

Journey to Discovery

Jonah 1: 1-17

In our self-absorbed daily lives, we have a natural priority concern for what happens or is happening to ourselves. In the whirl of these events and occasions, our perspective is narrowly focused, almost naturally so. It is all about us and what we're experiencing. I think that's universal and nearly unavoidable in normal circumstances. It is only when we take a moment to think something through that we realize other perspectives. Hopefully we know enough to take that moment of reflection before opening the mouth and letting words come out. It is often regrettable when we don't.

Not making the connections can lead to some wrong conclusions. There is a story about Lawrence of Arabia visiting Paris after World War I with some Arab friends. He showed them around the amazing city of Paris and all of its sights, but what fascinated his Arab friends the most was the faucet in their hotel room. They spent hours turning it on and off; they thought it was wonderful. Incredibly, all they had to do was turn the handle and they could get all the water they wanted. When time came to leave, Lawrence found them in the bathroom trying figure out how to detach the faucet. They explained, "It's very dry in Arabia. What we need are faucets. If we have them, we will have all the water we want." Lawrence had to explain that the blessing of the faucets lay in their connection to the pipeline, and the pipeline to the water source.

Like assembling the hundreds or thousands of pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, the picture doesn't gain clarity until the pieces are set in place where they intersect. I'm sure you've had plenty of occasions when an occurrence only made some sense after stepping back, or better looking back with fresh eyes to see again and make fresh connections that reveal meaning. That's often when we realize that God has been busy at work, and we hardly noticed at all. We discover in this process that what we thought we knew has been transformed and taken a new dimension.

Our scripture reading from Jonah relates an interesting tale about someone who is called to prophesy to the great city of Nineveh. We know little about Jonah, but we can imagine that God is not calling someone to this preaching ministry who is not equipped to do the job, at least in God's eyes. We don't hear Jonah objecting to his mission, like Moses who made all kinds of excuses, or Isaiah – *I am a man of unclean lips* – unworthy of the role. It would be reasonable to believe that Jonah was a willing servant of the Lord. This was someone waiting, maybe even expecting God to send him out in mission.

However, clearly Jonah wants nothing to do with this mission to call for repentance from the city of Nineveh. He doesn't try to argue with God; in fact, Jonah makes no response to God. Is he trying to ignore God? Maybe God will go away if Jonah doesn't respond. Maybe God will have second thoughts when Jonah doesn't jump at it eagerly. Maybe Jonah can simply pack his things and get on a ship heading out to sea, and God won't notice that the ship is heading toward Tarshish.

Of course, God would have to be a real knucklehead not to see through this. Nineveh lies to the east and is best reached by traveling overland to the east. Any boat leaving Joppa is going to be heading west, in the opposite direction. We don't really know where Tarshish is, but we know it isn't anywhere near Nineveh. Let's make another assumption; God knows that Jonah has no intention of going to Nineveh. God has figured this out.

At this point, God could have zapped him dead in his tracks. But apparently God is rather patient with reluctant servants, like Moses and Isaiah and bunch of others. Jonah is going to require some work on God's part to get his head on straight and see things God's way.

As the boat ventures out to sea, God goes to work. A high wind whips up the sea and a violent storm descends on the ship. As they're rocking and rolling, the storm's intensity has them fearful that the ship will break up under the pounding. It's bad enough so that the crew starts praying to their gods as they throw the cargo overboard to reduce the risks and lighten the ship.

Where's Jonah in all of this? He's asleep below deck. Hmm, that sounds familiar, like, didn't Jesus do that, too? In fact, we'll find a couple of features that sure make it seem like they borrowed some familiar imagery from Jonah to put in the gospels.

How can Jonah sleep amid this storm that is surely tossing and pitching the ship? If he isn't holding on for dear life, he'd probably get thrown around like a rag doll. This reminds us that such questions are inappropriate. This is a story, and we don't want to be jerks who ask too many questions and interrupt the story. So, Jonah was asleep below deck, and first, the captain of the ship comes down to him. The captain thoughtfully asks the question we've been asking, *How can you sleep?* But the story must go on. The captain demands that Jonah call on his god. Everyone else is doing it, and their gods don't seem to be helping. Maybe yours can help and save us.

This is awkward for Jonah since he's running away from God. This would not be a good time to put in a call to ask for a favor. About this time, Jonah may be realizing that it *is* his God who is causing this crisis. Then the dawn breaks a little more in his little head and he realizes, of course it's Jonah's God; no other god could pull this off.

Next, attention turns to the crew. They decide to cast lots to find out who is responsible. Here again are two questions that no jerk should ask; why do they think someone on board is responsible, and how do you cast lots on a ship that is being battered and besieged by a storm? Again, it's a story; such questions would be impertinent.

They cast lots and it falls on Jonah. He's questioned because surely **he** must know something. *'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'* This God of Jonah's sounds pretty serious, and this puts the fear of God in the crew. Did you see what happened there? The crew had their

own gods to whom they were praying, thinking that it would have some effect. Now they're in awe of the God of Jonah. They've abandoned their gods, at least for now.

They ask Jonah what to do to get Jonah's God to save their lives. Jonah actually tells them to throw him into the sea, acknowledging that he has caused this. He still hasn't told them why he's running away from God, and he doesn't intend to. Jonah is still so determined that he won't obey God that he's willing to sacrifice his life rather than go to Nineveh. I imagine that Jonah realized how foolish this would sound to the crew.

It sounded nutty to the crew already, so they tried to row back to shore, but to no avail. And what does the crew do next? **They** pray to Jonah's God. They don't want to be blamed for killing Jonah and then get punished, but they can't see any way out of their predicament without tossing Jonah overboard. They have really taken Jonah's God quite seriously. In a strange act of faith on the part of the crew, they do throw Jonah into sea. Interestingly, the crew at this point is acting more faithfully than Jonah!

After throwing Jonah overboard, the crew offers a sacrifice and makes vows to Jonah's God. Again, the good listener will not be impertinent and ask what they sacrificed or how they did it on this stormy sea. Suffice it to say that they did. Again, the crew is acting with more devotion to Jonah's God than Jonah has.

Of course, God has thought ahead and provides a big fish in which to imprison Jonah where he can reflect on his choices thus far.

There are a lot of pieces to this story already. One element that can easily be missed by focusing only on Jonah is the sub-story of the faith transformation of the crew who had no knowledge or experience of God. They come away with a whole new experience of the sacred and the spiritual. Did it have a lasting impact? We don't know, but it's clear that the God of Jonah, the God of the Hebrews, made a very big impression.

On this communion Sunday, we come to the table of the Lord's blessing. Yet at the time when Jesus took the bread and then the cup, and announced that these items represented his body and his blood, surely the disciples didn't grasp the full implications. It wasn't until later when they remembered. Because they remembered, we remember. For them, the strange things happening on the occasion of their last supper together only became clear later, upon reflection. Then it made sense. The Lord knew what was coming and faithfully made known that he was giving his life to be a blessing for all.

Jonah in his strange way did the same, giving up his own life to save the crew and the ship, and hence the reason we can perceive such correspondence between things found in Jonah's story and in the gospel accounts about Jesus. Jonah never does quite figure it all out. He comes pretty close when he's forced to do nothing in the belly of the big fish but look back and put the pieces together. There is where Jonah learns to pray.

We come to the table, remembering and reflecting, knowing the gift of life celebrated in our sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here we can see the pieces come together.

Sharing today as we do with many other Christians throughout the world, it is always the hope and promise that we, as different pieces of the Christian mosaic, different elements bearing the promise of God and the good news of Jesus, would join together in one body and one spirit to celebrate our ministries together with the one who invites us to his table, our Lord and Savior Jesus.