

## **EMBRACING THE "OTHER"**

**Jonah: 3. 1-5**

**Mark 1. 14-20**

**PREACHED ON JANUARY 22, 2012 by Gloria-Jean Skeete**

Jonah was a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (between 783-753 B.C.) He gave King Jeroboam of Israel, the divine authority to extend the Northern Kingdom's territory almost to the extent of the Davidic kingdom, and became a national hero. But Jonah disliked God's latest mission to preach to the enemies in Nineveh. Fleeing God, he boards a ship going west, rather than east, then goes down in the ship to sleep through a storm while the pagan sailors pray for deliverance. Awakened by the angry captain of the ship, he sees that the sailor's lot fell on him as the culprit who is causing the storm. He answers their questions as briefly as possible and told them to throw him into the sea to bring the storm to a halt. Finally, the rugged sailors did as Jonah asks, while they pray to God for forgiveness. God send a special fish to swallow his off-track-prophet.

Jonah is a story filled with irony, satire, character reversal and humor. Sometimes it makes you cry. It is supposed to be. But it is also a sad commentary on us as a people of God. While God tries to carry on a love relationship with the world, we selfishly seek to limit His love to us and people who are not like us. We should laugh as we read Jonah and see the many ironic twists of the narrative. We should also cry as we let Jonah show us our prejudices and the limits that we place on God.

Jonah is a book of mission. It contrasts God's eternal mission of redeeming a lost world to humanity's ongoing mission of self-preservation and self-serving. Jonah exemplifies the intricate relationship between these two missions.

The book of Jonah presumes that we know the story from second Kings because Jonah is written in direct contrast to that story. Here Jonah again hears the Word of the Lord. The Old Testament uses the expression *dabar* about 438 times. It means Word. Apart from the verse in 2Kings and the book of Jonah, we know nothing else about this prophet.

This message of God that came to Jonah the second time was different. It expanded his horizons. Jonah must do more than report to the King. God was calling him to a truly God-sized task to preach God's message in the capital city of the most cruel enemy on earth. Nineveh, the capital of Assyrian empire featured the great temple of Ishtar.

Nineveh was not only great in political power and cultural sophistication, Nineveh had great Wickedness. It was this wickedness that came to God's attention. God had enough of this evil and was going to do something about it. He was calling Jonah to preach against the city. God was calling Jonah to get out of his comfort zone and **Embrace the Other**. Has God called you lately to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable?

Jonah was not quite sure about this latest calling. This mission went beyond his understanding of his mission with God. I can almost imagine Jonah and God having a dialogue. Jonah must have said: "Lord, you know I love you, but faith has limits. I will go

anywhere except Nineveh. Lord, this is a dangerous mission. ***Those people?*** *Those Outcasts, The ones who do not speak like us, as righteous as us, as upright like us, and you know what Lord, I do not even like their lifestyle. Those people* do not deserve your mercy, love, compassion, and forgiveness Lord.

And God's response would be: "Oh yes Jonah! I am well aware of their lifestyle, But, they are still important to me, no matter what! They are still my children whom I have created in my image. I love them just as much as I love you. They too are included in my salvation plan Jonah.

But Jonah did not like where this conversation was going, and fled to Tarshish. Little did he know that he can run but he cannot hide from God. (Adam and Eve tried to hide from God too, but God smoked them out). Are you running from God's mission? We know the story, how he was swallowed by the fish. And from the belly of the fish, God got Jonah's attention. Once there, he will carry out God's mission. He was more than ready to preach to the people who he did not want to embrace. Sometimes when we are called to do what God wants us to do, he has to chastise us to get our attention.

Let's leave Jonah in the fish for a moment to listen to the rest of the story. God spoke to the fish as clearly as he had spoken to Jonah. God is God, and he can use anyone or even a donkey in Balaam's case in the book of Numbers to get His message across. In this case, the fish served as God's chastening rod in a way comparable to the prophet serving as God's messenger. The fish did not answer God, but simply got the biggest belly ache and

vomited Jonah onto the dry land. How about that? Do you see why this is a funny story that makes you laugh until you want to cry?

Now the Word came to Jonah again the second time. God said: “One more try Jonah. And you had better do as I say. Nineveh is the destination I chose, not Tarshish. Are you going this time? Aren’t you glad that God is a God of second chances?”

Jonah went to Nineveh, but his heart was not in the mission. He went as far as possible before preaching, then preached only **Eight Words**: *“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”* Now! What kind of evangelism is that? Eight words? This suggests to me that his heart did not appear to be in stirring up a revival in Nineveh. He did not like the Ninevites, and was not going to embrace them, so he merely passed God’s message on. That’s as far as he was willing to go.

But of all the unexpected twists in the story, this has to be the one we are least prepared for. The Ninevites believed God. How about that? I heard somewhere Jesus said: “Last shall be first and first shall be last.” Oh yes! “He came to His own and His own received Him Not: but for those who believed, became sons and daughters of God.” He came for the marginalized and the outcasts of society. Now Nineveh was known as a religious city with temples to many gods, but in this instance the people of Nineveh turned to the God of Israel. They recognized God’s power and believed he would carry out the threats he had made through Jonah. From the King to the cattle was clothed in sackcloth and ashes and cried mighty unto the Lord. And this was one of the

largest conversion ever recorded in the history of the Bible. How about that?

Did you know that I have read this story on several occasions and overlooked the animals in sackcloth. Is this a funny story or what? This suggests to me that when we do not do what God has called us to do, He will use anyone, or any of His creatures to carry out His mission. (You may recall the donkey in the story of Balaam, a fish, and now the animals in sackcloth?). Can you picture that? I'll suggest to pastor that we have our four-legged fuzzy friends at Jan Hus be clothed in sackcloth one Sunday.

So Jonah learned a valuable lesson in Nineveh. He learned that Salvation is of the Lord. Jonah failed to recognize his privilege of being an instrument of God in a miraculous situation. Failing to recognize God's sovereign plan, he missed the joy of the situation. Much like Elijah (I Kings. 19:1-18), Jonah sank into a selfish state of mind. Where does this leave us? I have learned that we serve an inclusive God. I learn that we serve a forgiving God, but more importantly, what I learn from this story is that God is pissed-off when the church, the so-called Christians and society allow their arrogance, ignorance, selfishness and bigotry to get in the way of refusing to "***Embrace the Other.***" God had forgiven and embraced the Ninevites long before He sent Jonah on this mission, and He can and will forgive you and me regardless of what we have done, or where we have been.

Now I invite you to follow me as we do some Border-Crossing. You may ask: Who is a Border-Crosser? In actuality, we all are. For an individual, border crossing represents a significant

change in one or several areas. These include lifestyles, friendships, geographical location, employment, marital status or any significant aspects of one's life.

In contrast, where Jonah failed in his mission to **Embrace the Other**, Jesus Christ fulfilled in the Gospel of Mark. When we consider Mark's Gospel these words come to mind: "Lights, camera, action. Mark sets the stage by positioning the lights of the Old Testament prophecies from Isaiah to Malachi and the messenger who will fulfill this prophecy- John the Baptist. John heralds the message of the coming Messiah as well as prepares the people through the act of baptism for the upcoming entrance of the Messiah. John was not the light, but he positions the lights in such a way that when Jesus appears everyone will know he is the main player in the drama.

The cameras are positioned to start the filming through the baptism of Jesus. The action begins when Jesus starts His ministry of service in the synagogues of Galilee preaching the "Good News, and casting out demons, healing Peter's mother-in-law, and healing a leper. The stage has been set, the cameras are rolling, and the drama has begun with incredible action.

Mark wastes no time in telling us the theme of his book. It is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And what is this Good News? (In simplest terms, the Good News, or the Gospel, as it is commonly known is all about people who were once outsiders, and are now experiencing the hospitality of the Holy Spirit. So in actuality, we are all outsiders, because of our

sinfulness and frailty, and the welcome we receive is proof of a graceful and forgiving God).

Since Mark is writing to the Roman audience, he has no need, like Matthew or Luke, to establish Christ's lineage. There are two reasons the Romans did not need such information. Unlike the Greeks, the Romans were not interested in qualifications as they were in action. The second reason was, since Jesus was portrayed as a "servant or slave", there would be no need to show his genealogy since from a Roman's standpoint, slaves do not have genealogies.

Jesus' task was to gather around Him a community whom He could teach so they might be sharers of this Good News. So here Jesus comes walking by the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful fresh-water lake. Fed by the waters of the upper Jordan River, is 700 feet below sea level and 14 miles long, and 6 miles wide. A lot of fishing took place at this lake. Josephus, a famous historian of the Jews, recorded that up to 330 fishing boats sailed this lake on a daily basis. Among those who fished this lake for a livelihood were Simon and his brother Andrew. Jesus called them: "Come follow me", and I will make you fishers of men. This phrase was a metaphor used by the OT prophets for the "Gathering of the people."

Jesus was calling Simon and Andrew to the urgent task of rescuing people from the impending judgment implied by the coming of the kingdom in the person and work of Jesus. His ministry was inclusive. He preached the Good News, which is both from God and about God. This Good News is the gospel that brings

forgiveness, restoration, and new life. Men and women in Jesus' day, and in our day, have been longing to hear such a message. Now they not only hear it, but actually see and touch the One who is able to deliver it. He was a King all right, but a king who demonstrated His power through service to His people. The entire Gospel of Mark captures the servant heart of Jesus. He was a man of action. He touched the leper, He healed the woman with the issue of blood, He healed the blind, He raised Lazarus from the dead, He raised Jairus' daughter, and the list goes on. Oh yes! Jesus was a Border Crosser all right. He crossed the border to bring the Good News to the woman at the Well in Samaria. He became ceremoniously unclean when He identified with the outcasts of society. Like Mary Magdalene, a woman who was considered an outcast in her society, I also felt like an outcast when my father neglected me, but then I heard the voice of Jesus day: "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." Jesus was a 'voice for the voiceless'. He brought the Good News that liberates us from the bondage of sin, and liberate us from the "In-group and Out-group," category that society has placed us in. So do not let the label stick. It is comforting to know that we serve an inclusive God: A God who embraces us, no matter what. No one was left on the margins on the day of Pentecost. Everyone heard the Good News in his/her own language. Now!

En't that Good News?

You may ask where I am going with this message. What I am saying is that in the same way that Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, John and the other disciples; He is extending the same call

to you and to me regardless of our social location, to share the Good News. And how do we do this?

The answer is simple: By “Embracing the Other.”

May God richly bless you: Amen: