

*A Major Word from A Minor Prophet*

“The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second time*.”

Isn't the whole story wrapped up in that line?

If you know the story of Jonah, you know about the whale, but the whale gets nothing more than a cameo, so let's get the fish out of the way: God commands, Jonah runs, storm follows, crew panics, man overboard. Fish eats, Jonah prays, God speaks, Fish spews.

Which brings us to an unknown shore on the Mediterranean and a persistent call from God that won't go away. “The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.”

Like all the prophets, Jonah received a call from God. He was asked to go and preach the Lord's admonition to the people of Nineveh.

A word is in order about the Ninevites. Ninevites are Assyrians. (Imagine a little 'hiss' on the S's.)

No self-respecting post-exilic Jew would have *anything* to do with an Assyrian.

That is why, from a certain point of view, what Jonah does next is perfectly reasonable:

he jumps on the next boat headed to Tarshish.

Back when we were waiting anxiously to get our vaccines, I preached an entire sermon online to you on the well-worn path to Tarshish, and I want to recap it by asking one question: Have you never thought that the boat to Tarshish looked awfully appealing?

Consider it:

The world is awash in manufactured falsehoods. But it is often easier to go along than to call a lie a lie. Tarshish, anyone?

The effects of climate change are increasingly self-evident, but addressing it will require substantial change for all of us. Tarshish, perhaps?

Unconscious bias isn't a new concept, and it takes real work to confront what it does both to institutions and individuals. I hear Tarshish is lovely this time of year.

Every one of us has gone Tarshish.

Perhaps that's why Jonah speaks to us: We have *all* booked passage on that boat one time or another!

*The Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time.*

Jonah proceeds into Nineveh and delivers his eight-word sermon: Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!

This is where the story of Jonah takes on a comical tone. He finishes his sermonette, goes out into the desert and points his lawn chair at the city to watch the destruction.

To his surprise, the people of Nineveh *hear* his sermon. The text says, the people *believe* God, and repent fasting in sackcloth and ashes.

In the culture of the ancient near east, favor was indicated by dressing well and putting lotion on your hands and combing your hair and generally making yourself look respectable. Repentance, on the other hand, required that acknowledgement of disfavor be expressed equally robustly to show that something was profoundly *not right*.

The king decreed that everyone from the royal court on down would fast, neither eating or drinking, and show their repentance, visibly, with sackcloth and ashes, right down to the animals.

A friend of mine, a Hebrew Bible scholar, says this story becomes a comedy here, because they are essentially saying, "I've been really, really bad, so I'm going to make the dog look stupid."

But more deeply, this repentance in sackcloth and ashes is *total*, and the cry to the Lord is offered not as bargaining, but rather in *hope*.

"Who knows," says the king, "God may relent and change his mind; he may relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

If we stop reading Jonah here (as the lectionary does), we risk drawing a perverse picture of God. We see a god who coerces and manipulates and is subject to whims.

But not if we keep reading.

The *whole* story shows a very different picture of God, one who gives second chances.

Nonetheless, despite having received a second chance himself, the Lord's mercy for Nineveh was displeasing to Jonah.

Seeing the show has been canceled, Jonah begins to *sulk*, and it is in *this* moment that our minor prophet speaks a major word.

Displeased that he has been used to this end, Jonah prays to God and this is what he says, "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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live."

In other words, "I *knew* you would do this! I *knew* this is who you are!"

That's a major word: slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love...

That is who God is.

Nonetheless, Jonah holds out hope, to the end, that Nineveh will get what it has coming. But, while Jonah is sitting in the desert sulking, waiting for something to happen to Nineveh, God appoints a shrub to grow up over Jonah's head to provide him with shade, and the story tells us that Jonah was glad of the shrub.

Who wouldn't want some shade in the desert?

The next day God appoints a worm to attack the root of the plant so that it will die.

Then the story tells us, God prepared 'a sultry east wind' and the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and finally Jonah asks again that he might die.

God replies again, 'Is it right that you should be angry?'

Jonah answers with equal measures of absurdity, anger and honesty, 'Yes, angry enough to die!' (Back of palm pressed to forehead.)

All told, Jonah lobs 39 words of complaint at the Lord, and the Lord gives him back 39 words of answer: 'You're worried about a plant. You didn't grow it, it grew overnight, and died in the same time. And you think I shouldn't be worried about Nineveh, "In which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second* time.

The God of second chances cares about those who don't know their right from their left, and the animals too. It's enough to give credence to the old adage the Lord protects fools and children.

And this God who calls us is relentless.

The relentless God is always looking for redemption, for another, better chapter.

That is why God sends the prophet!

It was certainly not Jonah's idea to go to Nineveh, indeed he resists it heartily because he knows the nature of God.

*God sends the prophet* because there is a word the Ninevites need to hear and God appoints the prophet to preach it.

At every turn, it is *God* who acts: *God* calls the prophet, *God* sends the storm, *God* commands the fish, *God* has mercy, *God* appoints the plant and the worm and the wind, and it is *God* who answers.

Further, God's categories of judgement and mercy defy Jonah's understanding.

Jonah *thinks* he knows who God is, and what God is about, so he runs away.

But the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.

And the text doesn't say so, but when Jonah is out in the desert pouting, it might as well read, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a *third* time.

The call of God is irresistible, but by the time Mark's Gospel talks about calling, it looks a little different from Jonah's version.

Jesus walks along the shore of the sea of Galilee, and encountering fisherman at work, he calls them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

They get up and follow him. Walking a little further, he sees James and John, Zebedee's sons, and he calls them too.

They leave their boat, and their father, and their hired help, and *they* follow him.

It is not their idea: It is Jesus who calls.

If we read the rest of Mark, we encounter again a God who loves people who don't know their right hand from their left.

If we keep reading, we encounter a God who sends a bunch of Jews into the midst of the Gentiles with a word we all need to hear.

If read the *whole* story, we'll see again that it is Jesus who acts: It is *Jesus* who calls, it is *Jesus* who sends, it is *Jesus* who heals – it is even *Jesus* who when the disciples, recalcitrant like Jonah, have their own ideas about who God is and what God should do, stops his work and patiently teaches them who God is.

Because when we see the ways God calls in the story of Jonah, and the stories of Jesus calling the disciples, we see an *irresistible* call.

It is a call that goes on and on, right down to us.

I will readily grant that the reality of God calling us can be quite intimidating. If we are honest, we may feel poorly equipped to communicate ourselves the width and depth and nature of God's grace and mercy.

From time to time, if we are honest, we may find ourselves feeling like Jonah, miffed and miserable saying, "I knew you were going to do this!"

Living into God's call in our lives requires a great deal of us, personally.

Yet, as personal as calling feels, it is not about *us*.

It is so easy to fall into thinking that church is primarily about us.

Sometimes churches do this by getting caught up in *numbers* game. Sure, we're a growing congregation, but this is generally only appealing when we think the numbers look good.

Churches can also be tempted to play a *morality* game. While I think we are all wonderful people, this is generally only appealing when our consideration of morality makes us look good.

Likewise, we could feed into a success narrative, as though the calling of God is about us and our efforts. This is generally only appealing when we look at what we are doing and it lines up favorably with however we have defined success.

The problem with all of these temptations is that they make something that is fundamentally about *God* about *us* instead.

No, the call God gives us is to follow the one who shows us a “gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

Jonah got that part right.

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time; that one line makes this a different kind of fish story, the kind where God gives second chances, and third, and fourth.*

It is the story of a God who acts, again and again.

This is a story about a God who calls us to follow.

So, maybe we can skip the boat to Tarshish next time, and go on to Nineveh knowing that it isn't our responsibility to get all the predictions right.

We can leave the boat lying on the side of the sea because, when the day's work is done, it isn't about whether we got all of our nets mended, or apparently even if we knew where we were going when we left.

When the day's work is done, it is about whether or not we will follow the God who calls, and go where God sends us.

*As many times as it takes.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.