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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
“Prophetic Listening”
January 22, 2012
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 <<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=194337649>>

Our scripture passage for this morning reads like an entry on Jonah’s resume. Short and to the point, these verses summarize Jonah’s success as a prophet. They tell of how Jonah, by uttering just one sentence as he walked across a third of the city of Nineveh, turned the whole town to God. The Ninevites hear God’s word in Jonah’s brief proclamation, and as a city, readily accept Israel’s God and repent of their sin. From king to cattle, the whole of Nineveh dons sackcloth and ashes and turns from their wicked ways. And God is so impressed that God does not destroy the city as God had promised. Nineveh is saved with just a few words. What other prophet can boast of such success? Who else could say the same?

Yet the first verse of our reading give us a clue that we are missing something. In Verse 1, our passage begins by saying: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah for a second time.” We are walking into the middle of the conversation. We don’t yet have the whole story.

Fortunately, many of us know the story of Jonah from our childhoods. From Vacation Bible School programs to *Veggie Tale* DVDs we have heard of the prophet who ends up in the belly of a whale, living for three days until the whale spits him out and onto dry land. But how did Jonah end up there? What is the back story?

We read in this tiny book that the first time the word of the Lord came to Jonah, God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh. But if this initial account were to appear on Jonah’s resume, he surely would NOT have gotten the job. Upon hearing the word of God, Jonah ran. He ran in the opposite direction of Nineveh, heading for Tarshish, hopping a boat in Joppa. When God sent a storm to get Jonah’s attention, Jonah insisted that the ship hands throw him in the water, knowing that God had sent the storm for him. Only after God sent the whale to save him, did Jonah accept that there was no getting out of this call. God wanted him to proclaim this word, and God wasn’t going to give up until Jonah did.

The surprising thing about Jonah is that after he proclaimed God’s word, after he turned the hearts and minds of a city, after he saw that these efforts bore great fruit and a city was spared: Jonah sulks. He is disappointed that God changed God’s mind and didn’t offer the promised wrath to the Ninevites. He scorns God, crying out: “I KNEW you’d do this! I knew that you are a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love. Now kill me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” So when the word of God comes to Jonah a third time, God reminds Jonah that salvation is God’s to give; grace is God’s prerogative.

It is easy to poke fun at Jonah who appears to be a bit melodramatic, who sulks in the face of God's goodness and who runs from his call. Although he's not the first prophet to resist his initial call, he is the only one we read of who actually tries to run. But the reality was that Jonah's call was complex. His call from God was one that evoked a genuine internal conflict within him. His call was not that of Moses, to free his own people from captivity; nor was it the call of Jeremiah, to prophesy to the Israelites to hang in there in the midst of exile. While both of these prophets, like all the others, had a tough job to do: Jonah was asked to prophesy to the enemy.

Nineveh, the site of modern day Iraq, was the capital of Assyria, the nation that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, and who held control over the Southern kingdom for nearly 100 years. The Ninevites were a wicked people, but they were also those upon whom Israel might wish destruction and judgment. From Jonah's perspective, they were worthy of God's wrath. And so for Jonah, the Ninevites' salvation was not justice. It was a slap in Jonah's face. Why should he, an obedient Jew, go into enemy territory and prophesy? Why should he be happy when the Ninevites repent? Why should the Ninevites receive God's grace after all they've done?

Jonah is a reluctant prophet because a part of him just does not want to see Nineveh change. If they change, if God has mercy upon them, his paradigm for understanding God and understanding himself is shaken up. He has been a part of the people who God has favored through difficulty, and now God's favor goes beyond his own doorstep. It threatens his own sense of security to know that God might just forgive his oppressor. He does not want their repentance. He wants to keep things as they are, because in that equation God is his, and his alone.

Jonah is an everyday, average person. He is the big brother who can't believe that his parents can love the newborn baby they've brought home and still love him just the same. He is the politician who is wary of policies that ensure that everyone eats, has shelter and healthcare because of how that might disrupt his own tax payout. He is the father afraid to accept his child's same-sex spouse because he is afraid that the institution of his own marriage will be threatened. He is the liberal who is afraid to welcome his conservative neighbor because he is afraid that his ideals will get lost in the friendship. He is the progressive Presbyterian who hopes that evangelical churches will leave the denomination over ordination standards so that the discussion will be less difficult. He is the activist who forgets that there are poor people being victimized by both sides of the shale drilling disputes. He is the person among us who is afraid to believe that God might just have enough love to go around. He is us.

We all have a little bit of Jonah in us. We want to know that the world, and especially God, is on our side. We fear the possibility of a grace so big that it expands to welcome our enemy, a mercy so wide that we might be forced to forgive those we have easily and rightfully hated. And a call to work on the "enemy's" salvation when we have our own messy lives to deal with is outright confounding.

In many ways, God's initiative toward Nineveh is God's initiative toward Jonah. By calling him to this impossible task—persistently and relentlessly—it is as if God is trying to demonstrate the wideness of God's mercy and grace. God does so by inviting Jonah to participate in this ministry firsthand, to know God's heart and to be a partner in God's ministry.

But Jonah just doesn't see it. Although he answers the call, and sets about the business of doing the job, Jonah doesn't hear God. Jonah just doesn't seem to get it! The word of God did not penetrate his hardened heart. He was not a changed man after his encounter with God and his ministry as a prophet. Jonah cannot see that God's grace to Nineveh is a manifestation of God's grace to him. After all, how much better would life be if one's enemy now turned toward your God! Jonah can't see this possibility, nor can he appreciate the continual mercies God extends to him, over and over again.

While we might desire ourselves to live as prophets of God's word evoking transformation and justice in the world, we are reminded by Jonah's story that God's people are first called to be **prophetic listeners**. We are reminded that we ourselves cannot be changed unless we listen to God's call as if our life and the lives of others depended on it. We have to listen with open hearts so that we can hear God's truth and be transformed, even when that truth is difficult, challenging, unexpected, or provocative.

We have to listen in a way that orients our hearts and our lives toward God; we have to repent, or turn toward God. We have to listen in a way that motivates us to excise from our lives those habits and attitudes that block us from responding to God's will. We have to listen in a way that allows God's love to truly penetrate our being so that we don't just hear the good news, but so that we know it with every fiber of our being. We need to listen in a way that reminds us of our status in life, that God is in fact God and we are God's children, the sheep of God's hand. We need to be led by God's Spirit for only God knows where we are going.

Thomas Merton writes of our need to break down our own self-will, which he calls "that interior resistance and coldness of heart."^[1] This state of heart, he says, "pushes others out of our life in order to enjoy values that are too small to be shared with more than a few, or even anyone at all. (This) self-will is inseparable from fear, anxiety, and spiritual slavery."^[2]

The first step toward this transformation is to listen, prophetically: listening like we mean it, like we want to hear God's word for us, like we want to be conformed to God's will and transformed for the sake of God, of others and for the sake of living as our fullest selves.

So how do we do this? How do we listen?

Ester de Waal says:

(One must listen with the) whole person, of body as well as intellect, and it requires love as well as cerebral assent. ... Having heard the word, through whatever channel it may have come, even as unacceptably as a pain in my back, I stop and take it seriously and then do something about it. To listen attentively to what few hear is more than giving it passing aural attention. It means in the first instance that we have to listen whether we like it or not, whether we hear what we want or something that is actually disagreeable or threatening. If we begin to pick and choose we are in fact turning a deaf ear to the many unexpected and perhaps unacceptable ways in which God is trying to reach us...to listen closely, with every fiber of our being, at every moment of the day, is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking.^[3]

Grace is a hard law to live under. It is hard for us to accept for ourselves let alone see it dished out so freely by a relentlessly loving God.

But Jonah reminds us that God's gracious love, however difficult to accept, is the law for which we strive as disciples.

I submit to you, that when the writer wrote the last word in the book of Jonah, God was not done with Jonah yet. I submit to you, that the God whose word came to Jonah a first, second and third time will continue to come to Jonah again until the word takes a hold of his heart and his faith is more than divine Simon Says game.

And I submit to you that God is not done with us yet, either. The God who called Jonah is the same God who called the disciples by the lakeshore and is the same God who graciously and persistently calls to us so that we might live according to God's purpose, be who God has created us to be, and so we might partner with God in God's gracious life-giving ministry here in this world, reaching into the next.

Listen for it. God is calling you.

[1] Merton, Thomas. The Silent Life. 41.

[2] Ibid 42.

[3] De Waal, Esther. Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict. P 42-43