

Sermon: *God Will Not Give Up on You (based on Jonah and the Whale)*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angles 1.21.24

Jonah 1, 2, 3:1-10

Psalm 62

Mark 1:14-20

I have taught ten confirmation classes, more Christian Adult Education classes than I can remember, and I used to teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade religion. In each setting, I ask this question: tell me a story from the Bible. I don't need chapter and verse; or for you to tell me if it's in the Old Testament or the New; just tell me a story. The story I get told often is Jonah and the Whale.

Do you know the story? Jonah gets swallowed up by a whale (or a large fish depending on your translation) gets spit out on the shore of a great city called Nineveh, tells the people in the city that in forty days that God will destroy them, they repent, and God changes his mind.

This is a popular story. There is a theme park in downtown Oakland (CA) that has a cement whale with a twelve-foot open mouth and the prophet Jonah standing on its tongue. This is the first of many wonderfully painted cement displays that the kids can play on. Next to it is the story of the three little pigs, humpty dumpty, and others. All fairy tales. Except for Jonah and the whale.

Today's lectionary readings include a small part of Jonah's story. This is the only time you'll hear, in the three-year cycle (except for year A where it is an optional reading next to Moses; like who ever would replace the Moses reading with this one); and, it doesn't even mention the whale! If you know this story, you did not pick it up in church. It most likely was told to you in Sunday School, or at a theme park, or somewhere. ... but I bet it wasn't preached on.

We preachers get a little flinchy around this story. I mean come on, a whale; three days? There are some serious theologians who have postulated on how a human being could actually live in a baleen whale's mouth for a few days. I don't want to make light of their work. But, let me ask you this, does this story have to have happened factually, as it is written, in order for it to make an impact in your life? Does this have to be true, or, could it be allegory?

An allegory is a story that has symbolic meaning that we can apply in our lives. Let's read Jonah's story as allegory and see if it has meaning for us today.

As it is written, Jonah is the most effective prophet ever. He went to an exceedingly large city – it takes three days to cross – that is not Jewish. He does not know these people; they do not know him. As a foreigner, by himself, probably smelling of fish, he walks in and tells them this: in forty days, God will destroy you and your city. And they believed him! From the king down to the livestock; everyone fasted from drinking and eating, they put on sack cloths and stopped what they were doing. God saw it and changed his mind.

They believed him! And, they didn't kill him. Most, if not all, prophets except for Jonah were killed for what they said. "From the king to the livestock" they all believed him. Wow. He is the most effective prophet ever.

And yet, he ran from God. He ran from God's calling and mission. When God told him to go do it, Jonah got on a boat and sailed in the exact opposite direction. A mighty storm blew against the ship. The captain and crew did everything they could to keep the ship from sinking – throwing their cargo over board and then praying and making sacrifices to their gods. The captain found Jonah curled up on a ball, asleep, in the deepest cargo hold of the ship. He told Jonah to get up and pray to his god that they shall live. Jonah told the captain that the storm is his fault. Throw him overboard and the storm will pass. They did and it did – all was calm. As Jonah was treading water, the crew stood on the side of the ship and asked Jonah about his god. He said there is only one God, the Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. They believed him and started worshipping and praising God. Just then a whale swallowed him up. He was in the belly of the whale for three days and prayed the psalms to God. He was then spit out right where he needed to be.

As allegory, how would we read this story today? I read it this way: God did not give up on Jonah. Even when Jonah ran and hid, God didn't give up on him.

Jesus makes an interesting comment in Matthew's Gospel when he says: I say to you that God is able to take these stones and raise up children of Abraham. (3:9-10) God can do whatever God wants to do. God is sovereign and is the creator of heaven and earth. But, despite all that power, God did not give up on Jonah.

In the story of Exodus, Moses took it upon himself, briefly, to lead a rebellion against the Pharaoh. Moses killed an Egyptian who was supervising the Hebrew people. He thought that would make the people rise up. When it didn't, he left, broken, to a land east of Egypt and was a shepherd for someone else's sheep. That is when he saw the burning bush and God said, "Moses, take off your sandals, you are standing on holy ground." God could have raised up another to lead the people of out captivity but God didn't. God didn't give up on Moses.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus calls Peter (named Simon) to follow him. Some of you believe that Jesus knew in advance everything that was going to happen to him; including Peter's denial. And yet he called Peter anyway. Some of you believe that Jesus did not know in advance and rolled along with it as. Either way, Jesus did not give up on Peter.

Taking Jonah's story as allegory – a symbol that can give meaning to our lives – God didn't give up on Jonah, or Moses, or Jesus. And that means that God won't give up on you.

No matter what you've done or left undone, how far you have run away from God; God will not give up on you. God is not going to start over with someone like you, or raise up from a stone someone who looks like you; no, God is going to be patient and not give up on you.

I can tell you from experience, God does not give up on us. I told you that I heard God calling me to the priesthood when I was twelve years old. And then I ran for twenty years. And eventually, in a cold Russian hotel room, Jesus stood by my side and asked if I was ready to follow him. God didn't give up. I didn't go out and do bad things, I didn't run in the opposite direction, or deny God's existence; but, I did respond with apathy and reluctance. I was not hot or cold; I was lukewarm to God's call. Who knows in God's mind what is worse – murder or apathy. We'd assume it'd be murder; but, maybe not. God is sovereign. And that sovereign God did not give up on me. God won't give up on you either.

God is with us when we are, allegorically speaking, in the belly of a whale.

If you feel as if you are trapped in the belly of a whale; if you are concerned about your children, or your grandchildren; if you are concerned about all the allegorical whales in life, God has not and will not forget about you, or your children or grandchildren. Instead, God retrieves us, receives our loved ones, and places us exactly where we need to be. This is because God is who God is – God does not give up on us, or on our enemies, or on anybody. It is because God calls and restores all to himself. God didn't give up on Jonah, or on me, and God won't give up on you.