

Pastor Jon's Sermon from January 21, 2024 based on the book of Jonah

“God Never Gives Up on Anyone”

Today we are going back to Sunday School and the story of Jonah and the whale (or big fish) as the NRSV translates it.

The book of Jonah is a story about God calling ordinary humans to be messengers of God... in this case for the prophet Jonah to go to the Ninevites to and call them to change their evil ways. But Jonah wanted none of it.

Jonah, is considered a parable or satire, dealing with the problem of a gracious acceptance for one's own people... while resenting similar treatment for others who aren't like you. Whether you believe it literally or not, Jonah is filled with a truth we need to hear today, especially in a presidential year. It can address the toxic “us versus them” culture that has permeated our world these days.

Jonah, whose name means “dove” is a Jewish prophet called by God to go at once eastward to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come before God.

But Jonah the “dove” took flight and went westward on a ship to Tarshish to get away from the presence of the Lord. But while on board, the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea and a storm that was swamping the boat. The sailors found out that Jonah was fleeing God's call and was causing the storm. So, they threw him overboard and the storm stopped. The Lord then provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Early Christian artists often had Jonah and Jesus in the same painting because of the three days in a tomb or tomblike structure.

While in the belly of the fish, Jonah sang a psalm of thanksgiving to God that he was saved. Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on dry land. But God wasn't finished with Jonah yet.

God called Jonah a second time, and this time he went to Ninevah. His message was “Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!” The people of Ninevah actually believed Jonah; proclaimed a fast, and everyone great and small, put on sackcloth. Jonah’s message even got to the king and he declared a fast and a call to repentance... to turn from their evil ways and the violence. When God saw the people’s repentance... God changed God’s mind about the destruction God would visit upon them and did not do it. God offers grace here to humans who repent and change their ways. We receive this today in our confession and forgiveness and communion.

Jonah was angry that God relented from punishing the Ninevites. Jonah’s mind was made up about them already. Can you relate to Jonah? Is your mind made up about a certain person or group of people. Jonah didn’t like the Ninevites, nor did he feel that they deserved God’s mercy. But Jonah also knew that God was a gracious God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. That’s why he fled this call in the first place.

Jonah went outside the city and pouted. When the sun got hot and the wind sultry, God provided a bush for shade for Jonah, much like God provided a big fish for Jonah. But God changed God’s mind and took it away. Jonah complained about the bush being taken away... something Jonah didn’t provide in the first place.

God responded, “You are concerned about a bush. And should I not be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

1 Timothy 2:1–7, where the author proclaims to his audience that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” because God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”.

God cares about everybody, and we should too.

Both Timothy and Jonah remind us that whatever divisions exist in our world and whoever we identify as our “Ninevites,” God still cares for them and desires that they be saved. God still cares for our “enemies” and still desires our “opponents” to be saved. Jonah

reminds the church not to cast anyone aside... and that there is room for dialogue between opposing viewpoints on social and political issues.

Leslie Allen puts it this way: "A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart." But our God in Jesus Christ calls us to pray for everyone, even our enemies, and to never give up on anyone. Amen