

Back in October of 1964, Minnesota Vikings defensive end Jim Marshall snagged a football fumbled by the San Francisco 49ers. He took off running and carried the football into the end zone. The *wrong* end zone. So, rather than six points for the Vikings, he scored a safety *for the 49ers*. Marshall didn't even realize that he had gone in the wrong direction until a 49er hugged him in the end zone. Jim Marshall didn't know, but the prophet Jonah knew he was headed in the wrong direction. *And he went anyway.*

The book of Jonah is a teaching story, like the parables of Jesus, only longer. It is full of ironic and sometimes even comical scenes. The story of Jonah originally spoke to a time after the return of the Israelite people from exile in Babylon, the troubled time of Ezra and Nehemiah who were trying to rebuild the devastated nation. The story is, however, *set* in an era more than *200 years before* that time. The city of Nineveh, featured in the story, had long-since passed from historical importance.

A story set in the past can more easily get around the defenses of people who you want to be teaching. The people trying to re-establish themselves back in Judea after the exile had lost sight of the Abrahamic call -- "*blessed to be a blessing.*" Many had become blindly nationalistic, enforcing strict racial and religious exclusiveness, even to the point of telling men to divorce wives who weren't full-blooded Judeans. They had forgotten that their God was a welcoming God, always concerned for the outsider. And so, we hear about our "*wrong way Jonah.*"

Chapter 1 summary: *Jonah is told by God to: ²"Go at once and deliver my message to Nineveh." But Jonah found a ship going the opposite direction. A mighty storm came; the mariners were afraid; they threw cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Amid the storm, Jonah's asleep. The crew rouses him.-- Get up, call on your god! The storm continued. Jonah, feeling guilty that he chose to head in the wrong direction, tells them to "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you." The sailors didn't want to do that, so they rowed hard to bring the ship back to land; but they could not. So finally, they threw Jonah into the sea; and, Jonah was right, the sea became calm. The chapter ends, like this: ¹⁷"But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."*

Chapter 2 is a hymn sung by Jonah in the fish's belly, after which we are told that the fish carried Jonah back to the shore and spit him out.

Chapter 3 (which includes the reading appointed for today)

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a *second* time, saying, ²Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. ³So, this time, Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*" ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth."

And now, the story continues . . . ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “*By the decree of the king and his nobles:* ⁸*Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.* ⁹*Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.*” ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Now Chapter 4 gives us Jonah’s reaction: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “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.*’” ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD answers, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down . . . waiting to see what would become of the city.”

“*40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed.*” Such a little sermon--in Hebrew, it’s all of *five* words. Yet the effect is almost comic. The whole huge wicked city stops *dead* in its tracks, and everyone, from the mighty rulers right down to the lowly shopkeepers, the cattle tenders, and even the *cattle!*, immediately repent and fall all over each other in their rush to put on sackcloth and ashes, the sign that they were ready to turn their lives around, just like that! Jonah had assumed—no, he had even hoped-- that Nineveh was too wicked for God’s grace. Ah, but God has other ideas.

Poor Jonah is so angry at God. Jonah got himself thrown into the sea because he just didn’t want to risk passing God’s grace on to his enemies. That boat was off to Tarshish, *way* at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea. *Wrong way Jonah.* So let me ask you, “Where is *Tarshish* for you? Where do you go when God sends you in a direction you don’t want to go?”

Jesus says “*Follow Me,*” and we follow Jonah. Jesus says, go west, and we hotfoot it to the east. Go to Las Vegas and we head on out for Maine. Jesus says, go north, and we’re in line to buy a ticket for Rio. Jesus says, get on the team, and we just sit there in the stands, eating our hotdogs and drinking our beer.

When God does spit us out onto our mission field, uh, *the shore* -- when God picks us up and points us again in the direction of our Nineveh, maybe we just kinda merely mumble our message, all the while secretly figuring that God won’t mess up our world with this outta control “*goodness and mercy*” stuff. Do we ever find ourselves angry that God’s grace would be freely extended to the enemies we just love to hate? And that *we* may be the ones called on to offer that word?

The thing about God's grace is that we do not control it. God wants to turn lives around, and heal the hatred between enemies. But isn't it just *so* much more satisfying to simply hate the Ninevites? So, who lives in your Nineveh? Liberals, welfare cheats, socialists, neo-Nazis, gays, bigots, antifa, immigrants? Or maybe it's just your rude neighbor, or your crazy ex, or your no-good brother-in-law. Or...well, you get the picture.

In Chapter 4 poor Jonah the reluctant prophet is in a regular snit over the amazing about-face in Nineveh, still holding out for God to destroy the city. You'd think that a trip to the shore, delivered from the killing depths of the raging ocean in the belly of God's own big fish would have turned him around. A trip from death to life--three days and three nights. Death to life. *Resurrection!* But *no* . . . Not our pouting prophet Jonah.

Too often, we humans prefer to get the good stuff from God for *ourselves*, with none of God's uncomfortable demands. So, we prefer a manageable God, a nice friendly, God who will pat us on the back and prop us up when we get down. We'd like free rein to hate our enemies *AND* we want God to shower love on *us and our friends*. And sometimes we quietly cling to a nasty grudge against an *outrageously gracious* God.

In spite of his shortcomings, God called Jonah. God kept calling him. God sent a fish. God cared enough for a reluctant prophet to stick with him. That little five-word sermon, mumbled reluctantly by the pouting preacher-- had power to totally turn Jonah's enemies around in a day. And then Jonah was *mad* at God. Yet God kept calling Jonah to turn away from his hatred and anger, to surrender his attempts to control the grace of God.

God also keeps on calling us knowing that sometimes we are led in ways that shake us up and challenge lots of what we thought we knew. God's amazing grace just stubbornly refuses to be boxed up by *our* boundaries, as the disciples in today's gospel reading had their lives turned around by the call of Jesus to follow him. God calls us to look for the Spirit of Jesus at work in the most unexpected places, and through the most unlikely people. *Maybe even you and me, here and now!* Stranger things have happened!