trash-talking or fire and brimstone preaching. In any case, Jonah is not wanting anything to do with his heaven assigned role. In fact, rather than showing up for work, Jonah buys his own ticket to get on a ship headed in the opposite direction. Not a good move. Heaven is not the corporate headquarters you want to ignore.

Apparently, Jonah missed the class in prophet school where they memorized Psalm 139 - "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ... If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me." Unfortunately, for Jonah, the Lord's hand is substituted by the hands of a panicked, storm-tossed ship's crew launching him overboard without so much as a refund; whereupon Jonah catches a three-day ride in a flounder taxi before being unceremoniously spit out on the beach.

It is here, smelling like the garbage disposal you forgot to empty, that Jonah hears a voice with a familiar ring to it. *Ahem, as I was*

saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

Our text says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Across the land, pulpits are populated with pastors who did not, or more accurately, did not want to hear the voice of the Lord until at least the second time. I have colleagues who were lawyers, teachers, sailors, real-estate agents, physicians, bartenders, carnies, and coaches, their lives filled, yet unfulfilled until they stopped chasing dream fulfillment and started following the call of God. And though I went straight from university to seminary, I spent most of my time and energy in college pulling on doors that would not open and chasing opportunities for which I already knew I was not suited.

I may not have smelled like a dead fish, but I was sure sweating like a pig when I finally started listening for what the Lord might ask me to pursue. I have surely shared with you before that the belly of the fish for me was the School of Business at ol' Mizzou. By the start of my third year there I was miserable, depressed, taking classes in which I had zero interest and even less ability.

It was the right at the dawn of the age of the desktop computer, and my Cobol professor set one of these futuristic technological wonders up in the basement of Middlebush Hall with the witty notion of reporting our final grades by inviting us one at a time to sit at the desk computer, type in our student number, and watch as the screen slowly and methodically lit up with these tiny green letters, each representing our grade, joining together to form one giant letter, indicating the same, and filling the whole screen. So, I apprehensively punched in my six-digit number, and gradually, letter by letter, the grade emerged, ddddddd-D.

That, my friends, is what you call a sign. I had known I didn't want to pursue the path I was pursuing, just as sure as I knew it wasn't a path for which I was suited. Yet, like Jonah, I hadn't been willing to risk listening to what the God I claimed to follow might have in mind for me. For me, it was ministry, but it could have been park ranger or English teacher. Point is, I just hadn't risked asking what God would have me to do.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time..." Our Lord is not just a God of second chances, but also a God of persistence and

purpose and patience. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Seldom does the story of life form a straight road, but rather a journey with hills, valleys, blind curves, wrong turns, accidents, breakdowns, dead ends, a couple of tow trucks, and now and then, open highway. At every turn, God is there to direct, redirect, repair, dust off, tune-up, and refuel. And even though we very often speed by, unaware or indifferent to God's presence, when the next curve looms or when the tire goes flat, God will be there, too.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Augustine, whose 4th-Century theological reflections were critical to the formation of our understanding of God's grace, chased all sorts of morally questionable diversions before finally hewing to the call of the Lord. As a kid he stole fruit, not because he was hungry, but because of the thrill of doing what was taboo. The pursuit of the forbidden continued as he went to school and lustfully pursued life, famously praying at one time, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."

It would be years before his conversion and a decidedly different focus in his prayer life. He later prayed, "Belatedly I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, belatedly I loved thee. For see, thou wast

within and I was without, and I sought thee out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things thou hast made. Thou wast with me, but I was not with thee."

"Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things thou hast made. Thou wast with me, but I was not with thee." What an eloquent description of the lives we are so prone to lead. Heedlessly indifferent to that one voice who knows where we most need to go. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, and it would come to him, as it comes to us, a third time, a fourth, and a fifth, never giving up, even as we have given up on the voice. Karl Barth said, "When we are at our wits' end for an answer, then the Holy Spirit can give us an answer. But how can He give us an answer when we are still well supplied with all sorts of answers of our own?" The Psalmist confesses, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways."

Finally understanding this, Augustine confessed, " "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time..." This time Jonah relented, and yet, did not yield. Oh, he'd do the job, but not even half-heartedly. He'd proclaim God's wrath, but neither share nor understand God's mercy. By the grace of God alone, Jonah's poor effort yielded truly miraculous results. The Ninevites repented and God relented, yet Jonah stewed and sulked. Can you hear the bitterness in Jonah's voice? "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." To which the Lord basically asks, "...and that's a bad thing?"

Jonah still doesn't get it! Remember, this is the same guy who was in the belly of the fish praying for mercy, reciting the learned hymns of his people, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice." The one who prayed for and received God's mercy, remains blind to the breadth and depth of that same mercy. The book ends with Jonah as frustrated and self-involved as he was at the beginning. Like so many religious insiders, good church-going people, Jonah is so irked at the thought of an outsider getting the mercy that he himself had received but had

certainly done nothing to deserve. Isn't this, far too often, the way it is with us? Granted God's mercy, we go into the world with a decidedly Jonah-esque attitude: "Mercy? Yeah, I've got it. Didn't really need it. Seldom think about it. But you can't have it because I don't think you deserve it. So, if you do get it, God must have made a mistake. Bad God!"

The author of Jonah has a perfectly Shakespearean grasp of comedy. The insider acts like the outsider, while the outsider acts like the insider should act, with the result that the outsider values what he has never had before, while the insider ignores the blessing he has always possessed. Meanwhile, the perceptive reader (*Could that be us?*), appreciates the humor because we can see ourselves clearly in the characters, laugh at our foolishness as revealed in Jonah, and give thanks for the forbearance and mercy of God.

You see, in spite of Jonah's clueless histrionics, in the end, God is still with him in the same way God remains with us, even in spite of us. For the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And guess what, Jonah? That's a good thing. Amen.