

Jonah: Run!

Jonah 3:1-10

There's an old story that has any number of versions, but it seems while reading her Bible on a public bus, a belligerent man confronted a rather bashful Christian girl. With disdain he asked if she believed everything in the Bible. She said she did.

The guy rolled his eyes and said, "If you believe EVERYTHING in the Bible, then explain to me how Jonah lived for three days in the belly of a whale!" The young woman answered, "I don't really know, but I believe he did."

The guy became even more agitated. "Look, you should be able to explain what you believe!"

She respectfully and quietly repeated her inability to know exactly how Jonah survived. She talked about it all being a matter of faith but that wasn't enough. This guy just kept pushing until finally she said, "Well, I guess I'll just ask Jonah when I get to heaven." Sarcastically, the guy said, "And what if Jonah didn't make it to heaven?"

She paused for a second and said, "Well, then you can ask him." And then she went back to reading her Bible.

This is one of the most famous fish stories of all time. Granted most people don't really know how it ends or how it begins.

I had an English literature professor tell the class that he thought this was the perfect short story. It's only 4 chapters long and only contains 48 verses.

So, here he is, one of the most unlikely prophets of them all.

The story is simple. One day Jonah is minding his own business and suddenly God's there and says, "I want you to go to Nineveh and hold a revival. Tell them they better get their act together and straighten up. I'm watching."

Jonah gives God a big smile and says, "Sure thing Lord." And the minute God turns God's back, Jonah spins around and does a perfect Jesse Owens imitation and runs as fast as he can, in the other direction. He jumps onto a ship headed to Tarshish and hopes God won't notice. Well, God does notice and sets up a storm to trouble the boat.

Now here's the odd thing. The sailors turn out to be praying men. While the storm was raging, Jonah was down below and asleep. The crew was down on their knees praying. They woke him up and told him he better get praying to his God or they're all going to drown.

Jonah says, "Fine, this is all my fault anyway. I'm a Hebrew and I'm running away from God. The only way to save yourselves is to throw me overboard."

Then along comes this big fish. Rather than letting Jonah drown, which Jonah obviously thought was better than holding a revival in Nineveh. God sent the big fish to act as Jonah's very own private Taxicab to haul him off to where he was supposed to go in the first place.

It was a miserable trip for Jonah and even worse for the big fish. After a while, even the big fish couldn't stomach Jonah. It's a good thing Jonah had spent time praying because the big fish could see the benefit of going back to being a non-prophet entity. But apparently the prayer worked. So, to oblige God and relieve himself, the big fish "spewed Jonah out. The big fish tossed its cookies and tossed Jonah out of its life.

That brings us and Jonah up to the doorstep of Nineveh and the revival. Reluctantly Jonah walks to the center of the city and delivers this message: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He might have even been wearing one the sandwich board signs with the words "The World Will End In Forty Days."

It was the lamest revival and sermon anyone had ever heard. The sermon was too brief. He just told them they didn't HAVE a prayer. "Nineveh is going to be destroyed in 40 days." And then he left. He didn't even stick around to see what happened.

Instead, he went out to wait hoping he was going to get to watch a good fireworks show. He was already to see Nineveh destroyed. But you know what happened? It was the biggest revival of all time. 120,000 people got right with God. They all repented, the whole nation even the animals fasted and wound up in sack cloth and ashes. Nobody wanted to be left out.

Now you'd think Jonah would be happy. But he wasn't. Instead, he got right in God's face and said, "I knew you were going to do this. I knew from the get-go, that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. That's why I ran away."

That day Jonah sat there in the sun in a stew of his own anger. God on the other hand, took pity on Jonah and made a gourd plant grow up in one day so Jonah could sit in the shade of its leaves. The next day though, God sent a worm to destroy the plant. And that made Jonah even madder.

And that's when God said, "OK, enough is enough. You've had your say. Now here's mine. You're angry about the bush and the loss of shade and yet you did nothing to grow it. I did.

You're more concerned about the trivial insignificant things than you are about the people of Nineveh who are my children, too. Shouldn't I be concerned for these 120,000 people and their animals, who don't know their right hand from their left?"

God reminds Jonah that God is the creator and God of everyone, and there's no getting away from it or from God.

There's lots of little things to be learned from this passage and from Jonah. One, you can't outrun God. I tried when God first called me to ministry. You see who won that race. I didn't want to do it because I couldn't see how God could use someone like me for something as awesome as this. But no matter where I turned, God was there, reinforcing that Call.

Second, we are not the only children of God in the world. I believe that all the people of the world are God's children. I believe that all expressions of faith are windows into the love God has for us.

The third thing we learn is God is in charge. Like Jonah we have trouble with that sometimes. But there it is, God is in charge. God has always been and always will be in charge.

The little things do matter. Jonah gave a little sermon, but God used it in a powerful way. The sailors had a little humility, enough to allow them to pray to God even though Jehovah wasn't their God. That little bit of humility and faith was enough to save them. And God used a little thing like a worm to teach Jonah about how much God loves the world and how much God wants to redeem the entire world.

There are little things we can do and are doing as individuals and as a congregation that make a difference in our community and world. It is in the little things that we show the love of God to all people. It is the little things that remind us that God is in charge. And through the little things God can make great things happen, even when we're reluctant. Amen.