

Sermon, November 7, 2021

Jonah 1:1-17

“A Whale of a Story”

I've always loved Herman Melville's, *Moby Dick*, a tale of one man's obsessive desire for vengeance and his need to kill the great white whale that once took the leg of Captain Ahab - a hate filled passion that will end in disaster for the crew of his ship, the Pequod,

In chapter nine, before setting sail, many men of that whaling crew gathered for a service in a small church obviously geared towards a seafaring congregation. The pulpit is in the shape of a ship's bow, which is entered by a rope ladder such as one might climb to board a great tall ship. On the wall behind the pulpit is a large painting of one such ship caught in a powerful storm.

The pastor's name is Father Maple, who climbs into the pulpit, then, as Melville describes the scene, “There was a low rumbling of heavy sea-boots among the benches, and a still slighter shuffling of women's shoes, and all was quiet again, and every eye on the preacher.” He paused a little, then kneeling in the pulpit's bows, folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea.”

He launches into his sermon, appropriately focused on the Book of Jonah, and at one point he asks, “But *what* is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches? “Shipmates”, he says, “ it is a two stranded lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men, and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God. As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-hearted ness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah.”

The first question we have to ask ourselves is how are we in the postmodern age to take the story of Jonah? Obviously, we can't take it literally any more than we can take the image of Pinocchio and Gepetto inside Monstro the Whale literally. But then, we have to ask how we define literally? In the first few centuries of church history many of the church fathers would insist on taking such a story as literal, but what they meant was not that we should see the story as factual, but that we are to take the spiritual message, or messages, the story offers literally. As I see it offers messages similar to the way it was interpreted by Father Maple.

The Lord told Jonah to go and deliver a message to the people of Nineveh, but Jonah did not want to do so; So, he decided to jump on a ship and hide from God in Tarshish. Now, today, it is not clear exactly where Tarshish was, but some ancient documents do indicate that it was a long way from Israel. What that would seem to suggest is that Jonah saw Yahweh as a local, tribal god, as most gods were perceived at that time. (BTW, I should point out that in the Hebrew text the author uses two names for God- Elohim and Yahweh. He uses Elohim when he speaks of God in a stern manner, and Yahweh when God acts in a caring compassionate manner.). The sailors on the ship appear to represent a plurality of people of different religious beliefs, worshipping various gods. The way the sailors become open to the God that Jonah believes in, but is running away from, insists that Yahweh is, in fact, the God of all, and not just of the Israelites.

Jonah soon learns that Yahweh is not someone you can hide from when the Lord hits the boat with a mighty storm as a form of punishment. But is it really punishment? If so it is not in the same manner of vengeance as Captain Ahab sought on the white whale, or the vengeance *Moby Dick* would eventually exact on Ahab and the Pequod.

What this might suggest up to this point is that sometimes we might have done things we shouldn't have done, perhaps even knowing we were doing wrong at the time, and maybe even think we can conceal the sin just as Jonah thought he could hide from God. And, sometimes, something goes wrong in our lives, and our sense of guilt tricks us into thinking we are being punished by God. But if we look at today's story as a whole, I think we come to see that all that befalls Jonah is, in fact, contributing to his deliverance.

For example, according to Proverbs 16::33, decisions made by the casting of lots indicates the will of God. Keeping that in mind we can say that it was Yahweh who determined that Jonah should be the one cast into the sea - wherein, Jonah is swallowed up by the big fish, which, in the end, is not punishment, but the ultimate road to his salvation.

You know, I mentioned that the pulpit in the church in *Moby Dick* is in the shape of a ship's bow. I've actually been in a church in New Bedford, Mass, whose pulpit is just that. But there is also a church in southwestern Poland where the pulpit is in the shape of a whale, and the preacher stands in the whale's mouth with a row of large teeth just above him, and the whale's tail rises up in back of the pulpit. I have to ask, why would a church build such a pulpit unless they see it as a symbol of salvation?

My point is that sometimes bad things happen to us, and we may ask, "Why me?", or even see it as a form of godly punishment, when such things may actually be the something from which we can grow and mature in our spiritual life.

Down through the centuries preachers and theologians have seen Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the whale as a foretelling of Jesus' time in the tomb - his resurrection a sign of victory over evil, over pain and suffering, over death itself. Likewise, Jonah emerges from his fishy entombment a new man. Through a storm, a casting into the sea, and being swallowed by a whale, God brings Jonah to a new life in Him. As a modern people, we may not see the bad which befalls us as being brought on by God, but we can see the Spirit of the Lord as the one who can strengthen us, inspire us, and lead us in ways that overcome, and bring us into a brighter day! Amen.

Veterans Day Prayer: Lord, today we honor our veterans, men and women who gave their best when they were called upon to serve and protect our country. We pray that you will bless them for their unselfish struggle to preserve our freedoms, our safety, and our country's heritage, for all of us. We also lift up those who still deal with wounds, and for those who find difficulty adjusting to civilian life. We also are aware that many veterans are homeless. We pray that you give them all help, healing, and peace of mind.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer: Eternal God, you know us intimately and look upon us with love. You watch over us in our weaknesses and guide us through both good and bad. Sometimes we are not proud of things we have done and hope you are looking the other way. But you know our heart and desire what is best for us. Though we know we deserve your anger, you respond to us with care and compassion. Through your love we find a new wholeness and are inspired to do better. We thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, and look to him as we struggle to navigate the rough seas of life. May he lead and inspire us towards the abundance of life he promised - an abundance made of Faith, Hope, and Love. Equip us with these things that we may be a true blessing to others. We thank you that you have gathered us together to be the church. Help us to be all we can be, bearing witness to the love Jesus taught and embodied - touching the lives of those in need, - and being advocates for peace and justice here and throughout the world.

Amen.