

-Happy Epiphany to all of you. Epiphany: a season where we commonly talk about light and following the call of God. (A good time, ironically to have an Annual Meeting I think!) As I indicated to you last week, we are going through several call-stories of characters in and throughout scripture. This includes this story of Jesus calling his disciples (last week from the Gospel of John, this week from the Gospel of Mark). I would like to, this week, turn our focus this week to Jonah from the Old Testament. Jonah.....there is a lot to say about Jonah. Instead of zeroing in on this single part of Jonah that the lectionary chose for us, I want to instead retell the entire story of Jonah. The story of Jonah is not so long and plus, when you get something in its entirety you can gain appreciation of themes and questions that can't be teased out when just reading a section. Plus, when was the last time you heard the entire story of Jonah (with some commentary from your pastor)? Probably not for a while and we all need some reminding of how it goes. So here it goes:

-Once upon a time there lived a man named Jonah, son of Amittai, one of the 12 tribes of Israel. One day, while Jonah was working, the great voice of God came to him and said: "Go at once to Nineveh (capital city of Assyria), that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." "Nineveh?" Jonah said to God. Are you *bleeping kidding me? Nineveh? You know what those s***holes do to people right? They invade your country, behead all the male community leaders, rape all the women and children, and then take them into slavery. You want me to go those *bleepers? Thank you, no. But the voice of God kept coming to Jonah again and again to the point where he couldn't get away from it. It was bugging him so much that he finally says: "*bleep you God!", bought a boat ticket for Tarshish (which was in the opposite direction from Nineveh) and took off hoping to get some relaxation in and away from God's annoying voice.

But God hurled a great wind upon the ocean and a mighty storm so rocked the ship that it almost was broken into bits. The mariners were beside themselves. "I've never seen a storm such as this!" one said. "What is happening to us??" said another. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it and help navigate the huge waves. Jonah, meanwhile, went down into the hold of the ship, hid under some blankets, and fell into an uneasy sleep. The captain, in a rush, discovered him and yelled: "what are

you doing sound a sleep?? You are a Jew aren't you?? Get up, call on your God so that we might be spared from this crazy storm!" The ship continued to be on the brink and the sailors began to place bets with one another who might be causing God to bring such a storm upon them. They saw Jonah shaking in the corner and asked: "Is it you? Who are you?" Jonah replied: "I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven and Earth who made the sea and dry land." This freaked the mariners out even more and they asked: "What the *bleep have you done?? What should we do to quiet this sea?" Jonah then said, quietly, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." The sailors tried even harder to keep the ship upright, but it was no use. So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea crying out "forgive us Lord!". To their astonishment, the sea immediately ceased its raging and it was calm. So moved were these men that all of them offered sacrifices and made vows to the God of Israel on the deck of the ship.

Jonah survived too, having been swallowed by a gigantic fish sent by God. He was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights. Jonah, realizing that he was still alive, started to sing: "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and God answered me!!" Then, the fish swam up and urped Jonah (and other contents) onto dry land. The voice of God came again to Jonah saying: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah, realizing where he was, slowly got up and started lumbering to Nineveh. Now Nineveh, was a huge city: a three days walk across. Jonah hated every inch of it. This was the enemy. "I am NOT going into the center of the city," he said to himself. So upon arriving at the city gate, Jonah took a couple steps into the city, raised his arms and said: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Thanks bye." In the instant that Jonah turned to walk out, traffic stopped. People looked at him and said: "May God have mercy upon us!". Every single person around Jonah bowed down and repented before God. The newspaper ran big headlines of Jonah's sermon: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!!" News reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with a sackcloth, and sat in ashes. He then made a proclamation: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd of flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered

with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; God may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish!" When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that was to come to Nineveh. It would not happen.

"Are you *bleeping kidding me?" said Jonah. "You are going to let these *bleepers live?" He then prayed to the Lord: "O God! This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; because I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and I hate it! I can't bear seeing these guys live another day! I hate them! Just end it now, God. Just take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than live seeing the people of Nineveh live too!" Then God said: "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah then bolted out of the city gate, sat on a hill overlooking Nineveh, and cried. The Lord appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, giving him shade which helped Jonah's mood somewhat. But then, the next day, God sent a worm which attacked the bush and it withered and died. The sun again beat down on Jonah and he again became mad. "Just end it all God! It's better for me to die than live!"

But then God said: "Jonah, is it right for you to be angry at the bush?" Jonah replied: "Yes! Angry enough to die!" God replied: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a day and perished in a day. Therefore, should I not be MORE concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left as well as many more animals?"

Here ends the story of Jonah. This story, we know, was purposefully written as a satire comedy to prove a point. A point that I think needs to be heard in our time and place too. Who are the Ninevites today and when have we purposefully gone in the opposite direction of God's call? What are we frustrated with God at? Perhaps most importantly: who are our enemies whom we never think God of working through? May we be able to take the story of Jonah to heart in our time and place and may God use us in ways we could never imagine. Amen.