

PENTECOST XIV

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. Jonah 4:1

I love the Book of Jonah. It's a very short book in which a whole lot happens. The plot: God tells Jonah to preach against the city of Nineveh because of the people's wickedness. Jonah doesn't feel he's a prophet, so he runs away to sea.

A great storm comes up and the sailors determine that Jonah is responsible. He tells them to throw him into the sea, where he is swallowed by a gigantic fish. He dwells within the fish for three days and nights, dry and happy, and prays in thanks to God for delivering him from the stormy depths.

God orders the fish to vomit Jonah up onto dry land, and the fish obliges. God tells Jonah to go preach against Nineveh again, and this time Jonah does. The king and the people and animals all cover themselves with sackcloth and repent, and God forgives them. But Jonah is angry; evidently he wanted the Ninevites to perish because of their evil ways, and he knew that God would forgive them if they'd listened to Jonah in the first place. So this is where our passage today picks up: Jonah sulking under his rubber plant, or castor oil tree, as it is variously called.

It's a fantastic story, in more ways than one. Jonah is full of folkloristic motifs; the flight of a disobedient man, the threat of a storm at sea, the casting of lots to determine guilt and the expulsion of the guilty one, the consequent ceasing of the storm, and the lucky presence of an animal, though not in this case a talking animal, to save the imperiled protagonist.

What are we to make of all this as theology? As salvation story? What does it have to do with us, here, today?

Jonah's rant to God seems weirdly spiteful and convoluted. *But to Jonah (God's forgiveness) seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to God, "Isn't this what I said, God when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, God, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

We could argue that Jonah is a vengeful, petty man. We could also argue that he is a coward—running away, trying to escape his call to prophecy. But he is also clearly a religious man. He tells the sailors, *"I am a Hebrew and I worship the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* He prays a long psalm when he's in the belly of the fish: *But you, my God, brought my life up from the pit. 7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, God, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*

Even his angry objection to God's mercy and compassion is voiced as a prayer. Jonah may feel resentful of what God calls him to do and of God's forgiving heart, but he has no doubt of God's reality and God's power in his

life and in the world. Moreover, before his preaching causes all of Nineveh to repent, his witness to the power of God during the storm at sea converts all the sailors to worship of the God of Israel. Jonah is an accidental evangelist, even when everything is all too much for him.

So, here are some ways I'd like to connect the story to us here today. First, doesn't everything often seem all too much for *you*? For *us*? The world and its problems are very very large, and in the great scheme of things we are very very small. *What, Jonah may have thought, can I possibly do about all this evil and wickedness, all these problems? I'll just sit under my castor oil plant and sulk.* What, we may think, can we possibly do about all the mess in our world today? We've got compassion fatigue. We are overwhelmed. Let's just circle our wagons at home and take care of ourselves.

But that's not our call as Christians, as followers of Jesus. We are called to come together, in small ways and large, to try to make a difference. And one of those ways we can make a difference is in our natural environment. This fall has been designated Creation Care Season in the Church, and Jonah has much to tell us about ecology and environmental theology.

God acts as a subject whose verb is nature. God hurls a great wind, which causes a great storm upon the sea and threatens the ship and her sailors. The sailors give back to nature one of her own, Jonah, and their deeds restore harmony to a hostile environment. But the sailors don't take credit; instead, they worship the God of Israel.

Then God appoints the fish to swallow Jonah, and the fish mediates between human and divine. Eventually God decrees that Jonah be spewed forth, and the fish obeys.

Back in Nineveh, the animals participate with the humans in acts of repentance. They are forbidden by the king's decree to graze or drink water, and they are to dress in sackcloth, call loudly to God, and to turn from evil. The king treats animals on a par with people. Even this urban environment advocates for the well being of natural creatures.

At the close of the story, nature's all over Jonah. A miraculous plant shades him and makes him happy. A worm kills the plant, he pities the plant. A fierce wind blows on him and the sun attacks his head; he faints and asks to die.

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." 10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

And that's the end, the absolute end of the Book of Jonah. A hundred and twenty thousand feckless folk who can't tell their right hand from their left, and all those animals. The animals get the very last word.

God is a God of all creatures, a God of all nature. God has given that

nature and those creatures into our trust, and we have, at best, done a mixed job as caretakers. And now, doesn't everything seem all too much? Global warming, species extinction, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and drought? What can we possibly do? What difference can we make?

Well, you can find out more about that, about our Green initiatives here at St John's, at coffee hour today. You can find out, as well, about other volunteer opportunities. And have no doubt: you can make a difference. And we need you to make a difference. We are a small community with a big heart, and we need the hearts and hands of all our members. Remember, for all Jonah's defects and failures, he has no doubt of God's reality and God's power in his life and in the world. He is man of faith and prayer, and despite himself he brings all of Nineveh, people and animals, to their knees and to their salvation.

And his whole extraordinary story is witness to the power and love of God, and how, with God's help, we can make a difference. Alleluia! Amen

