

# A funny thing, faith

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, January 22, 2012, The Third Sunday After the Epiphany.  
Based on Jonah 3:1-5,10 and Mark 1:14-20.*

A funny thing happened on the way to this final sermon. Jonah popped up. No, not our son Jonah, who is funny and charming and strong, and who did in fact pop in to be with Jane and Adam to help me say farewell. No, I mean the book of the prophet Jonah, which is maybe the funniest book in the Bible.

*That* Jonah pops up on our menu of readings only once every three years. Too bad, but great for today.

For Jonah's story gets at the central dilemmas of our lives, and in a riot of storytelling gives us hope that we'll make it after all. And we will.

Most people think of Jonah in the whale, which is not our lesson today but a good place to start. In the story, Jonah is called to deliver a message of judgment to Nineveh, the capital city of the dreaded Assyrian Empire.

If you like Hebrew narrative—and you should—you'll love that we learn what's going on inside Jonah by what he does.

He takes a boat going to the other side of the world, away from Nineveh and "away from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). We're to assume that he's simply acting sensibly, fleeing a prophetic call that would result in his certain death.

Jonah's behavior and speech on the boat bound for Tarshish reveals his character when he tells the sailors, who are panicked by the unnaturally fierce storm that he is fleeing "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (1:9-10).

And we see that it's God who has provoked this reaction in Jonah, not his fear of the Assyrians. Jonah is then thrown overboard at his own request and ends up in the belly of a big fish, where he remains for three days and nights.

Inside the fish, he gets real religious, spontaneously composing a psalm, in perfect meter, with measured verses, in passionate language: "Lord, how shall I look again upon your holy temple? . . . As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you." He puts an Amen to it with, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

At this, the fish *throws up*. You would too if you had to listen to that kind of phony religious prattle.

The actual reading this morning finds Jonah back on dry land and confronted a second time: *Get up, go to Nineveh and tell them what's what*. He goes.

He walks barely a third of the way into the city and shouts his warning, remarkable in its brevity. And the people of Nineveh—*corrupt, powerful, fearsome Nineveh*—respond with immediate and total contrition, *the* most successful (and least credible) mass conversion in the Bible. The story says: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." (3.10) Exactly what Jonah feared would happen.

Two huge points this ancient story makes:

- First: Whatever it is you say you believe, make it real and honest, because if you don't, God will throw up at the sound of it.
- Second: God is bigger and deeper, more contrary and more mysterious than we are usually able to believe, much less to say.

Jonah knew that, too.

"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." (4:2). Here Jonah is quoting a high description of God's character, putting together key passages from Exodus 34.6, Numbers 14.18, Psalms 103.8 and 145.8, and Joel 2.13. He may quote this stuff, but you get the clear sense that he wishes it weren't so. He could get out of this call if it weren't for God's sweeping generosity.

Now that's not the only picture we get of God in the Bible. Nor the picture we often get in public use of the Bible. Present political campaigns are filled with religious rhetoric of a different-tempered God. Jonah and many, many people would like to hang on to an unseemly but often convenient and satisfying God who smites, and exacts revenge and punishment, and who is quick to judge.

This broad satire is late in the composition of the Bible and reminds us that revelation is a process— a daringly progressive process.

If you're willing to read the whole thing and to stand back and take a look, you see that while plenty of things are still painful and disappointing about that world *and* the world we live in, the trend is redemptive. Things really are getting better. Stephen Pinker, the Harvard scholar, has a convincing book out now claiming this is the least violent period in human history.

That's not the view of those—and here I have to say this includes politicians on the stump and any who love to cherry pick their verses to bolster their points—who still think the world is about to end and our urgent task is to save ourselves alone.

I believe God wants more Jonahs—honest, reluctant souls who, when kicked often enough, maybe even thrown up occasionally, will answer the call to stand up and say that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

A funny thing, faith. The Jonah story, so masterfully and humorously told, is the perfect illustration of how hard that is to do, and to my mind, a reasonable argument for why the church is necessary. You've been with me a long time and knew I'd come around to this point.

It takes a church to teach and nurture and bolster most of us to dare to announce the love, and not the judgment, of God. And it takes the staying power, balance and ballast a church community can find over time to help us love —and love without ending up like Jonah, who actually and honestly resented the love God had given the secular, pagan city.

A church is typically two things. It's a *place*, and you know how weary it makes me to hear that the church is merely spiritual, that the material and institutional forms don't matter. The world is material, and without a few piles of stones like this one, the Ninevites of our time and place might not see the spirit in action. I'm proud that when we boiled down St. Bart's mission to something that would fit on an envelope, a web logo or a business card, we said it straight: *Everybody needs a place*.

The other thing about a church: it's the intangible *quality of spirit* that lives when you get entangled with the unique spirit of Jesus. As I've said so often, once I got into the Jesus story it wouldn't let me go. That's the unique spirit of Jesus the early church wrote down: “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The meaning of the cross on which Jesus died has been debated to sometimes extreme and absurd lengths, to the point, I think, where God must want to throw up.

I hope you got that I'm announcing a new standard of faith today. Work hard on it so that it doesn't make God throw up. To me, the cross, simply and radically, is the total integrity of Jesus—the integrated and world-changing integrity of a person who told the truth and lived the truth.

Jesus was this planet's unique example of a life that can transform lives. His community remembered the striking way he spoke of God's generosity, the same “merciful God, abounding in steadfast love” we heard of from Jonah; and, God knows, a claim still true for us in 2012. He once put it this way for his followers:

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:36-38)

And speaking of measures, if you want to measure how far you need to travel on the spiritual journey, ask yourself this: What do I need to do to believe that, and to say it and mean it so that God will not throw up when hearing it?

Jonah, and Jesus, and you and I: same journey. Same challenge. It's what we've been doing together, and what you'll keep on doing.

Wherever I am, I'll be doing it, cheering you on, thinking of you, praying for you and above all thankful forever for each of you. And forever loving you. That's it.

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