

"A Dangerous Mercy." Jonah (sel. Verses); Ps. 62:5-12; Mk. 1:14-20
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Throughout the month of January our scripture readings have related various "call" stories, God calling people to serve him. Last week we heard the Old Testament story of young Samuel and Jesus' call to Philip and Nathaniel in the gospel of John.

Today's we heard Jesus' call to the first disciples as Mark records it with the familiar invitation: "Follow me and I will equip you to fish for people." Mark tells us they responded immediately, leaving everything to follow Jesus. By contrast, Jonah left everything too, but not to follow God's call. It was to run away from it as fast as possible.

In the beginning Jonah was told to go and preach in Nineveh. Nineveh, we are told, took 3 days to walk across. Its walls were 100 feet high and 3 chariots could race along the top without touching hubs. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire → those "Bad Guys" who had laid waste to the whole Middle Eastern region.

Assyria was the Super Power of the day. The Assyrians had carried off whole nations into exile, including the Northern Kingdom of Israel and they almost succeeded in destroying Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom too.

In the Jewish imagination of Israel, if there were ever a people to hate, it was the Assyrians! They were right up there with the Philistines, the Egyptians and the Babylonians.

It's not surprising Jonah was dead-set against following God's command.

So instead of heading east to Nineveh, he heads west to Tarshish; away from Nineveh and out of the range of the God of Israel.

This is where the boat trip comes in, followed by the stormy seas and sailors desperately trying to lighten the load and save the ship, all the while praying to their various gods for rescue. We may have forgotten that they cast lots to see who was responsible for their troubles and the lot fell to Jonah. Cornered, Jonah tells them of his God and his vain attempt to get away from him. With the seas growing more and more violent with each passing minute, Jonah tells them to throw him overboard and all will be well.

We get some insight into Jonah's character at this point. He isn't a coward. He isn't lacking in compassion. In fact, Jonah had more compassion for the gentile sailors in the boat than for the gentiles in Nineveh. He's concerned for the welfare of the lost souls he can see, but not the ones he can't.

He extends a dangerous mercy to the sailors because he knows he is at fault and his death will save them.

Even so, the sailors try their hardest to row Jonah safely to shore; but they cannot. Finally, with a prayer to God to forgive them they toss Jonah over the side.

The sea goes calm. The sailors are even more terrified than before. Right then and there they are converted to worshipping the Lord God, maker of heaven and earth: Jonah's God. If nothing else, Jonah's sacrificial act turned a bunch of pagan sailors into believers.

But God isn't finished with Jonah, and exercises a dangerous mercy toward him too. A large fish swallows him up and he spends 3 days meditating on his life and his vocation. Finally he prays and his prayer

of thanksgiving ends with these words: "I, with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

And with these words Jonah is spit out onto dry land. He's a mess! ... Literally! And his story is messy too. One minute he is running away from his calling by God. The next minute he is courageously commanding the sailors to toss him overboard. In the belly of the fish one moment, having his prayer answered the next.

His deliverance by God's mercy and grace, however messy it might have been, sounds a note of hope for us and a reminder of God's patience and grace and God's call to service. God's voice comes to Jonah a second time, calling him again to head to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys. He preaches to the people of Nineveh saying, "Forty days and Nineveh will be no more!"

Regardless of how he said it, the people listened to Jonah's preaching. Everyone from the king on down repented with fasting and prayer. (Kids even made little sack cloth clothes for their pets). God saw their repentance and changed his mind about the destruction that he had planned for them.

Of course, Jonah was furious! He says to God: "I knew this would happen! That's why I headed to Tarshish in the first place! I knew you were gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... a real softy. I knew it! So why don't you just kill me now?"

But God simply says in reply, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Without giving God an answer, Jonah goes outside the city and sets up camp to wait and see what would happen to Nineveh. What was he thinking? That God would torch the place anyway? That the God of

the universe cared for some people more than others - Israelis more than Assyrians, good people more than bad people, Presbyterians more than pagans?

Was Jonah thinking that God should hate the people he hated too? I think he was expecting God to blast Nineveh anyway. It was just too awful a place, beyond redeeming. So he sits and waits for the other shoe to fall.

But it's a hot day and Jonah is getting fried. So God causes a bush to grow to give Jonah shade. It grows up in one day and Jonah is pleased to get some relief from the sun. The next day God sends a worm to attack the bush and it withers. The sun comes up. A hot, dry wind blows and Jonah is miserable and again asks to die.

God asks Jonah whether he is angry about the bush's demise. Jonah says, "Yes, you bet I am. I am angry enough to die." But God says, "Now let me get this straight: you are angry about this bush that grew up one day and was gone the next - this bush that you did nothing to grow or cultivate?"

"And if you are so concerned about that bush, why can't I be concerned about Nineveh and all its inhabitants who are my children too? Or should they all go up in smoke as a burnt offering to your bigotry and thirst for revenge?"

And that's where the story ends. No neat finish; lots of loose ends.

We may like the first part of the story of Jonah: the ship and the storm and the fish and the spitting up on dry land and all that. But how do we feel about the rest of the story?

What do we think about our God who may call us to do things that we'd rather die than do - - things like letting go of past hurts and prejudices, not striking back when provoked, forgiving those who hurt us? What do we think God is capable of doing in the world and in our lives? If God won't give up on Jonah and won't give up on the people of Nineveh isn't it possible that God hasn't yet and won't give up on us?

How is God reaching you these days? Is there a calling that you have studiously avoided? Are you somewhere on the road to Tarshish? Do you think you can really go anywhere that God is not able to reach out to you? Do you think that you have done anything that is beyond God's power to redeem and to save?

Isn't that the message of Jesus: God refusing to give up on us and reaching out to us with grace and mercy plus a mission and a calling?

But it's a dangerous mercy because we really don't know what it will lead to. Nevertheless, if God is bound and determined to win us over in love, what's to keep us from responding to his call? Oh yes, I forgot: our pride, our doubts, our fears, our history, our plans, and our schedules. But don't you think that God can work in and through us in spite of who we think we are and who we think God is?

It's really an amazing and marvelous journey, this life of faith, isn't it? How blessed we are to be - each one of us - the apple of God's eye and God's ambassador of hope, chosen to do special work in God's kingdom and for God's glory!

Oh, and those tickets you've bought for the boat to Tarshish? I'm told they are fully refundable...

Let us pray.