

SEPTEMBER 21, 2008
PENTECOST 19
“BUSH-WHACKED BY GOD”

Let us pray: Help us, O God, not to envy your generosity but to let it inspire us, by the power of your Spirit, to astounding acts of generosity ourselves. In Jesus' name. Amen.

“Am I allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” I prefer the older RSV translation, “Or do you **begrudge me my generosity?**”

Hundreds of years before Jesus' day, a nameless Jew, wrote, under the inspiration of God's Spirit, a marvelous short story—a kind of fictional fable—about a prophet of God from several centuries earlier who is mentioned in the Old Testament book of 2 Kings as living during the reign of King Jeroboam II, in the early 8th century before

Christ, almost a half-millennium earlier. It would be like someone today sitting down and deciding to write a story using Martin Luther as the main character with the events of the 16th century Reformation as the historical backdrop.

As one biblical scholar has written: *“The Author of Jonah means to write his fabulous, moving tongue-in-cheek tale around an obscure but historical prophet. But he hardly meant for his story to be taken as history”* —any more than the parable of the vineyard we just heard Jesus tell is to be taken as history. Just what prompted our unknown author to write the fictional tale of the prophet Jonah we don’t know for sure, but we might well expect, from the pointed, sometimes almost satirical, character of the story about a reluctant prophet named Jonah back in the days of the dreaded Assyrians, that something in contemporary Jewish cultural and religious life led this anonymous author to contest what he saw as

the dangerously exclusivistic spirit of Hebrew religion that led the good religious folk of his day to “begrudge God’s generosity,” to resent God’s goodness and mercy as extended to those outside of the specially chosen people of Abraham and Sarah and their descendents.

The story is artfully told in just four short chapters consisting of a total of 48 verses. You can easily read the whole book in less than 10 minutes—and I urge you to do so sometime this week. One commentator calls this “*the most winsome, imaginative, compelling biblical rebuke of all provincial pride, all arrogance born of parochialism—the slyest, deftest, most charming and humorous, most timelessly pertinent repudiation of exclusivism—religious, theological, ethnic, political, national—anywhere to be found.*” We might well think it a biblical tract for our times.

You only heard read the very end of the story, a peculiar and abrupt ending to be

sure, in which the prophet is found pouting under a bush at the outskirts of the great, pagan city of Ninevah—literally beside himself with anger at God for allowing the people of Ninevah to repent of their evil ways and to be spared the punishment God had sent him to pronounce upon them.

In order to better understand Jonah’s anger at God, we need to realize that the Assyrians—and their great city, Ninevah—were for Jews the great boogeymen, the heart of the evil empire, and the great hereditary enemy who had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, carrying the chosen people off into exile. In our day it’s sobering to remember that ancient Ninevah lies within the borders of what we today call Iraq—what our President has called part of the “axis of evil”—ancient Ninevah lying somewhere north of modern day Baghdad, on the Tigris River.

For Jonah to be bidden by God, as he is at the outset of the story, to “*Go at once to*

Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” is not all that unlike the mission of weapons’ inspection that the UN set itself at the end of the Gulf War and how convinced of Saddam’s evil intentions on the basis of his past transgressions against the Kuwaitis, the Iranis, the Kurds, and the Shiites among his own Iraqi people, our elected leaders decided that he intended evil against us Americans and the rest of the world and that he surely must possess weapons of mass destruction that he intended to use against us.

Forgive me if I can’t help but see a kind of rough parallel between Jonah’s resistance to God’s call to engage in a mission to Ninevah that he feared would eventuate in God’s relenting of his desire to punish, much as our President tired of the UN weapons inspectors’ good intentions in Iraq.

But here’s where the parallel ends, for we might have thought that someone who

hated the Assyrians as much as Jonah, on what it seems were good religious as well as patriotic grounds, might have jumped at Yahweh's commissioning him to go on a "prophetic air raid" —a kind of religious propaganda sortie on God's behalf—to evil Ninevah.

So why is it, do you suppose, that, as the story begins, Jonah not only fails to obey God's call to go to Ninevah—the heart of the evil empire—but actually takes off in the opposite direction taking ship from Joppa for Tarshish in far-away Spain, "*away from the presence of the Lord,*" as verse 3 puts it? (Pause) My guess, as the story itself later implies, is that Jonah knew his God well enough to know that condemning the hated Ninevites to hell, simply pronouncing doom and gloom, calling down hellfire and brimstone upon them, wouldn't be Yahweh's last word.

So you see, the story of Jonah is really in a sense a **vocation** story, isn't it, a story

about **God's call**. And so I suppose one lesson we learn from Jonah is that God doesn't easily give up and doesn't take our "no" as the final word. God literally pursues Jonah, using a great wind and a storm at sea, as instruments of Jonah's continuing call, until the sailors now suspicious that something strange is up, turn to their foreign passenger who offers himself up as an offering to the God he knows is pursuing him, the God, as he tells the sailors, who is not just any God, but the God of the Hebrews, "*the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*"

But God isn't looking for the soggy sacrifice of Jonah's water-logged corpse, it turns out, and so, in good fable fashion, God sends a big fish—or whale it used to be translated—to "swallow up Jonah"—and there he remains for three days and three nights in the belly of the fish—a burial of sorts which it is not surprising that Christians through the ages have seen as a

kind of prefigurement of Jesus' burial in the tomb and rising on the third day.

How did Jonah manage to survive three days in the fish's belly, you ask? Well, of course it was a miracle, is the age-old answer for those who insist on taking the Jonah story literally, mistaking a story for history. Phillips Brooks, one of the most prominent New England preachers of more than a century ago and author of the Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" once said tongue-in-cheek to the literally-minded of his day that the fish's swallowing of Jonah was certainly possible for Jonah was, after all, only a "**minor prophet**" — (you can all groan now) — a kind of bad in-joke for those who know their Bibles..

Once vomited out upon the dry land, resurrected, as it were, from his watery coffin in the belly of the fish, chapter three begins laconically: "*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.*" I always find that a very

funny line. And not surprisingly, after Jonah's recent misadventure at sea, the text continues dryly, "*So Jonah set out and went to Ninevah, according to the word of the Lord.*" Finally, Jonah responds to God's call and he goes, and he shouts out to the people of the wicked city, "*Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown!*" That's the message. No, "do this or else." Just the warning "forty days and you guys are dust." Why forty days, who knows? Echoes of Noah's flood? Just forty days and you're history!

And the next verse reads remarkably how they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small—and as the text goes on to say, even the animals—put on sackcloth and ashes—the traditional signs of mourning and repentance. No why and wherefore. It just happens. As the proclamation of the king of Ninevah commanded: "*All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.*" And then, this from the pagan king: "*Who knows? God may relent and change God's*

mind; God may turn from God's fierce anger so that we do not perish." It's as if Saddam had suddenly said, "Alright, I'm sorry. Come on in and inspect. And I'm sorry for all the violence! I repent—Allah be praised!"

And you know what? God did just that! Chapter three concludes, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, **God changed God's mind; and God did not do it.**"

And you know what? Jonah was **wroth!** Jonah was ticked off! The Bible's nicer way of putting it was that "*this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.*" Yep! He was "hopping mad" as we used to say. Why? Because he was surprised at God's change of mind? No-ooo! Because this is just what Jonah feared God would do, being the kind of "*gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*" God of which our Psalmody for today speaks, and that's why Jonah refused his divine commission in the first place and ran off in the other direction toward

Tarshish. As verse two and following of chapter four put it:

Jonah prayed to the Lord (some prayer!) 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 (almost a direct quote from Psalm 145.)

“I just knew you’d be this way, God,” Jonah whines in a tone I expect we’re all familiar with—sometimes as we hear it from our own mouths. “*So now Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*” I love that “please”—the courteous prophet to the end, sounding like a great Jewish comedian. I’d love to see Jerry Seinfeld do this scene. And the Lord responds: “*Is it right—is it just—for you to be so angry?*”

But Jonah in his fury won’t even answer God, but stomps out in a pout to the outskirts of the city where follows the absurd little epilogue

of the story involving the bush—or should we call it a shrub?—which grows up and gives Jonah some temporary shade for which he’s so grateful. But the next day “*God appointed a worm that attacked the bush,*” —God appointing a worm? Can you imagine?! No details are too small for this God of Jonah’s. And Jonah’s only friend, the bush, for which he’s so grateful, withers and dies, and Jonah grumps, “*It is better for me to die than to live.*”

But God inquires: “*Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?*” And Jonah retorts in his pouty voice, “*Yes, you bet, angry enough to die!*” To which, in case we haven’t yet gotten the message of the parable of the bush, God spells it out for Jonah—and us. “*You, Jonah, are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in the night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do*

not know their right hand from their left (they're really dumb!)—and also many animals?”

End of story. “...*and also many animals.*” I love that ending. 120,000 people who don't know squat—not to mention their dumb animals. If you, Jonah, can love your silly weed so as to get your underwear in a knot over its demise, can't I love them—and their animals—unlovely as they—and you, in your self-righteous funk—may be? Can't I love you all—even the animals, if I so choose?

Can't I, Jesus in his parable, has the vineyard owner ask, can't I do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? Or do you begrudge me my generosity? **Well, do you? Do I? Do we all?**—we good religious folks, who show up on time to work, and expect equal pay for equal work, and expect the Master to cut us some slack and show us some favor rather than those Johnny-come-latelies who we're pretty sure haven't really earned their way into our communion of workers in the vineyard?

Thank God, sisters and brothers in Christ, that God keeps calling us, pursuing us as we try to escape or ignore our vocation to proclaim and practice God's justice and mercy, God's judgment and compassion, God's law and God's Gospel precisely to those folks we would rather see in hell. Thank God for the good news of God's final and forgiving word—even for the likes of us Jonahs.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.