

Sermon

“God Won’t Give Up”

September 22nd, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Psalm 106:1-12 and Jonah 3

SCRIPTURES:

Psalm 106:1-12

¹ Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. ² Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or declare all his praise? ³ Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times. ⁴ Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them; ⁵ that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage. ⁶ Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly. ⁷ Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea. ⁸ Yet he saved them for his name’s sake, so that he might make known his mighty power. ⁹ He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry; he led them through the deep as through a desert. ¹⁰ So he saved them from the hand of the foe, and delivered them from the hand of the enemy. ¹¹ The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them was left. ¹² Then they believed his words; they sang his praise. [NRSV]

Jonah 3

¹ The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 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.” ¹⁰ When 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. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: O Lord, send now your Spirit into our midst to entice us and overpower us with the strength of your word. Even more, we ask for the strength to hear your call and live according to your will, this day and always; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Story of Jonah

The story of Jonah is all at once a wild and humorous story, with a variety of exaggerations and fascinating characters, including a prophet who is hardly an ideal prophet, sailors who are hardly stereotypical sailors, a great fish that hardly has a functioning digestive system, and a community of non-Godfearing Ninevites who seemingly repent at the drop of a hat. Even the God of the universe has a change of heart in this story ... which is why, at its essence, the story of Jonah is a story about hope—hope for ourselves and for the world because of our hope in God.

So let’s do a quick recap of the story since we only read chapter 3 (of 4 total chapters) ... there’s Jonah, minding his own business, living his life however he was living his life, and all of a sudden he gets called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Now, Nineveh was a great city in ancient Mesopotamia and probably had more than 120,000 residents at that time. And, apparently, God knew their wickedness (historically, the Assyrians had a reputation for extreme brutality, among other things)—and maybe Jonah did, too, because Jonah ran away from God and ran away from Nineveh.

Now, Nineveh was several hundred miles to the east of Israel, in what is modern-day Iraq, but Jonah hopped aboard a ship bound for Tarshish—a city in the far western part of the Mediterranean Sea. And, while he was out at sea in this boat bound for Tarshish, a mighty storm came upon the sea, mighty enough to scare the sailors into praying to their gods and our God and even hurling some

of their cargo into the water. They must also have been fairly superstitious because they eventually figure out that their new passenger must be to blame, which prompted Jonah to admit he was fleeing God. So they throw him overboard and the sea ceases its raging.

Bizarrely, Jonah then spends three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, praying to God for help. After three days and three nights, the great fish spits him out onto dry land, where God calls to Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh. At this point, I can just imagine Jonah singing part of the familiar hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*—singing “grant me wisdom, grant me courage!” Now, Jonah was definitely not a Presbyterian, not because Presbyterians weren’t a thing that long ago, but because he goes on to preach for three whole days (and Presbyterians can hardly preach 30 minutes!). Now, he preached for three days because Nineveh was so large that it took three days to walk across it. However, Jonah might have enjoyed being a Presbyterian if given the chance because he preached the shortest sermon of all time (just one sentence), “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” It’s just that he preached it over and over for three whole days, and everywhere he went in that enormous city, the people believed, repented, and stopped their wicked behavior.

And, as the story goes, God decides to spare Nineveh. Our God of grace and God of glory saw how they changed and God changed God’s mind and did not destroy the city and its people. Fascinatingly, the fourth and last chapter of the story tells of how Jonah threw a hissy fit because he thought God was utterly wrong. But, Jonah had forgotten who God is—that God is good; that God is slow to anger; that God is abounding in steadfast love; that God is gracious and merciful; and most of all that God won’t give up—not ever.

God doesn’t give up on any of us. God didn’t give up on Jonah. And, God didn’t give up on the Ninevites. Because from the beginning to the end of the Bible, God is in the business of redemption! God is all about bringing good out of the bad. Which is why, as I said at the beginning, Jonah’s story is ultimately a story of hope—hope for ourselves and for the world because of our hope in God—our God of grace and our God of glory.

Landfill Harmonic film

Speaking of bringing something good out of the bad ... back in 2015, a movie was released called *Landfill Harmonic*, and it follows the “Recycled Orchestra of Cateura,” a Paraguayan musical group that plays instruments made entirely out of garbage. Here’s the backstory—in the awful conditions of a slum called Cateura, built on a landfill in the capital city of Asuncion, Paraguay, 2,500 families live and survive by separating garbage for recycling. It has been estimated that over 1,500 tons of solid waste arrives there each day. Illiteracy is rampant and the water supply is dangerously polluted. It’s a place where a violin is worth more than a house.

Back in the early 2000s, the community there began making musical instruments out of the garbage. Instruments are made of old oil cans, aluminum, cooking tools, and more types of trash. And, somehow, an orchestra now exists. They call it “the recycled orchestra.”

Can you imagine? In the midst of such an existence, these people—these children of God—have created something both special and awe-inspiring. They have made something beautiful out of something ugly (out of 1,500 tons of solid waste per day). They have made something good out of something bad. Because at some point it occurred to them that they won’t give up. And, God won’t give up either!

The Promise of the Jonah Story

And, once again, that is the promise of the Jonah story—*that* is the hope we are given—because we know that God doesn’t throw God’s people away. We know that God chooses grace because our God is a God of grace and a God of glory. And, God is always busy working on us. God has been busy working on this community of faith—through the decades and definitely during this season of transition. And, God has been busy working in each of our individual lives as well.

One of the things I treasure most about being a pastor is meeting so many wonderful people and listening to your stories. Indeed, it is a true privilege to learn about you and discover how God is at work in your lives. And, I have seen

time and time again how God has continued the good work of grace, mercy, and love in the lives of people who have moved from one church to another. I have seen how God has continued working in your faith journeys and call stories. I have seen how God has continued working through both times of grief and times of celebration. Because no matter what happens in this world, the good news is that God can take the most broken parts of us and make music with our lives—especially the parts we may think seem more like garbage than grace. And, that’s because God doesn’t throw God’s people away. Instead, God always chooses grace!

Closing

In closing, I want to say this ... whether we are trying every day to live as God hopes, or whether we find ourselves stumbling more than we are standing, or whether in the secret places of our hearts we feel like our lives and God’s plans have diverged so greatly that we can’t possibly imagine how God can see any promise in us, may we take comfort in the very thing that caused Jonah so much dismay and distress—that God is good; that God is slow to anger; that God is abounding in steadfast love; that God is gracious and merciful; and most of all that God won’t give up—not ever.

God didn’t give up on Jonah. God didn’t give up on the Ninevites. And, God won’t give up on any of us either.

Thanks be to our God of grace and our God of glory. Amen!