

Wednesday, November 22, 2017 - Day 325 – Jonah 1, Psalm 117, Matt 19

“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it.” Jonah 1:2

The story of the Jonah tells about a prophet who was called by God to go the people of Nineveh and warn them that disaster will happen to them if they don't change their ways. Jonah doesn't want to go. He's a Jew from Israel. The people of Nineveh (now Iraq) are outsiders and unbelievers. Jonah is shocked and unhappy that God would want to save the people of Nineveh. Why would God care about such people? So Jonah runs away... far away. He tries to sail to Spain, about as far from Nineveh as he can go.

One of the most pervasive themes in the Bible is the desire to do what we want to do as opposed to what God wants us to do. In some stories God is shown as stern and unkind, insisting that people do what He wants because He (and always it is “He” in these stories) is powerful and will punish those who make Him angry. But in the story of Jonah we see God presented in a different way. God has no interest in punishing or hurting Jonah. God also has no interest in punishing or hurting the misguided people of Nineveh. God just wants them to stop doing what God knows will hurt them. Also, I think, God wants Jonah to wake up from his delusion that he is somehow better than the Ninevites and that it's acceptable to hate them and wish them harm. The God that we meet in the story of Jonah is kinder than Jonah and relentless in the desire that God's children will grow and learn.

So Jonah runs, but we all know running from God never works. He goes to sea and God sends a terrifying storm. When the people on the ship throw him off the boat, God sends a fish, which swallows Jonah and spits him out on the beach, just three days walk from Nineveh. And God tells him again to go to Nineveh and warn the people there. And Jonah – sulking and grumbling – goes and does it. And the people of Nineveh listen and are saved. Poor Jonah! To be the instrument of God's love to people he hates. It would be terrible blow to his ego, his sense of superiority, and his self-righteousness.

The writer Annie Lamott once said that you can tell you've made God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do. But God hates no one. I think, for many of us, that idea that God loves all God's children, even the ones we hate, is harder accept than the idea that God is cruel and vindictive. It takes away our sense of specialness. It takes away our sense of control. It lets us know that, as we let ourselves accept and live into the love of God, we must accept we have brothers and sisters who are loved as much as we are, and those fellow beloved children of God includes everyone.

By The Ven. Pamela Nesbit