

As so often when we read a passage appointed by the Lectionary for our service, we need to understand the context in order to understand the passage. Sometimes that context is just that which has gone before. So it is with our passage from Jonah. We start with the last verse of Chapter One. Why is the Lord providing a large fish to swallow Jonah? In the rest of Chapter One, Jonah is called by God to travel to Ninevah to cry out against its wickedness. *But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.* Jonah simply didn't want to take on Ninevah as a prophet of the Lord. So he sought to escape to Tarshish. No one knows for sure where Tarshish was. Its exact location doesn't matter. In the story of Jonah it is simply somewhere far away enough that Jonah thought he could escape the Lord and get out of his God given mission to Ninevah. On the other hand, we know exactly where Ninevah was. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire the powerhouse of the middle east in the 7th and 8th century BCE. It was the empire we mentioned in passing last week as the empire that held Jerusalem under siege in 701 BCE as mentioned in Micah. Jonah was trying to escape God's direction to speak truth to power a task that is never easy and often can be fatal.

After Jonah has boarded a ship for Tarshish there is a great and entirely unexpected storm. Jonah quickly realizes the storm is a consequence of his turning his back on the mission of the Lord. As it becomes clear to Jonah that the only way to save the ship and its crew is for him to be thrown overboard. Now we come upon our passage from this evening. Jonah is not going to drown because *the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

By the way do not miss the significance of the three days and the three nights. In those times a day began with sunset on the previous day. Three days was not necessarily a full 72 hours. Jonah says *Out of the belly of Sheol he heard my cry. Just like He descended into hell, and on the third day, he rose again.* The rest of this evening's passage is Jonah's hymn of contrition and thanksgiving. *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord! Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.*

The final part of the Book of Jonah covers God coming to Jonah yet again and sending him to proclaim God's message to Ninevah. Jonah undertakes his mission this time. To Jonah's astonishment Ninevah repents and turns back to God and is spared destruction. Is Jonah happy, quite the contrary. He is so angry that the Ninevites are spared that he tells God it is better for me to die than to live.

So what do we make of all this? I think there are a number of messages. The first is no matter how far we stray from God's mission for us, we are all welcome back again and again. Whether you believe literally that Jonah spent 3 days and three nights in the belly of a whale or whether you believe that it is a charming myth to illustrate a profoundly important truth, the import is the same. God did not allow Jonah to perish. God is always ready to welcome us back. The

truly saving event was when Jonah realized that only through returning to what God was calling him to be, could destruction be averted.

The second message is equally important. We live in a culture where for millennia we have always been subject to power structures that are rarely truly just. We have an ingrained mentality of kneeling at the feet of the powerful for rewards and a desperation to avoid punishment for whatever our failings might be. The way we have been subject to powerful figures has corrupted and distorted our sense of God. Rather than rebelling against power figures who have abused their power in their own interests and greed demanding that they take God as their example, we have allowed our experience with those power figures to shape our sense of God. God is all powerful, vengeful, jealous, capricious, punishing. In such large part, that is how we have seen the divine. So let me be very clear: I absolutely believe that God does not punish. Through the prophets and through his Son, God provides a way; God provides encouragement; God warns of consequences for straying from that way. We are brought low by the consequences of our own failure to stay true to the way. Any punishment is a consequence of our own failings. God is ever ready to welcome us back when we turn away from our own destructive behaviour. And while we are at it, let me say Original Sin is a pernicious false doctrine used for subjugation and control. Instead we have the benefit of Original Blessing in all that God has created.

The third and final message, I suggest we take away from Jonah is this: be conscious of and beware our own perversity. Once Jonah is spewed upon the dry land he takes up his message to Ninevah. The King and the people repent; a fast is proclaimed, and all 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 said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.* What was Jonah's reaction to the undoubtable and miraculous success of his mission to Ninevah? In short, he is seriously pissed off! He is so angry that he says *O Lord take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.* Jonah's reaction is a well know piece of human perversity. How often have you heard or said in a peevish tone, well he got off lightly? We can be somewhat happy with others being delivered as long as we can be sure they suffered enough. How often do we hear, no one ever did anything for me, against all evidence to the contrary. The Bible has many examples: the other son when the prodigal returns, the astonishment at the shepherd's joy at the return of the one out of the ninety and nine, the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus eating with outcasts and sinners. That is how deep into our psyche an affection for punishment has permeated, sometimes for others and sometimes even for ourselves.

God is always ready to receive us back, as long as we turn and turn again from self destructive behaviours. The worst of those behaviours may be a perverse affection for punishment. Can we turn and rejoice in good or are we imprisoned in a need for misery. Can we truly love our enemies – see their bad behaviour in ourselves – and avoid the first stone? Amen