

1-21-18 – “The Joke’s on Jonah” – Jonah 3

Sometimes, the best way to respond to God’s grace is simply to laugh.

I’ll give you an example. Recently, a member of our congregation – whose name starts with ‘Randy’ and ends with ‘Phillips’ – sent me an email with a smattering of religious jokes. One of them relates to the story from this morning’s Old Testament reading, the story of a prophet named Jonah.

The joke begins with a little girl talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher tells girl that it is physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human being. “It’s true that a whale is a very large animal,” says the teacher, “But a whale’s throat is actually very small.”

The little girl looks at her teacher with a mix of anger and confusion, and says, “But Jonah was swallowed by a whale!” The teacher, gently but firmly, reiterates that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.

“Well,” retorts the little girl, “When I get to heaven, I’m going to ask Jonah about it.”

The teacher, amused, responds, “And what if Jonah went to hell?”

The little girl, not missing a beat, looked at her teacher and said, “Well, then you can ask him!”

Now, it goes without saying that there is no deep theological *point* to this joke. It’s not meant to start a debate about science education, nor about heaven and hell, and definitely not about whether a whale did or did not swallow Jonah. It’s a joke. The point...is that it’s funny. That it makes us laugh.

I was particularly tickled by this joke out of the several good ones that Randy sent as it turns out, the story of Jonah is also something of a joke. A tale meant to make us laugh A little snippet of ancient Hebrew stand-up comedy.

That may sound strange to us, perhaps; to think of a piece of Scripture as a joke. It’s likely how we learned the story in growing up in Sunday school. And of course, when I say that this story is a joke, I’m *not* trying to insinuate that it’s not Scripture, or that it’s not important. And I’m not trying to say that the Book of Jonah doesn’t have something *serious* to teach us. Rather, I’m saying that I think the author of the Book of Jonah decided that the best way to communicate the truth of God’s grace was to tell a story that makes us laugh.

And what a story it is! Think about it with me for a minute. Jonah is a Hebrew prophet, and so God sends him on a mission to Nineveh...to prophesy. But Jonah does like this mission, so he goes the opposite direction in an attempt to run away from God. Running from God has never worked out too well for anyone, and it doesn’t work for Jonah either. He boards a ship, tries to sail away from God, and ends up getting tossed overboard. But lucky for Jonah, he doesn’t drown because God sends a big ol’ fish to swallow him up. And three days later, this big fish or whale vomits Jonah up, safe and sound on the shore, in what Biblical scholar Conrad Hyers points out is “surely the most humiliating and undignified example of salvation in the Bible.”¹

This brings us to today’s text, in which God tries, again, to send Jonah on his mission to the Ninevites. This time our prophet is slightly more humble, seeing as he is covered in whale spit, and he complies and heads to Nineveh. But I think it’s fair to say that Jonah still phones it in. We are told that Nineveh is a huge city – a three days’ walk from one side to the other. But Jonah just meanders in, doesn’t even make it halfway through, and utters a short, gloomy prophecy: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

But lo and behold, the people of Nineveh *listen!* They repent, every last one of them. The king calls for a fast throughout the city, and they all put on sackcloth and ashes, everyone from the king to the country people to the cows. Yes, you heard me right: they dress up their livestock in the clothes of human mourning. And no, that is not a normal practice of the ancient Middle East. It's exaggeration. It's a joke. It's there to make us chuckle.

God sees this show of repentance, and he changes his mind. He decides not to destroy the city of Nineveh after all. Jonah, the Bible's most reluctant prophet, who preaches what is arguably the most uninspiring sermon, has somehow become the most successful prophet in the entire Old Testament! Thank you, Jesus, I guess, for those penitent pigs!

And what does Jonah do after his stunning success? He sits and pouts on a hill outside of the city. "I *knew* you were merciful," he says to God. "That's why I didn't want to come on this mission in the first place! I didn't want you to show mercy to the Ninevites!" Yes that's right, friends. Jonah our anti-hero, the prophet to whom God went to extraordinary lengths to show mercy – to whom God sent a *whale* to make sure he wouldn't drown, is angry with God for having mercy on his enemies. The tale of Jonah, the most successful Hebrew prophet in history, ends with him sulking on a hillside, telling God he's so angry that he wants to die.

Even the most serious among us can't help but laugh a *little* at this one.

Now, when the Hebrew people first heard this story, they would have understood *why* Jonah was upset, even if his anger seemed a bit...exaggerated. No Israelite in their right mind would want God to have mercy on the Ninevites. They were the classic 'bad guys,' the arch enemies of the Israel. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, ancient superpower that threatened the Southern Kingdom of Judah, conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and deported many of its leaders to unknown lands. In fact, the entire ministry of the prophet Nahum, which we encounter two books later in the Old Testament, is entirely dedicated God's condemnation and judgment upon Nineveh! In no world is Nineveh supposed to receive God's mercy.

But of course, the joke's on Jonah. Because the God who is faithful, and whose grace holds Jonah even when he is stubborn – even when he is petulant – is also faithful, and gracious, and merciful to the Ninevites. The God of Israel is a God's whose love knows no limits: a God who loves outsiders, even a God who loves enemies. In the end, the story of Jonah is a story about what the Apostle Paul refers to as the "foolishness of God": the outrageous, even *absurd* expansiveness of God's grace.

The joke's on Jonah, yes. But of course, the joke is also on us. Because from time to time, we all behave like Jonah, don't we? We know that we, too, can be self-centered and narrow-minded, particularly when it comes to people we consider our enemies. We know that we, too, can get trapped in an 'us v. them' mentality, where *we* get to decide gets God's love, and who does not.

We laugh when we hear Jonah's story – and we *should* laugh; it's good comedy! But in laughing at Jonah, we are gently tricked into laughing at ourselves. At our own self-righteousness in the face of God's unfathomable grace. At our own attempts to decide who is 'in' and who is 'out', when we are talking about a God who has broken down all walls, so that 'in' and 'out' are things of the past. At our own hard-heartedness, even as we worship a God whose heart breaks to see even a single sparrow fall from the sky.

Sometimes, the best way to respond to God's grace is simply to laugh. For we worship a crucified God who has made foolish the wisdom of the world. We worship a God who blesses his people through crazy, outrageous means. A God who gives Abraham and Sarah a son in their

old age. A God who chooses to become incarnate in the world as a tiny, poor child. A God who dies so that we all might live. A God whose grace is so beautiful, so foolish, and so absurd, that it gives us cause to laugh out loud.

Friends, if I understand the text, the story of Jonah invites us to delight in the foolishness of God. To marvel at the vastness of God's grace, at the absurdity of God's love even for our enemies. At God's love even for us.

In a world with troubles all too serious, perhaps it's important to be reminded that we worship a God who laughs. A God who can reveal his love and grace and truth...in a joke. Maybe, sometimes, laughter itself is the point.

Because friends, when we allow ourselves to laugh at Jonah – and, in all our humanness, to laugh at *ourselves* – we set ourselves and one another free to joyfully receive and rejoice in the absurd and foolish and outrageous expanse of God's amazing grace.

So maybe today, in the midst of all that weighs us down, let us look at that impossible cross that has conquered the grave, and with the joy of the people of God, throw our heads back and laugh.

¹ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1987), p. 103.