

I'll Do It, But I Won't Like It

Cycle #2 -- Session #6

I'll Do it, But I Won't Like It

Text: Jonah 3-4

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence

Song: This Is the Day -- #286 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

In the beginning, before time, before people,
before the world began

God was.

Here and now among us, beside us,

Enlisting the people of earth for the purposes of heaven,

God Is.

In the future when we have turned to dust

And all we know has found its fulfillment,

God Will Be.

Not denying the world, but delighting in it,

not condemning the world, but redeeming it through Jesus Christ,

by the power of the Holy Spirit,

God Was! God Is! God Will Be!

*From the **Wee Worship Book**, p. 13-14*

Welcome One Another. Spend a few minutes sharing with one another something or someone who touched you in some special way this week.

Cycle #2 – Session #6

Scripture

Jonah 3-4

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or 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; he 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 his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it.

Jonah's Anger

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

Jonah Is Reproved

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and
where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

The book of **Jonah** is dramatic, lively, moves us from the heavens to the depths of the sea on to dry land. It is a serious little book that asks big questions about the grace of God even toward the enemy. It is humorous. Its main character is fictional, and perhaps derives from a reference to an historical “servant of Yahweh”, Jonah son of Amittai, from Gath who was a prophet in the time of King Jeroboam who reigned in Samaria for forty one years and mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. Other than that one sentence there is no other reference to this prophet.

None of the questions that we of this early 21st century, American culture often ask such as *Who wrote the book? Why, When, Where?*”, have answers. We like for things to be clearly historical or story or whatever they are. We want to know is this story true? Instead this book presents us with a real mixture of what may relate to a particular time and place, condition of people, and even behavior we can recognize in Jonah and laugh about, because it’s him not us. It is one of those books that presents truth but isn’t necessarily factual.

The story unfolds in an orderly fashion in 48 verses.

Chapter 1 God calls Jonah to go to Ninevah and speak on God’s behalf to a people who were greatly in need of a message calling them to repent. This leads to Jonah’s running away to sea. The story of the storm and the sailors is a very compact piece which ends with the sailors worshiping God and Jonah having been thrown overboard.

Chapter 2 Jonah sinks into the ocean and is swallowed by a specially prepared great fish which swallows him and saves him from death. The Psalm which Jonah prays at the beginning of the chapter is made up of bits and pieces of many psalms. If you have a Bible which offers a listing of places where verses may also be found, you’ll notice that each of the 9 verses has at least one if not several sources. The chapter ends with Jonah being landed again on dry ground.

Chapter 3 This time when God speaks, Jonah does as God bids, gets up and goes to Ninevah, grumbling all the way. This chapter focuses upon his journey across the city and the fact that the people respond, from the king to the lowliest person on the street. God graciously forgives them and decides not to send destruction.

Chapter 4 This chapter could be called the chapter of the great sulk. God has been gracious and Jonah just can't stand it.

While scholars have tried to figure out the answers to the questions of when, where, how and why the story of Jonah was written down, other than being an interesting exercise, they appear to have been unable to come to any agreement. It may be that the time and place of the writing are not nearly as important as the message and could have easily been written in one of several time periods, before or after the exile, or after the fall of Assyria. That may in reality be its great gift to us, which allows it to move among the centuries and not be limited to somewhere back there. If you're interested in exploring what the scholars say, there are several good commentaries including the *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII*.

So just what kind of book is Jonah? It is listed among the *Books of the Twelve Prophets* along with the clearly historical prophets such as Micah and Amos. It has been described as allegory, teaching story, fable, fairy tale and folk tale as well as an historical account. Other words for describing it are *midrash*, which is a common practice in which a story is told about a reality and how it might have been. *For example one of my favorites come from the story of Mary and Martha that after having scolded Martha for being too anxious about unimportant things, Jesus goes into the kitchen and helps her clean up while they talk.* It has also been called myth novella, parable, parody, prophetic tale, saga, satire, sermon, short story, and even a tragedy. According to the classification used for Shakespeare's plays, it might also be called a comedy. No one is killed and while we're not sure whether Jonah gets over his sulk or not, even he is alright and his listeners are left with something both to think about and to laugh about. In reality, it contains elements of everything it has been called.

There are some elements which appear to be satirical or at least lend themselves to that kind of reading, Jonah's name for a starter. Jonah of Amittai means "*dove of faithfulness.*" He certainly does soar to the heavens, but goes down to the sea. He runs toward Tarshish in the most opposite direction from Ninevah that he can go. He refuses to go to the people of Ninevah even though God has sent him.

Which ever word you might choose by which to describe this tiny little book, it is a literary gem, tightly woven with no extra words or movements and carefully constructed. It is a story that can be understood by children and grownups alike. It could readily be adapted to a contemporary setting by simply changing some of the trappings of the story.

Jonah's theological perspective is complex. It begins with Jonah resisting God's call to do the work to which he is called, prophesy, speak on God's behalf. Jonah of course isn't the only one who ever tried to get out of answering God's call. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah are a few of the names which pop readily to mind. Of course Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the Apostle went to very stringent lengths to avoid encountering God. Except perhaps for Paul, Jonah exceeds all of them in resisting God's call. But fleeing from God's presence isn't enough to get out of the job. Even though Jonah had rejected God's call, God pursued him. While all the others who declined to speak on God's behalf did so out of their own sense of inadequacy, being too young, or the

message itself too dreadful, or being afraid for their own life. Jonah's biggest objection was geographical. He didn't want to go to Ninevah and he knew disaster could be avoided if they repented. He didn't want them to repent. He wanted them to get just what he thought they deserved. From his perspective that would have been justice. Instead he's serving God whom he understands to be gracious and merciful

Observation

As the scene opens on Chapter 3, Jonah has been called by God, tried to run away, been to the depths of the ocean and almost certain death. He has been rescued by God through the services of a "large fish" and been returned to dry land. He is now both where he started from and in a new place. His previous experience hasn't necessarily made him more willing to answer God's call, but there seems to be a sense of the futility of trying to avoid the thing God is calling him to do. So he, I suspect, begrudgingly sets off for Nineveh, probably grumbling all the way.

There are accounts of the actual city of Nineveh, which according to the list of nations in *Genesis 10* was founded by Nimrod, the mighty hunter and descendent of Noah. It was sometimes described as a place of evil incarnate, which from a prophet's point of view it undoubtedly was, not only because the people worshipped fake gods but they did not worship Yahweh. Apparently it was a place of violence as well as other evils. Nineveh in our story is legendary and God's attitude is that it is a great city whose people need to hear God's message, namely, if they don't repent, their city will be overthrown and destroyed. They have forty days to get their act together.

The city is so large it takes Jonah three days to make the journey. But its greatness is more than about size. As sometimes happens in translation from, in this case Hebrew to English, doesn't convey the richness of the meanings. Some other ways of understanding include 1) It is great in God's eyes, God rules over it, it is suitable as an abode for God (NIB, Vol. 11V, p. 51). From God's perspective, this city is worth saving. There is evil among the people, but the city is not inherently evil. Jonah doesn't share God's view.

Consider

1) Have you ever experienced God calling you to a particular task which you didn't want to do or from which you tried to run away? What happened? Was your avoidance related to feeling inadequate or just not wanting to deal with the people involved? 2) Have you experienced a discrepancy in how you have viewed a situation or a task and how you understand God's perspective?

Observation

Jonah reluctantly goes to do what he is supposed to do. He preaches repentance and the people respond, not just the ordinary people, but the king himself took off his robe and covered himself in the signs of mourning and repentance. Not only that, he announces that everyone else is to do the same. The people are to turn from evil and pray to God. While it seems Jonah was doing what he'd been told, he may not have

tried all that hard. He had walked a day into the city and preached, but he still had two days to finish his walk. Before he even gets across the city, the people, including the king has responded. The king has dumped the signs of his great power and replaced his royal attire with sackcloth and ashes. By decree he commands the whole city, including even the animals, to take the signs of repentance, just on the chance that God will relent.

Consider

There are four main “characters” in this story.

- 1) God who wants the people of Ninevah to repent so that God can do what God does best, offer grace and mercy. In other places there are other pictures of God as breathing fire, brimstone, and anger, but that isn't the picture here. There is the threat of destruction, but that is only if the people do not turn from their sin.
- 2) Jonah who has been described as the reluctant prophet. He is doing what God has told him to do, but is apparently hoping the people will not repent and instead will be destroyed.
- 3) The king of Nineveh who not only responds, but makes others respond.
- 4) The city and its entire people. If the city was so large it would take three days to walk across it, there must have been a great many people. Among that many people there must have been all kinds, good, bad, peaceful, violent, but the reality is they are all involved in what will happen to the whole. Spend some time looking at the events of this story from the perspective of each of the characters. What insights do you discover? Is there one character you identify with more than others?

Observation

When next we see Jonah he is in a major snit. First, he tells God off. God has done exactly what he expected him to do and that was why he had turned down the job in the first place. God had forgiven the people of Nineveh and decided not to destroy them or their city. God has shown them grace and mercy and Jonah had wanted vengeance. Jonah is so angry he declares he might as well be dead. God goes right to the heart of the matter, “Is it right to be so angry?”

Consider

Have you ever been in Jonah's shoes? Maybe not so angry you wanted to die, but angry because someone got off lightly? Have you ever seen people act out of disproportionate anger in your congregation? How do you respond? Where have you seen God's graciousness and mercy? In times of reactive anger as in Jonah's case, people are not thinking. When people are not thinking they say and do things that are out of proportion, make little sense, and can lead to major disagreements over nothing. In this case, it is Jonah who's throwing a tantrum, but Jonah isn't the only one.

Observation

God is at least as gracious to Jonah as he had been to the Ninevites. In spite of his major snit and his anger, God provides him with a shelter. Jonah is of course very pleased. He didn't really mean it when he said he might as well be dead. But he apparently isn't through sulking. So when he wakes up the next morning and a worm has killed his vine he is once again thoroughly ticked. Now he's sitting in the hot sun. It has gotten even worse because now there's a sultry wind blowing. I wonder why he didn't go inside instead of sitting on that hill?

Again Jonah says he wants to die. This time God asks him to look at reality, not a bad thing to do under the circumstances. Once before God has asked him if it is right for him to be so angry, first about the Ninevites and now about the bush. Jonah is apparently not going to be talked out of his sulk and replies that "Yes, he has every right to be this angry and he is angry enough to die." Again this seems a little out of proportion. God points out that he is so concerned over the bush which had sheltered him and protected him, a bush for which he had done nothing, but accept and enjoy because God had provided it and yet doesn't care about the people of Nineveh. Jonah is then left with the question. *And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?*

Consider

In the course of the story Jonah had experienced God's gracious mercy apparently without recognizing it. First, when he had run away from God, God rescued him and gave him another chance. Second, he has protected him from the scorching sun by a plant he did nothing to deserve. It simply grew up. It came as God's grace often seems to come to us, not because we deserve it, but because God loves us, even when we're not all that loveable. As you reflect on your own life, notice some of the places where God has been gracious and loving. How have you responded?

Observation

You may be wondering why I chose to use this story as part of a series related to transformation. There are probably several reasons, some of which I may not have yet recognized. But it seems to me that this is a story about the need for transformation. Both Jonah and the Ninevites are in need of deep inner change. The Ninevites need to turn in a new direction and Jonah needs to move from anger and vengefulness to recognizing that God's grace is for everyone. In times of change and transformation it is always a temptation to look at someone else and think they need to change. The reality is all of us have to change. For those of us who've been a part of the church for a long time, it isn't always easy to welcome people who are not like us. It isn't always easy for us to grasp that there's plenty of room at the table and Christ welcomes all, even if they do things differently or they don't know the stories we think they ought to or they use a different language.

While it is possible to dig much deeper into the meaning of various words and the structure of the story, I suspect it is best read as a story and not get too hung up on the details. You can spend time trying to figure out the nature of the fish and how that was possible or how a vine could grow up overnight and miss the point of the story. Jonah doesn't fit the usual description of a prophet and we never once hear prophetic phrases such as "The Word of the Lord came to..." or even exactly what the message was that Jonah was to preach and yet the people repented. Maybe it is just that when people are ready to hear God, they get it, even when we don't do our work as well as we might.

Consider

Where in this story do you find yourself? What might the message of this story be for you?

Activity (Optional)

Rewrite or retell the story of Jonah in our time. Who might Jonah be? What credentials might you want to give him? Who might Jonah be sent to? Who are people who are seen as evil or at least unworthy of God? What might God have to say?

Practicing the Presence

1) Sometime during the day this week, hold in prayer those persons who work in difficult places and perhaps struggle with the work they are asked to do and their desire to do something easier or different. If you wish, you might send that person a note to let them know you are holding them in prayer or to thank them for what they are doing.

2) This week focus on Micah 6:6-8, Habakkuk 3:17-19

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you - Jonah is a story, but one in which many of us find something of ourselves. If there is one thing you've learned from Jonah, what would it be?

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

(Responsively)

Because you made the world to be a good place,
and called its people your children;
because when things seemed at their worst
you came in Christ to bring out the best in us;
so gracious God, we gladly say,
**Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

Because confusion can reign inside us, despite our faith;
because anger, tension, bitterness and envy distort our vision;
because our minds sometimes worry small things out of all proportion;
because we do not always get it right, we want to believe:

**Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

Because you have promised to hear us, and are able to change us,
and are willing to make our hearts your home,
we ask you to confront, control, forgive and encourage us, as you know best.
(Pause)

Then let us cherish in our hearts that which we proclaim with our lips:

**Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

**Lord, hear our prayer, and change our lives
until we illustrate your grace, know you make all things new.
Amen**

Wee Worship Book, p. 21-21, adapted

Blessing (Unison)

**May God bless us and keep us in the Spirit's care
May Christ's warm welcome shine from our hearts
And Christ's own peace prevail, through this and every day
Till greater life shall call. Amen**

Wee Worship Book, p. 29, adapted

Song: Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal