

“Which Jonah Are You?”
Sunday, August 30, 2009
By Pastor Peter F. Paine

Pastor Paine started service with this joke:

There were three pastors on a boat. Their ship wrecked, so they found themselves in the middle of the ocean on a life raft. They decided that this was their last chance to do like the Bible instructs and “confess their faults one to another”.

The first pastor spoke up: “I have to admit that one time years ago, I fell on some very hard times financially. One week when the church had a particularly large offering, I gave into temptation and I took some of that money. I have never forgiven myself for it. I know God has forgiven me and I have never considered doing it again.”

There was a long silence and then the second pastor began to speak: “Once on a mission trip, I did something terrible. I was unfaithful to my wife. That one mistake haunts me to this day. I have never told anyone, and the guilt I feel makes me sure I will never do it again, but that one time, I messed up.”

There was a long silence again. It lingered for several minutes. Finally, the first and second pastors turned to the third waiting for him to tell them what he was holding on to.

Finally, he said “I’ve got a problem with gossip, and I can’t wait to get back to shore!”

We all have problems in our lives don’t we? No one is exempt from them. It’s part of the human experience.

Pastor Paine invited us to take a deep look at the story of Jonah. He started by saying that the book of Jonah is not necessarily about Jonah. It’s about all of us. Jonah was a man who was chosen by God to do something specific, and we are all people who are chosen by God to do something specific, but just like Jonah sometimes we face challenges in getting to where God wants us to be. Both spiritually and physically.

Here is a brief overview (paraphrased of course) of what we see through the course of the book of Jonah:

Jonah hears from God and finds out that he needs to go to Nineveh to warn the people that God is not going to put up with their sin any more. In response, Jonah decides to go the opposite direction from Nineveh. He goes to Tarshish instead. Jonah actually pays the money for a ticket to run away from where God was sending him. Basically, by his actions, Jonah is saying, “God, I don’t want to go warn the people in Nineveh that you’re angry with them. They’re not worth saving. They’re sinners. Just let them die that way.”

Once he got on the ship headed for Tarshish, a huge storm came, but Jonah was busy sleeping. When he woke up and realized what was going on (he had made God upset by deliberately disobeying him) he was thrown overboard by the other men on the ship who were trying to save their own lives. Jonah was swallowed by a “great fish” inside of whom he has the chance to spend a couple of days praying and getting the right perspective. After three days, Jonah finally goes to Nineveh.

We would think Jonah would be excited and thankful that God used him in such an amazing way that a whole city was saved, but instead he was frustrated that God sent him somewhere he didn't want to go in the first place and then ended up having mercy on the people Jonah was sent to warn. Once the whole city of Nineveh fasted and God delivered them, Jonah sat outside the city walls to sulk over having had to go through the whole ordeal. It took God revealing his love for the city for Nineveh to Jonah through a piece of fruit for him to finally get it.

Pastor Paine wanted us to remember a couple of key points about Jonah:
God wouldn't let Jonah off the hook even though he didn't want to be used.

God has been gracious to each of us. Why would we be angry when he's gracious to others? We shouldn't be.

Jonah had different attitudes along his journey with God. We all do. As our relationship with God grows and he expects more and more of us along our journey, we need to ask ourselves what attitude we have in reaction to those expectations. Pastor Paine asked the question this way: "Which Jonah are we?"

Are we the selfish Jonah? Do we find ourselves saying "God, I don't want to do that right now. It doesn't fit into my plan. I have other things on my agenda, so I'm going to go the other way and do what I want to do."

Are we the self-righteous Jonah? If so, we might find ourselves saying, "God, I know I need to go tell that person about your love, but can't you just do that on your own? I don't think they deserve your mercy the way I did. Look at the way they're living!"

Are we the willing Jonah who says, "God, I realize it's your plan for me to do this, so here I go."

Are we the ambassador Jonah? Maybe in our day in age it would sound like this: "God has shown me his love, and I can't keep it to myself. Do you know that He loves you and wants to have a personal relationship with you? Do you know that you can walk away from your sin right now and be cleaned by God through baptism in Jesus' Name? You can!"

Or are we the grumbler Jonah? Have you ever found yourself saying, "God, I know that it was your will for me to do that task and go through those circumstances, but come on. It was so much effort for such a small outcome. I don't know why you choose me to do all the dirty work sometimes. I mean, I love you and all, but that was a little excessive," then maybe you are Jonah the grumbler.

Why didn't God just call the next person in line when Jonah didn't want to do what God was telling him to do? Pastor Paine posed that it's because God's plan for Jonah didn't exist on the condition that Jonah bought into it. God wanted Jonah to do what he was designed to do, even if it took him a while to come around to admitting it. God's plan doesn't have some flaw that we're going to straighten out for him. Sometimes the only problem with God's plan is that we haven't gotten on board with it yet.

Many years ago, there was a person who came into a church and pulled the pastor aside. They told the pastor that they felt they really needed to do something for God in this ministry, and wanted to be put to work right away so they could make a difference. The pastor explained that they needed someone to come to the church on Saturday afternoons

to help clean the bathrooms to make sure that everything was ready for Sunday when all of our guests would arrive. The person was quick to correct the pastor and tell him that they saw themselves helping in a bit more visible role like the choir.

The fact of the matter is that the person who came offering help was looking for something that was “important” to do for God, but God doesn’t see one task as more important than others. In our individual walk with God, we need to come to terms with the fact that no matter how wonderful we might think we are, there is nothing God can ask us to do that is beneath us. Or, on the flip side of that thought, if we are coming to God, and He gives us a task that we think is way too great for someone like us, he will qualify us to do exactly what he has asked.

God used Jonah in spite of himself, and some of us find ourselves in a position even worse than Jonah’s when he was running away from God. We are saying “No thanks God, I don’t want to do that for you” and sitting on the sidelines. We have to stop talking to God and not listening when he is responding. We have to stop asking God for things all the time, but never being willing to act on our faith when He guides us.

No matter where we are in our journey with God, it’s not too late to start saying “Yes God, I’ll do whatever you want”, and when we have trouble figuring out what to do next, or finding out what’s standing in our way, just ask: “Which Jonah am I being right now?”