

Sermon on Jonah 3

If at First You Don't Succeed

So, finish this aphorism for me: 'If at first you don't succeed... try, try again.'

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is the God of second chances.

The God who in the first place instructs Jonah to preach against Nineveh, gives him a second go after he runs away.

Here we are, chapter 3 of this great book and it begins as the first chapter did, "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."

Jonah gets another go, a second chance.

Has his digestively challenging experience in the belly of the great fish taught him anything about God's heart for rescue and regeneration??

We will soon see.

What will he say?

What will he do?

Will he run away like the first time?

Or have things changed in his heart and this time will be different?

Jonah may well find himself muttering something close to yet another Woody Allen quip, 'My one regret in life is that I'm not someone else.'

Jonah is called by God again, or as the text puts it, 'And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.'

He cannot escape this calling, this word, he can only run as he did before, ignore it, or obey.

This remains the case, and the challenge of faith, for each of us today.

This time Jonah obeys.

He goes to Nineveh to proclaim the word of the Lord.

Now to put this in perspective, this is like sending a lone individual into a war zone to preach in the heart of the enemy's camp.

And, what's more, call his deadliest enemies to repentance.

This is like sending a Capulet to the Montague headquarters to say, 'You need to turn from your wicked ways.'

This is, as Barbara Brown-Taylor puts it, 'like sending a nobody from Tel Aviv to tell Saddam Hussein he was going to hell.'

Jonah's mission doesn't exactly make good geo-political or personal sense.

The Assyrians were the hated enemy of Israel and Judah, they ended up destroying the Northern Kingdom completely, and holding the southern kingdom in servitude for years.

They were known for their violence and struck terror into the hearts of all who got in their way.

So Jonah is like Daniel in the lion's den, like Moses before Pharaoh, like Paul entering into Rome.

The last place you want to be if you're a Hebrew prophet is in the streets of Nineveh proclaiming the word of the Lord, particularly calling people to repentance.

We can't blame Jonah for running, we probably would as well.

Yet second time around Jonah goes.

He obeys.

He hears the word of the Lord and responds faithfully.

And incredibly he becomes what would have to have been the most succinct prophet of all time.

He marches a day into Nineveh - remember it's big enough that it takes three days to get right across - and he speaks in Hebrew 5 words.

5 words, and 5 words only.

In English we get a couple more, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'

That's it.

It's not exactly Shakespeare.

Surely he could have started on a more positive note than that?

You know, 'God loves you.', or 'All will be well.'.

He clearly didn't know the 'sandwich rule' of effective critique – you begin with affirmation like the top piece of bread, then you critique, like the filling, then you end with affirmation like the bottom bit.

No, nothing like that, just, 'Forty more days and you're going to be in deep trouble!'.

Our biblical imaginations should be stirred, of course, at the mention of the number 40.

The waters of the great flood in Noah's day don't recede for 40 days, Moses was forty days in the presence of God on Mt Sinai, perhaps more significantly the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Looking forward, Jesus was in the desert being tempted for 40 days and nights.

All these allusions swirl around as we hear Jonah's prophecy.

40 represented a serious amount of time in which people might have a change of heart, or circumstances might change.

It is by no means an arbitrary biblical number.

The Ninevites have a time bracket, a deadline, a framework. 40 more days and they will be destroyed.

We've seen what Jonah did, now the question is what will they do?

It's probably worth mentioning at this point that this proclamation would have well suited a Hebrew audience's preferences.

This is what they would have expected.

This was music to their ears, just as, no doubt, it was music to Jonah's as well.

Of course the Ninevites should be destroyed by the God of the ages, the God of justice, the God of all power and might.

This fits with their theological assumptions alright.

These were the enemies of God's beloved, God's chosen people.

All the Hebrew people knew about providence, covenant, and righteousness would certainly have been fulfilled by such an action.

And after all, this is exactly what God has threatened.

This fits.

All good so far.

The actions of Jonah and the Ninevites have been surprising.

Now the question is, what will God do?

For the Hebrews, the expectation would have been clear.

And then just as everyone is expecting the inevitable to happen, it doesn't.

In fact, something very different and truly remarkable happens.

Jonah makes his breathtakingly short pronouncement, and the very next verse, in equally brief terms simply says, 'The Ninevites believed God.'

Jonah was the best tent revivalist of all time.

Billy Graham's got nothing on this guy.

The king of Nineveh repents and orders that everyone in the city, including the animals also should repent.

Amazing.

The arch enemy, on hearing the smallest whisper of a prophecy from a Hebrew nobody who hot footed it out of there the first time, has turned around, has converted, as fast as Jonah turned to run after the first call of the Lord.

But there is even more amazing news to come.

Verse 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.'

The Ninevites repent and change, and God also as the text says, 'changes his mind', and extends mercy to a people for whom the only right and proper end should have been destruction.

In this swift narrative about fate, everything has been turned on its head.

And the inevitabilities that looked to be coming down the tracks full speed, have been stopped, turned around, and driven in the other direction.

It's not that there were not hints earlier on of what was to come.

The sailors end up worshipping the Lord, and the Lord calms the sea down and saves them.

God's salvation extended to the unlikely is embedded in the story before the Ninevites are spared.

But this is a turning on a scale way beyond a few sailors on a ship headed for Spain.

This is a whole city and its king changed, forgiven, and released.

The Ninevites, like Jonah, like the sailors, are offered a second chance.

The Lord our God, is indeed the God of second chances.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

The comic nature of this part of Jonah should not be lost on us.

Can we imagine all the animals of Nineveh putting on sackcloth for instance?

Can we imagine the King's immediate heeding of Jonah's warning and taking his whole city with him?

This along with Jonah's 3 days and nights in the belly of the whale singing psalms of thanksgiving all the while?

Then being spewed out in a moment of marine indigestion?

Like any good parable, all the devices of humour, of exaggeration, of unlikely events, are used masterfully to point to the fact that isn't meant to be comic, the fact that is at the heart of the book's message, and the heart of our faith - the amazing grace of God.

'God is love.', wrote the apostle John, 'and we love because God first loved us'.

The amazing grace of God.

The limitlessness of God's mercy.

Even our most despised enemies, the text wants to say, are not outside the scope of God's loving action.

Jesus dies with his arms wide open having just pardoned a criminal, a scene that speaks of God's limitless love for all.

He will then enter the belly of the great fish of death for 3 days and 3 nights.

And on the morning of the third day, he will rise - God's final sign to all the world, to all history, to each one of our lives and hearts, that God's power to renew is greater than even our most entrenched willingness to hate or exclude.

Death is defeated, and this is good news for everyone.

Not just the chosen people, not just those who count themselves Christian, not just the church, everyone.

It is by no means coincidental that the book of Jonah is read as part of the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the day of Atonement.

It is a reminder that God's justice *is* forgiveness.

Forgiveness is what justice looks like through the lens of Jesus.

We are forgiven, called to repentance, and it is this same Lord Jesus we are then called to obey in our daily lives.

The turn of events in Jonah may have been designed to subvert the ancient Israelites' expectations of how far God's favour extended beyond Israel itself, but in terms of broader biblical logic, and the picture of God we receive through Christ, it is perfectly in keeping.

‘Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.’,

God is the God of second chances.

And if truth be known, third, fourth etc.

If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.

Second chances make room for new possibilities, for changed circumstances, for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Prideful judgement, and refusal to offer grace only closes possibilities down and squeezes life out of situations.

Imagine if the prodigal, on returning home in sackcloth, was met not with a loving father with open arms, but a judgemental parent seeking punishment?

Imagine if Jesus had told Peter, nope, you blew it first time around, there’s no hope of anything now.

Imagine if God had thought, well Jonah, you’ve messed up, so that’s the end of the story, no more.

Who knows what would have happened to Jonah or the Ninevites?

It’s amazing how often I still meet people who think God is going to punish them for something or other.

On average I would say at least once a week I meet someone like this.

I don’t come to church enough, I don’t pray enough, I’m not good enough.

I say to them, good, you’ll fit right in!

We’re all struggling in here in different ways, we’re all Jonah’s in some form, running away from God, perhaps running from a call we know we need to obey.

We don’t come in here to worship the God of forgiveness because we think we’re good, if that were the case we wouldn’t need grace and forgiveness.

It’s because we recognise how great our need is!

‘The good I want to do’, says St Paul, ‘I do not do. But the evil I do not want to do, I do.’

Perhaps we need to give someone a second chance in our lives?

To offer forgiveness and grace, even if it's someone who has hurt us deeply?

Perhaps in doing so we might find that God offers us another second chance?

A second chance to re-establish relationship or let go of resentment, or clear the blockage of anger and hatred?

Perhaps we too need another second chance.

Forgiveness is no small thing.

In Jonah, a whole city of Israel's enemies are forgiven by God.

We have one chapter of Jonah to go.

It will make for an interesting ending alright.

There will be anger, conversation with God, a scorching east wind, a tree, a worm, and an open ended conclusion.

There is much more to come in this story of the prophet who ran from God, and the God who wouldn't run from grace.

Next week is our final instalment.

Stay tuned!

Amen.

Amen.