

January 18, 2015
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

A Second Time

Some years ago there was a spinach scare. Some bagged spinach spoiled and people got really sick. News outlets warned consumers, asking: Where did you get your spinach? How was it cleaned? When was it sold? Maybe the safest thing was to stop eating it, stop eating spinach. Do you remember that? Maybe you don't remember that, because, spinach isn't your thing. For you, the phrase "spoiled spinach" is a redundancy. It says the same thing twice. (She repeated, redundantly). Stop eating spinach? You hadn't been eating spinach in the first place!

Spinach eater or no, maybe you know the term for what they do in those situations, when they make something and it turns out it's unsafe, and has to come back. Could be a food, or a toy, maybe a car part. Whatever it is, they need to put a stop to it. The manufacturers halt production, even want the shoddy goods returned. You know the term for that, right? They say that that thing is being "recalled."

We've got a story of being recalled today, the story of Jonah. It popped up in our cycle of readings a couple months ago, but it was a different part of the story than what we hear today. Today, we're in the part just after the big fish.

You know the big fish part of Jonah, right? It's how the book begins. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah." God calls Jonah to go to Ninevah, which is about as appealing to Jonah as spoiled spinach. Jonah takes off on a boat, tries to run away from God. There's a storm, and the sailors think Jonah might be the cause of the storm. Jonah suspects as much himself, and so is tossed overboard, into the swirling waters, and a big fish swallows him, and Jonah sits inside the fish's belly for three days, and the fish spits Jonah up on shore. And after all that, we get today's reading, which begins, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." You've got to marvel at God's technique, God knows how to work a redundancy. God calls the first time. Jonah runs away, gets stuck in a stinky, slimy, dark interior, and then is regurgitated, vomited, spewed up onto the shore. God calls Jonah a second time.

I love the story of Jonah, not just because of the humor, and the persistence, and the effectiveness, of God. I love the story of Jonah, because I am Jonah. God said to Jonah, "Go preach, to that great city. And Jonah said, "No," and ran away. In college, a religion professor asked me, "Have you ever considered becoming a pastor?" And I said, "No," and ran away, to New York City. You can make various comparisons between Nineveh and NYC, but I ran to, not from, that great city. I ran from my professor's question, which made me feel fishy, squirmy. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, but I didn't plan on become a pastor.

But a funny thing happened in Manhattan, I kept running into pastors—in New York City! I got a job at a non-profit, happened to be a church agency. Only a few of the people working there were pastors, but all of them were doing more than jobs, they were doing what they did out of a sense of calling. And then I started going to this inner city church, and I met this guy who was working at its after school program and going to graduate school to work as a teacher, sounded like a calling. He happened to be a pastor's son. And then we got married. And then I started working for that church and its non profit. And then we wanted to live overseas, and we happened to find a way to do that with a church, in Tanzania. And so we travelled across the water. We flew. Nobody threw me overboard. But it was absolutely a dunk in swirling waters.

And all up to that, I thought I was running away. Actually, God was reeling me in. It was God's way of asking me if I ever thought of being a pastor. It was God, persistently,

effectively, calling, and recalling me.

God's call is not just for pastors. It's for computer programmers, and professors, and volunteers, and coaches, and accountants, and administrators, and students, and retirees. It's for anyone who wants to serve God in the work they do, anyone who knows that God calls us through our work, whatever work it may be. God's call is for anyone, and everyone. It's for you, and to you. God's word comes to you, and not in singular form. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. You, like, Jonah can be recalled.

What a word of grace that is, that you can be recalled! Not like spinach. You can be recalled, not in a way that stops you, not because you are spoiled. You are recalled for the good work for which you are created. You are recalled by a love that will not let you go, even when you think you have gotten so far away, when you feel you are sinking down, sinking down, when all that seems left is to drown. Even then, even and especially then, God is with you, calling you...

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time." Jonah got recalled. It happened after he became intimately acquainted with fish innards. Didn't that just stink? I'm sure it did. I'm also sure it also had a profound impact on the work he did afterwards. Think of the sermons he must have preached, after being through that!

And Jonah does preach. He goes to Nineveh and proclaims the word of the Lord. Jonah's sermon gets a lot of attention, not just among the ancient Ninevites, but among modern biblical commentators. As I was reading through the scholarly interpretations, everyone kept making a big deal of how short Jonah's sermon is. Eight words only: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's concise—and look at the response it gets! The biggest, baddest city around totally changes its ways. Everyone repents, dons sackcloth, starts fasting. That's some effective preaching, and it only took eight words! If only we had a preacher like that...

Jonah's sermon is short, yet what a difference it makes, to so many people, in such need of God. As I read those textual scholars, I sensed a twinge of resentment about the efficacy of Jonah's sermon, perhaps especially in light of its artlessness. They make a point of that, too, these (I think secretly envious) commentators, they make a point about the sermon's lackluster composition, as if they were just barely restraining themselves from saying, "What kind of a sermon is that? He probably said it through gritted teeth!"

He probably did. That's Jonah. Can't you just picture him, stomping through the streets of Nineveh, the fish slime still fresh on his forehead? Can't you hear him, announcing sullenly, "God says, you better shape up. So there!"

Maybe it wasn't the most exquisite of oratorical endeavors, but it was effective. I think that's the point—the point of Jonah. That not only will God call you, and recall you, but that it's not all about you. It's about who called you, and to where.

God called you. God called me. God called us, here. To this church, in this great city. God has called us, and recalled us, even through experiences that are dark and reek of death. God's grace comes to us, even and especially then. God's grace says to us, we have been made for God's work. We've been made for grace, to receive it, and to share it. God, our maker, our manufacturer says, "Go, proclaim the word of the Lord." Proclaim it, again and again, for you've been given a sign, the sign of Jonah, as Jesus says. We've been given a sign even greater than Jonah, as Jesus says, as Jesus is: the sign even greater than Jonah: three days in the belly of death, and out of it, through it, new life!