

Jonah selected verses - What Kind of God?

With all the recent religious radicalizations and the ongoing culture wars south of the border, people are asking “What kind of God...?”

Recently I heard this response “The God my mother worshipped wouldn’t want that.”

In Epiphany we review the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Last Sunday we sat in on the call of the disciples. Today is an opportunity to look at just what kind of God is calling them and calling us. The Book of Jonah still provides a wonderful metaphorical window to see and answer the questions “What kind of God?”

Today’s readings capture the main points of the Jonah story. This fantastical tale is set in the 8th Century B.C.E. It is a teaching tale set at the time when the mighty Assyrian Empire was threatening the borders of Israel.

Scholars tell us that the book of Jonah was actually written 300 years later, in the 5th Century B.C.E. It was written at the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple after the Exile in Babylon. The story deals with the issue of re-establishing Judea in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. We know it is always safer to set a tale in another time period when we are questioning the control system of our own day.

Remember Ezra and Nehemiah show up after some years of re-occupying Jerusalem and say to the early wave of re-builders, “Come you out from among them and keep yourselves pure.” In other words get rid of your Samaritan wives and little half-breed children and marry only the daughters of Judah, who are coming in the second wave of resettlement. Such harsh requirements to maintain purity, such cruel acts to remain exclusive causes some to ask,

“What kind of God is guiding the re-construction era?”

So in this teaching story, this cautionary tale, Jonah is presented as a prophet of old. He knows God. He can talk with God. In fact he has been getting a little worried about God lately.

God seems to be going a little soft on crime. The ‘eye for an eye’ of Exodus isn’t so pronounced these days.

God seems to be going soft on judgement and retribution.

God seems to be going soft on purity and exclusion.

So when God calls to Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, their hated enemy, Jonah wants nothing to do with it. If God is going soft on punishment and purity, Jonah is going off in the opposite direction. But a storm blows up and Jonah’s scheme is revealed and he is thrown overboard.

The next thing we know, Jonah is swallowed up by a sea monster. There, Jonah languishes for three days obviously beyond God’s concern, since Jonah has been swallowed by an unclean sea creature. A ritually unclean sea monster with skin not scales, because anything large enough to swallow him is in this

category. Jonah laments to God anyway – and unexpectedly, God hears his cry and incorrectly, erroneously in fact has the sea monster spit Jonah up on the beach. Now, if Jonah's God were really big on purity the way Jonah wanted God to be, Jonah wouldn't have seen the light of day or the beach for that matter.

Jonah travels to Nineveh this time, a city so large that it takes three days to pass through on foot. He enters the city going a-day's walk and tells them "in forty days they will be destroyed." Word quickly spread and overnight the king and all his subjects unexpectedly, maybe even unbelievably repent. What's more even the beasts of burden put on sackcloth and ashes. Now, friends this is more than amazing, don't you think? Jonah goes a third of the distance and the Ninevites go the rest of the way and then some. Are we getting the tongue in cheek yet?

Are we getting the exaggeration here that assists metaphor.

Of course, Jonah was always afraid something like this might happen, and with God going soft on purity and soft on punishment, it is the worst of possible outcomes.

"What kind of God is this?" Jonah is so angry he wishes he were dead. So he leaves the city and sits in the scorching sun to see what happens.

Friends, we all have our Jonah moments.

We all have our Jonah moments when God calls us to be compassionate and we so don't want to be, even though God has been compassionate to us.

We all have our Jonah moments when we want to get even, counting the times before we can self-righteously strike back, and yet God keeps saying in our ear "forgive", just as God has continually forgiven us.

We all have our Jonah moments when we want to practice being right instead of being kind or helpful, even though God has brought kindness and assistance into our lives over and over again.

We all have our Jonah moments when we want to remain pure or exclusive. When don't want to play by the new rules of acceptance and inclusion. When we feel we still have the right to be angry and dismissive of others as unworthy. Even though God in Jesus embraces our humanity and enables us to intensify our own, to embrace and include others.

Friends, we have all been there one-way-or-another. When there is too much about me or too much about us and there is not enough about gratitude or respect for others.

Now God isn't finished with Jonah, or us, for that matter. In response to Jonah's self-righteous indignation simmering in the sun, God causes a bush to grow up and shelter Jonah from the rays. The next day, God causes a worm to eat the bush and destroy it. Now Jonah is even angrier and feels sorry for the bush. He is now totally caught up in self-referencing. He is totally caught up in that vortex of intense over the top self-involvement.

Then God asks, "Why are you angry about the destruction of the bush and not about the destruction of Nineveh with its 120,000 inhabitants?"

So what kind of God guides the re-construction of Judea?

The Book of Jonah suggests:

The kind of God who includes and values each and every one of us.

The kind of God who accepts and forgives everyone.

The kind of God who redeems, resources and sets us all free for God's New Day, if we are willing to engage it

What kind of God guides the re-construction of Christianity today?

The same kind of God:

Who includes and values each and every one of us, on earth.

Who accepts and forgives everyone.

What kind of God?

The same kind of God who redeems resources and sets every one of us free for God's New Day, if we will accept it.

The God who keeps teaching us that we are all in this together.

Like Jonah. Like the Ninevites. Like the Disciples, it is up to each of us to respond.

Application for Today:

Accepted, valued, forgiven, redeemed, resourced and liberated people live with an attitude of gratitude and a deep respect for all, since we know, we are all in this together.

Amen.