

January 22, 2012

Jonah's Tale

Make yourself comfortable; sit anywhere you please. I'll sit right here. So you've come to see me at the *Rest of the Story Retirement Center*. Well, that's nice. Yes, you can call me *Jonah*. My daddy gave me that name; his name was Amittai. He thought Jonah might be an easier name to live with. Of course he didn't know I was going to live so long... what? Oh, maybe 2,500 years, I'm not so good with dates anymore. What was it you wanted me to tell you about? Oh yes, that was the second time God spoke to me.

The first time, I ran away. I recall God saying, "*Jonah, go east to Nineveh and speak the word of the Lord against them.*" So I hopped a ship and headed west, that would be the opposite direction, to get as far away as I could from that city. Going to Nineveh as a prophet of God was not what I wanted to do with my life. Not at all. But it's hard to run away from God (have you noticed that?), to get to where God isn't.

A storm hit that ship on the Mediterranean; God was in the storm. The ship's crew figured out that I was the reason for the storm, because I told them. So they chucked me overboard into the sea, and sure enough the storm grew calm. I ought to have drowned, which also would have gotten me out of going to Nineveh. But God had a big fish swallow me, and that doesn't sound so good, but was the Lord's way of saving me. After 3 days and 3 nights -- all the time I was praying, singing and hollering for God to get me out of here -- the Lord had the big fish vomit me out onto dry land. I was a whale of a mess; it takes awhile to get presentable after all that.

Do you get the idea that God and I had different agendas and were both awfully determined to get our own way? You see, my favorite book is Moby Dick, where the preacher talks about me and says my problem was "willful disobedience" and points out that "if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves." That's right, and I wanted to obey myself -- to my own self be true -- which is why I ran from God.

You see, I was worried. What worried me about doing God's bidding was that I might be successful! Somebody in that wicked city might listen and turn to God, and God would let them escape destruction... and I want them all punished, destroyed, annihilated. The problem with being a prophet is: you may not like the results! Responding to God's call and doing God's will sounds fine except for what comes with it, like forgiveness. You heard about the disciples being called by Jesus and leaving everything behind. I didn't want to follow God and leave behind my opinions and antagonism and vengeance. Those Assyrians in Nineveh were violent people who should get a dose of their own medicine. I was worried they would get off.

Well, the word of the Lord came a **second** time to me: "*Get up, go to Nineveh... proclaim to it the message that I tell you.*" So I went. What else could I do? God is very persistent. God has a way of putting back in front of you those tasks you thought you had avoided. I went. But I wasn't very happy about it. Nineveh was a big city, and I just walked around saying, "*In forty days... Nineveh... overthrown.*" Obviously my heart wasn't in it. It was the worst sermon ever, and shortest. Nothing about God or morality; it sounded more like a geologist report. It was ridiculous, like one of you walking down the street in New York saying, "You are all in trouble."

Lo and behold, the whole city just ups and repents! You never saw anything like it. The people announced a fast -- the whole city fasted and dressed in old sacks, even the king who sat in ashes to show how sorry he was. The king ordered the animals to fast also and covered them with sackcloth as well. God liked it. God liked it a lot. God decided not to wipe them out.

I knew it. I told you this was a mistake. I was afraid God's mercy would get involved. Everywhere, mercy: God's mercy turned me around and brought me there. God's mercy opened their hearts and changed them. God's mercy offered them a new life and future.

After that, God and I had a **third** conversation. I wasn't in the mood. I was infuriated and disgusted. I spit out an angry prayer: "O God, you and your mercy! Why didn't you listen to me? If those people get in on your love and mercy, then I want out. I'm ready to die." After giving God a piece of my mind, I went outside the city and sat down. I was depressed. I sat there and sulked and stewed. I remember it was hot as stew with the sun blazing down.

God made a bush shoot up and cover me with shade, which I thought was God trying to make up with me. I appreciated it. But apparently it was God trying to teach me a lesson, because a worm came and sucked the juice out of the plant so that it wilted. When I complained and asked what God had against that bush, God said to me, “*You pity the bush, which I caused to grow. Should I not also have pity on the people and animals of Nineveh to whom I also gave life?*”
I already gave my opinion on that -- no!

People just don't know enough about God's mercy. It is wild and unfettered and you just cannot control it. You carry around the Good News of God's Son, and you don't know what it is you are holding. The mercy of God says “***Forgive***” to your guilt, and you are forgiven. Really! God in mercy says, “***Whole***” to your brokenness, and you are made whole... says “***Peace***” to your anxiety, and you are given peace... says “***Justice***” to the nations, and they are humbled... says “***Welcome***” to your alienation and you are made at home with God. That is God's mercy: powerful, wild, bursting at the seams (you try to tuck it in at the corners, but it is bursting at the seams!)... and I thought it was way too generous.

Then what happened?? The story just stops with God and me at odds -- a standoff. The question just hangs there, “*Should I not be concerned about Nineveh...?*” It still hangs there. You want an ending? I'll tell you the ending, this is how it ends: you get to sit in the chair and ***see what you do with God's mercy***. No, please, sit. The rest of the story is yours to finish. I'm going to dinner, as soon as I find my teeth.

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