

# Joy Amid Struggle

Peter JB Carman, September 18, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Philippians 1:21-30

You remember Jonah—that somewhat mysterious prophet whom God wanted to send off to the city of Nineveh, ( in the present day country of Iraq, near Mosul, but once the capital of the Assyrian Empire). The story of Jonah is one of the finest fish stories ever told—although we didn't read that part out loud!

The first lesson we learn from Jonah is that at least when it comes to the God of the Old Testament, **you can run but you can't hide**. Because he has gone in the opposite direction of Nineveh, by ship, a terrible storm comes up! In order to calm the seas, the sailors reluctantly toss Jonah overboard to calm the waters. Now that should be the end of the story. But not this story. A big fish swallows Jonah whole. Inside that fish, Jonah starts to singing the praises of God, in a rather remarkable way! But the fish promptly carries him back in the direction from which he had run, so he can turn around and go to where God wanted him in the first place. The original big fish story. And then we come to our lesson for today.

When he finally gets to Nineveh, Jonah proclaims impending doom: the destruction of the city if the folk don't mend their ways! When the reluctant prophet finally gets to work, it turns out he's good at it! The people of Nineveh- whom he despises with a terrible desperation—the people of the city take heed, and express their grief for their ways, and they get it turned around... And God forgives them.

What would your reaction be if you were sent some place to declare doom and destruction, and then your divine—or even human-- commander in chief chose to call off the invasion? For Jonah, the obvious response is anger. He sounds like a little child whose game has been ruined. “You promised me...I knew I knew I knew that you wouldn't go through with it! You're just too compassionate, God.” Let's not miss the content hiding in the story here! God is more compassionate than we are...God is certainly more compassionate than the religious authorities on divine righteousness and holiness and retribution who speak so often and so vigorously in God's name.

But the story keeps twisting! Now comes the best part. Because Jonah is so angry with the compassion of God that he decides he would rather die than live. And he says so! Now in this story, and remember this is a fish story; God has a good but rough sense of humor. And God has not given up on winning over Jonah, even with all of Jonah's terrible self-righteousness, over to another and more excellent way.

As Jonah sits sulking there comes a terrible hot wind...And the sun beats down without mercy. And now Jonah has good reason to feel like he would rather die than live. And he says so! But then, overnight, a bush grows up! And the next day grouchy old Jonah is happy. Happy with the bush. A mighty fine bush! We can almost see Jonah smiling, laughing in the shade of his wonderful new home.

Ah but for a three page book this story has a lot of twists, just keeps on twisting. Because then God “appoints a worm.” A frightening image for the gardeners among us. Ever gotten out to a lovely patch of herbs and seen the utter decimation, the organic annihilation caused by what appears to be a single bug? Who appointed that worm?

To make a short story shorter: bush withers and dies. And now Jonah is REALLY REALLY REALLY mad. Don't pretend. You and I have had days like this. Remember one of those moments when we have survived all the big stuff the terrible day, the near disaster, trouble at work, trouble with the family, trouble with the government? But we survived; we kept on our game face. And once we got home where did we go? We

went to the chocolate stash. And remember the day? It was gone. Gone. We don't lose it when the going gets tough. We don't lose it in the face of tragedy. We hold up bravely when the state legislature votes to ban gay marriage- a second time. No, we're good and strong and fine until we head home, and some little thing gets us. It is when we don't have that last bit of comfort, when the expected shade disappears, the chocolate is stolen, that is when we lose it. LOSE it. All of the accumulated struggle, the defeats, the memory of trauma in the belly of a big nasty fish—all of it comes crashing down.

And now, now in this story—and remember this is just a fish story—the final twist. “Nice of you to be so concerned with the wellbeing of a *bush*, Jonah.” Thus speaks the voice rattling around his addled brains in the desert sun. “But the bush arrived yesterday: *here today, gone tomorrow*. Who are you to care so much about that bush? You didn't plant it or water it. If you can care that much about one plant, maybe you can let me care for the city of Nineveh, with its hundred and twenty thousand innocent children, and a whole bunch of innocent animals. “

If there was ever a good corrective to the false advertizing of much of popular Christianity, here it is: anyone who thinks that a relationship with the divine is going to turn life into an easy ride might want to read the story of Jonah. So much of the time, to listen to the preachers, or listen to their sultry easy-listening tones, if we only would follow Jesus, everything would go our way. No more suffering. But Jonah reminds us—and even more deeply the words we shared from Philippians this morning remind us, that life lived in response to the sacred isn't easier, it has plenty of grief. It isn't easier, only better. For somehow, in the midst of struggle we can find great joy—even laughter. Somehow in the midst of death we find life anew. In the face of persecution or oppression, human beings find a well of hope! We find abundant joy in the presence of the one who made us, the one who cares about not only profound theological matters, but even more about one hundred and twenty thousand toddlers and a whole mess of animals!

How can we not struggle? Have you never been in the belly of that awful fish? And yet we sing hymns in the dark, we sing hope like Jonah sang. How can we not struggle? Over and over when we would rather bring down judgment and wrath, the God who gave us life chooses reconciliation and hope not only for us but for others as well! You are just too compassionate, God!

We struggle! We struggle with the world around us and we struggle with our own demons. And yet again and again, God seeks us out, wanting our friendship, longing for us to look out on the world with persistent, militant love. I sometimes wonder whether the apostle Paul remembered the story of Jonah when he wrote these words:

*1:21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.*

*1:22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.*

*1:23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;*

*1:24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.*

*1:25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith....*

*1:27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel....*

As we prepare to go out to our lives: to confront the big forces, to deal with the realities of hypocrisy and fear; know this. There is joy amid struggle, laughter even in pain. There is life where we only saw death before, and forgiveness and reconciliation where once we knew only war.

This is the sign of Jonah.