

September 21, 2014 – Jonah 3:10-4:11  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

## Jonah, the Sequel

Today's first reading is Jonah, the sequel. You know what happens with sequels, right? Movie sequels are often made because the first story is a surprise hit, but then the one that follows is not as exciting, or as funny, and not as many people go to see it. I once saw a movie about sequels, the main character being a high school drama teacher whose dream it was to stage a piece of musical theatre which he had written which was entitled *Hamlet 2*. You may remember the tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark? It's not a musical. At the end everybody dies. I love the goofy premise of *Hamlet 2*, but I must warn you, it's not very good.

The opposite is true of today's first reading. True, Jonah, the sequel, might not have the box office numbers, might not be as well known as Jonah 1. You know that one, the one about the reluctant prophet and the whale. I love that story. But I think Jonah, the sequel, the one about the angry prophet and the bush, is just as good. Even better.

In true sequel form, today's story comes after a surprise hit...in Ninevah. Now, Jonah did not want to premiere in Ninevah, and we can't blame him. Ninevah is in the land we now know as Iraq, near Syria, places we hear a lot of fearful things about these days. It was as dangerous then as now. So when God told him to go Ninevah, Jonah tried to get out of it by getting on a ship, but then he encountered a storm, and was swallowed by a whale, and he stayed in the belly of that great big fish for three days. Eventually Jonah did go to Ninevah, where he preached a stern, but very short, and very effective, sermon. This huge city, this evil empire repented, entirely, wholeheartedly. It's been said that Jonah, reluctant Jonah, was the most effective preacher in the Old Testament. It's been said that preachers should take note, because Jonah's sermon was only seven words long. He was such a hit it called for a sequel, which brings us to today.

Today's story begins, and we find our reluctant hero in a funk, even, in a rage. The story says he prays to God—but this is a strange sort of prayer: “I knew it!” Jonah says, “I knew that's what you would do! That is just like you! You are gracious, and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love! I knew you would relent when the Ninevites repented, so why don't you just kill me now!”

How's that for a dramatic monologue? I think Jonah holds his own with any histrionic high school student. In this scene, though, God is not the drama teacher. I picture God here as the tough-love guidance counselor. Jonah is sitting in God's office, ranting and raving. God hears what Jonah has to say. God lets him get to the end of his soliloquy. And then God pauses, leans forward, looks Jonah in the eye and asks, “Is it right for you to be angry?” That's the first of God's three questions to Jonah, and Jonah doesn't like hearing it. Jonah walks away, Jonah sulks, his anger burning hot.

Next scene, enter: the bush. It doesn't have a big role, the bush, but it makes an impression. As the story says, “Jonah was very happy about the bush.” So when the bush withers, Jonah gets mad all over again. And then God asks his second question. “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” Jonah is truly the drama queen in his response. You have to give Jonah credit, he really goes for it. Jonah responds, “Yes, angry enough to die!”

I love Jonah, the first story and the sequel. I love its screwball lead, and the comic conversations, and the dramatic genius of it all. Mostly, though, I love what it says about God, about the grace of God—a grace so wide we can't wrap our heads around it, a grace so intense it

questions of us, a grace so relentless it keeps after us, even when do not want to hear about it. God is gracious, not just to Ninevah, but to Jonah.

There's the way God listens to Jonah, listens to his ranting, and venting, his "I told you so's." There's a wonderful patience, even a tenderness in this, that God listens to Jonah's tirade, even lets it be called a prayer. There's also, of course, a wonderful irony to it, for it is a prayer. Jonah's tirade includes true statements about God, about how God (unlike Jonah) is slow to anger. Jonah's tirade testifies that God is shockingly, unbelievably, reliably gracious. So gracious that it makes Jonah angry. God listens to Jonah's tirade. God lets Jonah let it all out. God doesn't interrupt—doesn't pander, either, God doesn't falsely comfort or console. Instead, after listening, God asks Jonah a question: "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah's not ready to hear that. And so God sends him a bush, God sends him shade—another graciousness. God gives Jonah something to help cool off. God grants him some time and space to think—but not too much, God doesn't disappear, God's got more questions for Jonah. When the bush disappears, God has a second question, similar to the first, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"

Maybe it seems comic, Jonah caring so much about a bush, maybe it seems small. But God never says the bush isn't worth caring about. God points out that the bush wasn't there long, and that Jonah didn't do anything for it. Certainly, these points offer comparative effect, but I think there's also a graciousness to what God says. God acknowledges that Jonah has developed some very strong feelings for the bush. We can be sardonic about that, or, gracious about it, we can hear God saying, "You have become attached to something, a little thing, but it matters to you. I see that. I know that. Even, I allow that."

In all these ways, in the listening, and the shading, and the allowing, God is gracious.

What would it be like, if when someone came to us in anger, we offered this graciousness? What if we let our angry friend, or child, or colleague, rant? What if we listened patiently, let them say what they needed to say, and then asked a simple question? What if we also gave them space and time, even offered something that might help them cool off? What if, as we listened, we took note of things about which they are passionate?

God does all these things with Jonah. And then God comes back with another question, God's third and biggest question, it could be said, God's ultimate question. God asks: "Isn't it right that I care about things? Isn't it right that I care about cities, animals, enemies; about ignorant, desperate, dangerous people?" God says, "Isn't it right that I care about big things—about things that are big enough to make you angry?"

Here's the genius of Jonah—if we allow ourselves to admit it—here's what this story suggests: If the size of God's grace hasn't made you angry, you might not be thinking big enough.

Can we comprehend the grace of God? Can we allow it—for others, and for ourselves? Can we do that? That's how Jonah ends, with that huge and unanswered question, hanging in the air.

But there is a sequel, another sequel, to Jonah: Jesus. Jesus said, Jesus was referring to himself, when he said, "The only sign I will give you is the sign of Jonah." Jesus knew storm tossed seas. Jesus preached so effectively it got him killed. Jesus spent three days in the belly of the grave. And Jesus rose, answering, for once and for all, just how big grace is.