

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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 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.*

Crazy Love - January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

When we think of the word failure, we often think of it in the context of activity. The quarterback failed to connect with the wide receiver to score a touchdown. We may think of it in terms of business. The restaurant failed because their food and service was terrible. We may even think of it when applied to politics. We've heard of failed presidents and even failed nations.

However, I doubt you've ever heard the term "failed" in the context of a biblical prophet. Yes, a failed prophet.

What! Can there be such a thing as a failed prophet? I mean the Bible is a book full of success stories, isn't it? We have stories, even entire books, dedicated to relating the adventures of men, and a few women, who fearlessly spoke the word of the Lord. They challenged kings, religious authorities, and plenty of regular people to get their act together or face the wrath of God. We have a fancier word for getting your act together before God. That word is Repentance. The prophets of the Bible all spent their time urging repentance at all levels of society. Their words ring true for us even now because the situations to which the ancient prophets spoke are still happening today. Issues of justice, treatment of the poor, right living, and loving our neighbors are very much part of our national dialog. And we know that we need to make many, many changes to our society before it conforms to God's vision for humanity. Oh yes, the prophets of old might as well be speaking to us right now. Not much has changed over the centuries.

However, in all the storied history of the biblical prophets, there is one who stands out because he failed. Yes, failed. This prophet did not fail because people didn't listen to him. In fact, he is one of the very few biblical prophets whose words actually changed people's minds right on the spot. I mean most of the prophets said what needed to be said and did what needed to be done. Unfortunately, in almost every case, few if any people actually listened to the warnings of these prophets and changed their behavior. No, we remember the biblical prophets because no one listened to them and as a result their prophecies of destruction sadly came true.

In one sense, the man I'm talking about today was wildly successful. The people he talked to listened to him and repented. If this man were to be judged by his effectiveness, well, he would rank as one of the best. He spoke and people listened and acted and changed.

However, in life, judging people only on results leaves much unspoken, doesn't it? I mean that our capital city of Washington is very beautiful. The White House, the Capitol, the broad streets and magnificent parks. Very wonderful as we all witnessed again last Wednesday. However, we cannot and should never forget that much of the work to build those structures was done by slave labor. Slavery is evil, yet we continue to benefit from the human labor, suffering, and violence that accompanied it.

We know women are the primary caregivers in most families. They often take the lead in raising children and looking after aging parents. Yet, women are still treated unfairly in the workplace in spite of their life-sustaining work. The point is that evaluating accomplishments is not just about the visible results, but also about everything else that surrounded them. Is slavery fair? No. Is unequal pay for equal work fair? No. Beautiful buildings are wonderful. Well-raised children and happy seniors are wonderful. But the circumstances that make them possible are not always so wonderful. And so we come the story of our failed prophet.

The name of our failed prophet is Jonah. Yes, that Jonah, Jonah and the whale Jonah. He is a stellar example of a failed prophet because while he did succeed in persuading his listeners to repent, surely a wonderful thing, the events that surrounded Jonah's work mark him as an absolute moral and spiritual failure.

This morning's reading focusses on only a small part of Jonah's work. Jonah was an Israelite whom God called go to the city of Nineveh and tell the people they had to repent, or God would destroy them. Jonah heard God, but refused to go. Instead, he ran away. He wanted nothing to do with God or the Crazy mission God wanted to send him on. In fact, because the city of Nineveh was east of Jonah, he went to a port to find a boat sailing west. Jonah wanted to get as far away from God as he could.

Foolish Jonah! Did he really think he could run away from God? I mean, friends, do any of us think we can run away from God?

Oh I know we try. Hardly a day passes when we each avoid God by disobeying God's commandments or just try to ignore what God is saying to us — even when we know God is right and we are wrong. We all know that following God in Jesus Christ is not always easy. Living a Christian life is full of challenges. Aren't our days filled with questions and denials and wanting to bend the rules? We can certainly understand Jonah because, admit or not, we all have a bit of Jonah living in us, too. So we do run from God, especially when we are torn between doing what is right and what is easy. Doing the right thing is always much harder.

So Jonah got on his boat and sailed away, but that didn't stop God. No, suddenly a violent storm arose and threatened to capsize the ship. The crew struggled to keep the ship afloat but Jonah knew he was responsible for the storm. He even told the others he was running away from his God. I'll hand him this: he did confess his responsibility to the other passengers and he even told them the storm would stop when they would throw him overboard. Reluctantly, the crew did toss Jonah off the boat. The storm stopped immediately, and Jonah found himself swallowed by a big fish also translated as a whale.

The cutesie version we tell the children overlooks the important point that Jonah found himself in the whale precisely because he tried to ignore God. But friends, isn't that reality for most of us? I mean I doubt any of us have literally been swallowed by a whale, but many of us have found ourselves in equally dire circumstances. You may not be living in a whale but you might certainly feel surrounded and confined in a place you don't want to be just for resisting God. In short, Jonah deserved his fate, and that's not cute at all.

You might think that after his experience, Jonah might have had a change of heart about listening to the voice of God. Wouldn't you? I mean he messed up big time, was thrown into the ocean, and miraculously survived. That would get my attention. I might think that this God is someone I'd listen to.

But no, alas, the whale experience had no impact on Jonah at all. Yes, he did get the message that God was serious about having him go to Nineveh. And Jonah did go. But still, Jonah was not at all happy about it. Jonah totally, utterly, unreservedly hated the people of Nineveh. Jonah was in fact delighted that God planned to destroy the city unless they repented and he figured if he didn't deliver God's message to the Ninevites, they couldn't repent and God would then destroy them. Problem solved!

Now, Jonah had cause to be angry with the Ninevites. After all, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a nation that did its best to harass and eventually destroy Israel. There is no doubt that Jonah had legitimate grievances against them, more specifically against their rulers.

And that's the difference, isn't it? Can or should the actions of a few be projected on an entire group? Isn't there a difference between wanting the government of a nation to fall versus wanting all the people of the nation to die? In other words, just because the Assyrians had a nasty king, did that mean all the Assyrians were equally nasty?

We have a name for taking the actions of a few individuals and projecting them onto an entire group. It's called prejudice. There is no question that Jonah was extremely prejudiced against the Assyrians — every single one of them — and wanted them dead. How do we know this?

Jonah did go to Nineveh. He got to the city, entered and declared that God would destroy them unless they repented. Now Jonah didn't work very hard at the task. He did not go very far into the city. He didn't spend much time proclaiming his message. One can imagine Jonah walking about telling the people to change their ways speaking just above a whisper. Oh yes, Jonah was there all right, because God sent him. Would it be his fault if no one heard him? Clearly, Jonah did the same low quality job preaching to the Ninevites that most of our children do cleaning their rooms.

And the proof? Well against all odds, the Ninevites listened. I don't know how they listened or what they heard but somehow, Jonah's message got through. They repented. Scripture reports that the whole city really felt bad and they put on sackcloth — a very rough form of burlap — and they sat in ashes. Every one of them. Even the animals. They were truly sorry.

But for Jonah that wasn't enough. He didn't care that Nineveh repented. He wanted them dead. He didn't care that they listened to him. He wanted them dead. He did his best to do the absolute minimum to proclaim his message and then got out of the city to sit on a hill to watch God destroy the people of Nineveh. He wanted them dead.

And what did God do? Oh no! God forgave the Ninevites. God did not destroy the city. God saw the people's repentance and God changed God's mind.

As for Jonah, how did he feel about all this? Jonah was angry, really, really angry. He told God that he did not want to go to Nineveh precisely because he knew God would spare the Ninevites. He knew God would forgive them. He knew God would give another chance to the enemies of Israel. In short, Jonah knew our God is a God of Crazy Love and he couldn't stand it one bit.

Yes, Crazy Love. Did God know the Ninevites and their Assyrian Empire had been pummeling the Israelites without mercy for endless year? Yes. Did God know that his prophet Jonah was prejudiced against the Ninevites and would be very happy if they died? Yes. Did God create the Ninevites along with the Israelites and all the other -ites who walk the face of the earth? Yes. And does God love and care about every human being on this planet equally, without prejudice, without discrimination, without bias? Yes and Yes again.

My friends, that is what it means to truly be a committed child of God. God is in Crazy Love with humanity and God expects human beings to be in Crazy Love with each other. The whole point of this Christian thing is so we who follow Jesus can demonstrate to the world that we are all brothers and sisters regardless of outward appearance, or nationality, or language, or sexual orientation, or social status, or wealth, or any of the myriad ways we humans have invented to separate ourselves and look down on each another. The universal, unconditional, absolute Love of God for every single human being is, by our standards, utterly Crazy.

Jonah was a failed prophet because far from being in Crazy Love with Assyrians, he hated them with vengeful passion. He wanted them to die. Sadly we know of many, perhaps

neighbors, perhaps family members, for whom prejudice is absolutely normal. God called Jonah to be Crazy like God and Jonah refused.

God in Jesus Christ is asking us, will we dare to be Crazy — share and show Crazy Love to us all?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.