

Whoever wrote the book of Jonah, I imagine them to be like one of those very difficult teachers or therapists who forces you to listen to yourself and actually hear your own inconsistencies. This is a deceptively simple story, aimed at making us listen to ourselves. [Read 1:1-2]

We know we are in trouble within the first two verses, when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against it, presumably with the purpose of getting them to repent. Nineveh is an Assyrian city. In 721 BCE the Assyrians swept down on the land of Israel, the northern kingdom, and demolished it. The ten tribes of Israel were eradicated. The story of Jonah is written later, during the Babylonian Exile, so the writer knows very well that if Jonah had not gone to Nineveh and God had destroyed them, Israel would have been saved. God is sending Jonah to Nineveh so that the Assyrians will be able to destroy Israel. [Read 1:3 – 16]

It made perfect sense to everyone on the ship that a god or gods were responsible for this terrible storm. Every mariner prayed to his god, but to no avail. Yet when Jonah cops to being responsible for the storm, inasmuch as he's fleeing God, the sailors are reluctant to throw him overboard. They may be non-Jews, but they are decent people. Finally, when they've pitched him into the sea and the storm has ended, "the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." Without even trying, Jonah has accomplished a powerful witness or testimony to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No wonder God wants him to go to Nineveh! [Read 1:17] And Jonah receives mercy rather than justice, being spared death by drowning.

[Read 3:1 – 4] This has to be the most pitiful preaching ever. Eight words, no

visual aids like Hosea or Jeremiah used, just a cranky prophet trudging through the city yelling the absolute minimum he could get away with. And the people of Nineveh believed God! [Read 3:5 – 10] What a responsive population! Not only the king, but all the people and even the animals fast and put on sackcloth and ashes. For a second time Jonah has accomplished a remarkable witness to God; it's just a pity that he gets absolutely no gratification from it. While God takes note of the thoroughness of their repentance and forgives them—surely this was the purpose of sending Jonah, right? so Nineveh could be saved—Jonah takes no joy in his success. [Read 4:1-9]

Jonah, who has benefited from God's mercy, thinks that he would prefer God to be just. To the Ninevans. He has forgotten that he could have drowned back there in the storm, had God not sent the fish to take him to dry land. If God were going to be as just as Jonah wants him to be, Jonah could be in Davy Jones' locker right now. Instead, he protests to God, says he wishes he were dead, and then goes up on a hill in the hope that he may still see the destruction of Nineveh. God causes a plant to grow up so that Jonah may be sheltered from the sun, and then kills the plant. Jonah is happy about it growing, angry about it dying, to which God's response is, [10-11]. Every bush, every animal, every person matters to God, and Jonah can like it or he can not like it but that's how it is.

Jonah, like most of us, would prefer to be in control. He has an acute sense of justice, and he would like the guilty to be punished and cast out, and the innocent to be rewarded. The name, "Jonah," means "dove," and the dove was a symbol of Israel. It seems reasonable that the author of this story is suggesting that Israel also wants

to be in control and exercise justice as they see it. But there's another way in which Jonah may symbolize Israel. Jonah had resisted doing what prophets do; he had tried to run away from his mission. Israel and Judah have resisted their mission, which is to be a light to the nations. They have turned in upon themselves, and focused on being a club of well-to-do Yahists, indifferent to the poor, the orphaned and the stranger. What happens when a prophet or a people resist their mission? They are swept into chaos, either the deep blue sea or exile in a strange land. Remember that this story is written *after* Assyria has annihilated Israel, and after the remaining kingdom, Judah, has been exiled to Babylon. Your much-hated enemy, the storyteller says, is an instrument of God's will *and* a people whom God knows and cherishes as individuals the way God knows and cherishes each bush that grows on the outskirts of town.

It will not do to try to run away from one's mission. Nor will it do to prescribe justice for one's enemies while expecting mercy for oneself. That way lies chaos and even destruction. Even churches that lose their sense of mission find themselves going down as if they'd lost the wind in their sails or the oxygen in their blood. Mission is what keeps us alive, and our mission is to reach beyond ourselves, even to the most despicable and fearsome enemy.

On this last Sunday before the election, I have no trouble thinking about who is despicable and fearsome to me. It's my fellow citizens who have inexplicably supported Donald Trump. Since he has made it less unacceptable to insult people, I've—and we've—been shocked and horrified at what our fellow citizens are willing to say about people they regard as "other." The woman who was arrested in Des

Moines recently for voting twice because she believed our system is “rigged” also looks at people of color and sees criminals. It’s as if the entire civil rights movement, feminist movement, LGBT movement, and so much more had simply been tolerated until they could come back more hateful and arrogant than ever. None of our so-called progress had actually sunk in or changed these people.

Whatever happens, our job is this: to name and reject hatred of the kind given new oxygen by Donald Trump *and* to love our neighbors, even the hateful ones. That’s a tall order. We may stumble now and then. But we are called to learn from Jonah not only to do what God sends us to do but also to let it change us. I was trying to imagine how Jonah would have been different if he’d let the mission to Nineveh change him. He would have thought, Okay, God apparently loves Nineveh, so let me see what’s lovable about them, and I suppose he would have noticed how 120,000 of them didn’t even know their right hand from their left, and how they also had quite a few animals in the community, and perhaps despite his deep misgivings and frankly their actual real shortcomings, he might have found some tenderness toward them. I don’t know. I have a very hard time feeling tender toward that woman who voted twice and thinks all people of color are criminals, but if I think of her as a beloved child of God who carries burdens I know nothing about, I can imagine calling her out on a hateful statement without, myself, being hateful.

We need some extra help right now, or at least I do, to be better than Jonah. None of this comes easily. So I recommend taking frequent short walks and, if possible, getting out of town and into the woods or the open spaces. And I also recommend looking for beauty. It’s there, just as much as ugliness, and we ought to

let it feed us. I will let Mary Oliver have the last word with her poem “Mindful.”

Every day

I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me

with delight
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.

It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,

to lose myself

inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,

and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings
as these—
the untrimmable light

of the world,

the ocean’s shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

God of the seas, sky, and land,
When Jonah turned to run from you, you showed him that nothing and no one could hide from your presence. You are in all things, and you love all things. Show us the gift of your presence, and help us to carry your word of compassion and grace to all the world, in the name of the one who carried out your love flawlessly, Jesus Christ our redeemer.
Amen.