

WHEN GOD WORKS THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET

We have the musical, *JONAH*, being presented later this week and next Sunday in worship. I know that Mike Haines already preached a sermon about the *Book of Jonah*, which I hope you all heard. But I'D like to visit the story AGAIN as we prepare our hearts and minds to watch the musical and to CONSIDER this short but very IMPORTANT book of the Bible. So, let me share some THOUGHTS with you today. Nineveh was a city located to the northeast of Israel, in what is present-day IRAQ. And it was the capital city of a nation called ASSYRIA. We don't know EXACTLY where TARSHISH was located, but it's RUMORED to have been in present-day SPAIN. So TARSHISH was at the end of the WORLD as far as the Israelites were concerned. So, God tells to Jonah: *Go over to Nineveh and preach.* HOWEVER, the people of Nineveh were Israel's ENEMIES. You see: the Assyrians had HUMILIATED and CRUSHED Israel, and then, STRIPPED them of their CULTURE, their LAND, and in many cases, their LOVED ones, as they EXILED the Israelites to their own land, a FOREIGN land. Jonah, therefore, DOESN'T want to PREACH to the Ninevites. They are HORRIBLE people! Jonah would RATHER just have GOD push the DELETE key and OBLITERATE them from the face of the earth. SO, Jonah gets on a SHIP and heads in the opposite direction! There's NO pious, *Here I am, Lord, send me*, in THIS story! Jonah just RUNS!

Of course, WE can understand Jonah NOT wanting to go to Nineveh. Who WOULD in Israel? It would be like US being sent to preach to Al-Qaeda! On the OTHER hand, God tells Jonah: *Cry OUT against Nineveh; for their wickedness has come before me!* SO, WHY wouldn't Jonah want to GO and preach PROPHETICALLY to Nineveh and tell them just how WICKED they are? Well, LATER we find out that it's because he's afraid that his preaching might actually WORK! After all: WHAT if the Ninevites actually LISTEN and REPENT? And WHAT if God FORGIVES them? What THEN? With US as the GOOD guys, and those terrible Ninevites as the BAD guys, WE know where we STAND. But if they REPENT (which literally means *to turn around, to change direction*), THEN where would WE be? WHO would be the GOOD guys and WHO the BAD?

So, Jonah BOLTS! He tries to go where God is NOT, which leads us to the ONLY episode in the book of Jonah that most of us KNOW very well. Jonah is cast OVERBOARD in a storm and is promptly EATEN by a big FISH. And after three days and nights of SEVERE indigestion, the great fish finally *VOMITS Jonah on the sand* (2:10), on the VERY shore from which Jonah had LEFT. And God comes to Jonah AGAIN and says: *Let's go over this ONE more time, THIS time in SINGLE-syllable words: 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you!'* (3:2). And Jonah, WORN OUT from his adventures in the belly of the 'FISH', has NO strength left to resist. And with the enthusiasm of a sullen adolescent, he begrudgingly DOES what God commands of him. He GOES to Nineveh.

And when he gets to the edge of Nineveh, he delivers a one-sentence SERMON -- just 8 words in English, and only 5 in Hebrew. He didn't spend a lot of time WRITING it, that's for sure! There are NO illustrations or poems, NO pithy slogans or alliteration. He simply says: *40 days MORE, and Nineveh shall be OVERTHROWN!* (3:4) THEN, he packs his bags. It's like he's saying: *There! Are you satisfied, Lord? I preached. It's done! NOW, I'M going HOME!* But MUCH to Jonah's AMAZEMENT, the response to the Bible's shortest and WORST sermon is the GREATEST response in the entire BIBLE! It's a breathtaking SUCCESS! ALL the people of this HUGE city REPENT! They throw ALL of their little statues of FERTILITY gods into a FIRE!

They start FASTING! They put on SACKCLOTH, from the oldest to the youngest! They roll in ASHES. Even the KING, who must have HEARD Jonah's sermon SECONDHAND, repents! (3:8). Even the CATTLE repent! Dogs, cats, kings! EVERYBODY repents!

And JONAH? What does HE do? HE could have said: *Hey, I've ALWAYS been good on my feet! What do you think of THAT sermon?* But NOT Jonah! Instead, Jonah gets MAD and DEPRESSED. *I KNEW this would happen!* he pouts to God. *Why do you THINK I high-tailed it to Tarshish? I KNEW You to be a God of MERCY and FORGIVENESS, a LOVER of LOSERS like the Ninevites. How DARE you FORGIVE these people?* And the story ENDS, with Jonah overlooking the city of Nineveh and POUTING.

Well, friends, **WHY** do you think that this STORY -- this whimsical, exaggerated, JOKE of story, would MAKE the Scriptures, would MAKE the CUT? WHY would it be TOLD to Israel in the first place, because THESE are ISRAEL'S scriptures? And WHY would it be passed down to US? WHY? Well, I think that it's a SATIRE, a SATIRE that applies to EVERY generation, even OURS. And it REMINDS us that, EVEN in the community of FAITH – or maybe ESPECIALLY in the community of faith – we tend confuse what WE hate with what GOD hates. But the *Book of Jonah* holds UP for us a MIRROR for us to USE in examining OURSELVES. You see, it's very EASY for us, especially THESE days, to point to ALL the HATE crimes and terrorism, all the HATE groups and terrorists, and ALL the WEBSITES that foster and perpetuate HATE, and to say: *THOSE people are SICK! THOSE people are BAD!* And we see OURSELVES as totally INNOCENT and blameless, and ON the side of RIGHT, and GOODNESS. But JONAH presents us with a PAINFULLY clear reflection of OURSELVES. Yes, WAR criminals, deranged ZEALOTS and HATE-MONGERS display a glaring, colorful HATEFULNESS that we ALL can SCORN. But Jonah REMINDS us that hate ALSO takes SHAPE in souls that APPEAR to be RESPECTABLE and FAITHFUL, souls like JONAH'S, and YOURS, and MINE. I mean, don't WE very OFTEN experience a touch of JOY when others FALTER and FAIL? Don't WE very OFTEM have some SADNESS when others find PLEASURE? Don't WE very OFTEN rejoice when those we DESPISE – or maybe just find ANNOYING – have to SUFFER? Well, Jonah EXPOSES this tendency in ALL of us, AS he sits there POUTING next to Nineveh. I mean, Jonah is like the Patron SAINT of ALL those who secretly SMILE when the high school PROM queen shows up at her 30th REUNION with 100 extra pounds and her 4th husband. JONAH is like the SOULMATE of ALL those who enjoy reading in the newspaper about some “family values” politician who gets photographed NAKED in a hot tub with some woman who is NOT his wife. JONAH is like the POSTER child of ALL those who take PLEASURE in having their BOSS suddenly FIRED, with 15 MINUTES to clean out his office. Yes, Jonah REMINDS us that HATE takes shape EVEN in souls like OURS, souls that APPEAR to be respectable and faithful.

You see, friends, our FAITH and our understanding of the HISTORY of God's salvation TEACHES us HOW we are to LOOK at the world. And according to the JONAH'S story, God saves EVEN our ENEMIES, IF they TURN from FAITHLESSNESS to HOLINESS, IF they REPENT and TURN their lives AROUND, and turn toward GOD and goodness. But the PROBLEM is that that HURTS those of us who take DELIGHT in the notion that God DETESTS all the people and ideas and organizations that WE detest. It's so EASY to unmercifully POLARIZE the world into “good guys” and “bad guys.” But Jonah REMINDS us that TRUE wickedness does not SPRING from the fact that YOU are not like ME, or THEY are not like US. True WICKEDNESS comes about when people are NOT like GOD, whether those people are Israelites or Ninevites, Iraqis or Americans, Democrats or Republicans, or ANY of us. The POINT of the story of Jonah is that God's VISION is a Kingdom where GOD is KING, and EVERYONE is invited to be PART of it,

EVEN your co-worker who stabs people in the back, EVEN your neighbor who YELLS at your kids, EVEN the LAY leader in church who is always SO self-righteous, and yes, EVEN those terrible Ninevites, even that awful TALIBAN, and even YOU and ME. Yes, God's PLAN of SALVATION is for EVERYBODY to be SAVED by turning AWAY from wickedness and TOWARD the ONLY God who can FREE a guy from the belly of a fish, and the ONLY God who can transform an entire city of heathens, and the ONLY God who can MELT the most HATEFUL of hearts. Sometimes we are SO SURPRISED to find GOD working the OTHER side of the street! But it's TRUE! God does NOT play favorites! God wants ALL of us. God works BOTH sides of the street! And WE need to REALIZE that and HELP God in God's WORK of salvation.

During the Vietnam War, a U. S. PILOT was bearing down on a Vietnamese village to drop his bombs. And as he was pushing through the clouds, he caught a glimpse of a CHURCH. He later said: *It must have been Sunday because I could see a crowd of people entering the church in the village. It was only a glimpse, but I could see it clearly. They were CHRISTIANS. Nobody ever told me that VIETNAM was a CHRISTIAN country too. It could have been MY hometown, and MY Catholic church. THEY looked JUST like US. THEY worshipped the SAME way we worshipped. Nobody ever TOLD me!* Friends, think about THAT on this Veteran's Day weekend.

Friends, DON'T you see? It's SO much EASIER to have an ENEMY than to have a PROBLEM? SO, very often, INSTEAD of taking responsibility for the dilemmas, struggles and problems that PLAGUE us, we try to BLAME someone ELSE. Well, AGAINST our propensity to BLAME, and to divide up the world into US and them, friends and enemies, the Bible HURLS this playful tale of JONAH. And the point IS that if GOD manages to care, EVEN for the Ninevites, if GOD manages to find a place in the divine HEART even for THEM, then God ALSO loves, and will FORGIVE, even OUR enemies, even those who HURT us.

Friends, let's not fall PREY to the temptation to confuse what WE hate with what GOD hates. And let's NOT be SURPRISED when we find out that GOD is working the OTHER side of the street TOO. And let's BE thankful that WE know the TRUTH, that if GOD'S heart is big enough for the NINEVITES, God's heart is ALSO and ALWAYS, big enough for you and ME as well, EVEN when WE have sinned and fallen short. Yes, LET'S be THANKFUL people, rather than RESENTFUL people. And OUT of our gratitude, let us learn to LOVE our neighbors AS ourselves, the SECOND greatest commandment according to Jesus. Furthermore, let's do OUR very best to LOVE even our ENEMIES and THOSE who HURT us. For THAT is what Jesus DEMANDS of ALL of us? Isn't that at the very CORE of His teachings, when He says *Love your enemies and PRAY for your persecutors?* Well, that's a TOUGH one, isn't it?

You know, we NEVER find out whether Jonah EVER stops POUTING. The book ENDS with Jonah POUTING! And WHAT that says to ME is that there are NO easy ANSWERS here. So WHAT will YOU do, and WHAT will I DO, in response to this IMPORTANT story that LIES at the heart of our sacred TEXT? I think I'll just leave us struggling with THAT one as we prepare for next weekend. I hope you ENJOY the show! AMEN.

(With thanks to my colleague, William Willimon, for some of the thoughts & imagery in this sermon.)