

“God of All People”  
Jonah 3:1-10

In his book *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James tells the story about a man who found himself sliding down an overhanging place on a dark night. Finally, he caught hold of a branch which stopped his fall, and for hours he remained clinging to the branch hanging over space in misery. He felt the strength gradually draining out of his arms, and finally he realized that his muscles would no longer respond to his will. With a despairing farewell to life, he let go and dropped. But he fell just 6 inches to safety on the ledge that was just below him all that time. So much of his agony could have been spared if he could have seen his situation in the proper perspective, and stopped struggling against a problem which was largely the creation of his own mind. Sometimes we define the world as a hostile place and our problems ensue as a result of this definition. Negative past experiences teach us not to trust the world around us.

So was the case of our dear prophet Jonah. His negative outlook on the people he was sent to reflects much of our human tendencies against those we label as our enemies. Although the book of Jonah is fairly short, it has great wisdom for us today as we look at our life and our world. This is an excellent parable that teaches us some enduring truths about faith and God. Many of the Jewish scholars consider this book to be a parable or a midrash that teaches a lesson. What we read today is the second time Jonah received his call from God to go to the people of Nineveh to give them the word of God and tell them to repent. The first time Jonah received this call, he resisted it and went instead somewhere else. So, we wonder today why the resistance? Why did Jonah reject God’s command to preach the message of God to the people of Nineveh? How could he defy God’s command? Why did he have to be swallowed up by a big fish in order to really listen? What branch of safety was he holding on to?

I think it is easy to judge Jonah and think that if we were in his shoes, we would have acted differently. But with this kind of assumption we would miss the real point of the story. The time of the writing of this book is not known for sure but scholars estimate that it was after the destruction Assyria which included Nineveh. The book was also written after the Jews had returned from exile and were feeling pretty insecure about their lives and hated their neighboring countries. Nineveh represented to them the evil that was lurking to destroy them. The people of Israel turned inward and began to only think about their own interests because they were afraid. In fact, the image of Jonah being in the belly of the big fish was symbolic of the people’s experience in exile where they had to leave their homes and felt that they were living in the belly of the beast. So, with this background, we can see that Jonah’s resistance to go preach to the people of Nineveh was based on the real fears and anxieties of his people. They did not want to think that God could care about their enemies and certainly did not want to be used to bring any hope to them. They did not want to trust their tormentors.

Of course an amazing thing happens when Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and preaches to them. They actually repent! They put on themselves sackcloth and they fast and do everything in their power to prepare themselves to change their ways. What a shock to Jonah this must have been! What a shock to the people of Israel this must have been! The Assyrians, the enemies of God’s people, the evildoers all of sudden repent and change their ways. This was certainly not what they would have expected. Jonah himself was not happy to hear about this. He did not like the fact that the people of Nineveh actually repented and God forgave them. He wanted them to be destroyed by God’s wrath. That would have been a more appropriate ending to the story from Jonah’s perspective. But this is the way of the kingdom of God which Jesus preached. It is about this reversal of our expectations. It is about knowing that God is the creator of all of humanity and the invitation is to look at the whole world as our country and the whole human family as our own family.

This was certainly a difficult message for the people of Israel and it is message for us today, especially with our world conflicts as they stand. It is more comfortable for us to define those who are friends and those who are our enemies. This way we know where we stand and how to

act. It is much more difficult for us to see the bigger view of the world where all have their place in God's creation. Some Christians even to this day believe in a violent outcome of a final Armageddon in which divine forces will aid in the victory over other "evil empires."

Several years ago Rabbi Michael Lerner wrote a book called "The Politics of Meaning." Lerner said that too often we give up on our deepest held values of compassion, caring and community because they do not seem practical in the real world. Instead, an ethos of selfishness and materialism prevails by default. These are the values that we settle for when our deeper values seem out of reach.

But this is exactly why we need the message of Jonah and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This vision of God's universal love can challenge us out of our comfort zones so that we can see beyond our little artificial boundaries to reach out in love to the world and ultimately to reach deep within us to connect with the universal love that God has placed within our hearts. This is who we are created to be and all the stuff of fighting and hatred comes to us as mechanisms for coping and survival. By reaching out in love to all, we can become more true to ourselves.

The Jewish writer Elie Weisel retells the story of Jonah noting that Jonah is to teach the Gentiles without ceasing to be Jewish...It is the Jew in him who will teach the Gentiles. The more Jewish the poet, the more universal his message. The more Jewish his soul the more human his concerns. A Jew who does not feel for his people, who does not share in their sorrows and joys cannot feel for other people and a Jew who is concerned with his fellow Jews is inevitably concerned with the faith of other people as well.

This is especially challenging for our American experience, especially in these difficult economic times. In his book, *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria writes a very provocative statement, "This is not a book about the decline of America, but rather about the rise of everyone else." Zakaria describes a world in which the United States will no longer dominate the global economy, orchestrate geopolitics, or overwhelm cultures. He sees the "rise of the rest"—the growth of countries like China, India, Brazil, Russia, and many others—as the great story of our time, and one that will reshape the world. The tallest buildings, biggest dams, largest-selling movies, and most advanced cell phones are all being built outside the United States. This economic growth is producing political confidence, national pride, and potentially international problems. How should the United States understand and thrive in this rapidly changing international climate? What does it mean to live in a truly global era?

Whether you agree with Zakaria's perspective or not, the challenge is always before us of how to relate to others in our world, especially today as our world gets smaller. Whether we like it or not, we are connected to all the earth. What ails us, ails them. What we do here with our water resources affects people around the globe. What they do with their resources, affects us as well. So, in the midst of all of this, how do we see the global nature of the kingdom of God? How do we see the merciful nature of God's love even for those who are considered our enemies? How do we cultivate a sense of connection to those we label as the enemy without endangering ourselves?

I know that there are no easy answers to this challenge because the dangers and threats we face are real. Yet, the vision of God's universal love and the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ are compelling to all of us and we must struggle with their implications for our lives because our own souls are at stake.

Once a father was trying to keep his children entertained, but he was not having too much success. It was a wet Saturday, and the children were getting bored. They were starting to get on his nerves, with their restlessness and their constant chattering. But the man was inventive, and suddenly he had an idea. He took down a magazine from the shelf and opened it up, looking through it until he found a map of the world printed on one page. He tore this page out of the magazine, and proceeded to cut it up with scissors into small pieces. Then he jumbled up all the pieces and placed them in a pile on the floor, like the pieces of a jigsaw. Then he set his two young sons the task of putting the map together again, thinking that this would keep them quiet for a good long time. He left them with it and went off to make himself a cup of coffee. Imagine

his amazement, when five minutes later he came back to find the map neatly and accurately put back together again. He said to them, "How did you manage to put it back together again so quickly?" The younger boy said, "Oh, it was so easy. You told us it was a map of the world and when we looked at the pieces, at first we didn't know where to start. It seemed impossible. But then we realized that there was a picture of a person on the other side, so we put the person back together again. When we turned it over, the world had come back together again as well!" The other brother chimed in, "It's ever so easy. If the person is okay, the world is okay. If the world is okay, the person is okay."

Our well-being is connected to the well-being of all of God's creation. The kingdom of God is for all people in all places, including you and me. Are we up to the challenge that Jonah faced in relating to his enemies? Are we up to the challenge of God's universal love transforming our relationships, our communities, our world and even our old animosities? Amen.

#### Resources used in the sermon today

James, William, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Touchstone, 1997.

Lerner, Michael, *The Politics of Meaning*, Perseus Books, 1997.

Wiesel, Elie, *Five Biblical Portraits*, Notre Dame Press, 1981.

Zakaria, Fareed, *The Post-American World*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008.