

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, begins his little essay on Jonah this way: “Within a few minutes of swallowing the prophet Jonah, the whale suffered a severe attack of acid indigestion, and it’s not hard to see why. Jonah had a disposition that was enough to curdle milk.”

I have known such people and I’ll bet you have too. And while none of those I have known were prophets of God, they were often very religious people. Maybe that’s just because I have always tended to hang around religious people. To be sure, there are all kinds of people who claim to be religious... and all kinds of religious people who claim to be good people. To paraphrase Mark Twain, they were all good people—in the worst sense of the word. They were upright and righteous but they came across as uptight and self-righteous.

I’m not sure how factually based or close to actual history the Book of Jonah is, so I don’t get excited by the fact that the whales in that area couldn’t swallow something that big. Nor can I picture surviving in the belly of a whale three whole days. But I do take from this that God truly has a wonderful sense of humor to use a whale to transport the obstreperous prophet to where God wanted him to be. And I agree with Buechner, the whale probably had it worse than Jonah.

I’m not sure that it actually took three days to walk across Nineveh either. But that’s rather irrelevant. Nineveh was one of the oldest cities to be populated by human beings and, by Jonah’s day, it was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. It was doubtless a very large city. But this book is not included in the canon of Scripture because it’s a wonderful cartoon story for Sunday School students or because it has a wealth of historical information. It is a book of theology intended to counter the kind of self-righteousness and narrowness of heart and mind of which we all are more than capable. It is included in the canon because it gives us a clear picture of what God is like and what we should be like, if we seek to be good people in the best sense of that word.

Jonah was a believer in Jewish exceptionalism. In fact, you might say

he preached “Israel First...and only.” He certainly did not believe God cared a lick about Nineveh or any other pagan city. He was actually a rather narrow-minded, self-righteous man. He was especially angry toward Nineveh—a city in what was then Assyria and what is now Iraq. It was located up near Mosul, which by now we are more familiar with than we ever would have thought. For two centuries, Assyria had invaded Palestine, looting and burning and deporting its people until in 722 BC Israel ceased to exist. Gone! Empty! Nothing left! Can you imagine Jamestown, Buffalo, and Erie all ghost towns? So you can see why (and maybe even sympathize with Jonah) when God called him to go to Nineveh, he went the other way. It’s no wonder he was reluctant, withdrawn and obstreperous. It would be like sending an African to go warn the K.K.K. of imminent destruction! I’m guessing there wouldn’t be a lot of volunteers.

Jonah, however, made a second mistake. He thought if he got out of God’s country, Israel, he could get away from God and God’s demands. God has no jurisdiction in Tarshish after all—that’s pagan territory.

I reckon even the worst of us might say a prayer if we found ourselves in the belly of a great fish. Jonah does and is regurgitated to the great relief of the fish and is given a second chance. He sets his pride and self-righteousness and anger aside when he realizes that even the fish are on God’s side and goes to Nineveh as directed. He preached only a five word sermon as he walked, warning the people to repent to the Lord and makes Billy Graham’s revivals look like complete failures in comparison. The whole city is converted from top to bottom—from the king to the cattle—and God changes His mind about the destruction He was set to bring upon the city... and Jonah is angrier than ever. The only one who is not converted is Jonah! He’s the only one who did not change his mind. Jonah cannot accept that God’s love is extended to everyone and that God wants all people to change their hearts and minds toward Him and one another and be saved. That’s why we have hymns like this one to remind us:

*There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.*

*There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior;
there is healing in his blood.*

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.*