

"When You Assume..."

Rev. Peter Bynum
January 21, 2018

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-10)

Many of us have heard the old adage about what happens when we assume. The sanitized paraphrase, which follows the spelling of the word, is "Never assume, because when you do you make a stubborn animal out of you and me." The joke works because the assumptions we make, even when we make them based on experience or some piece of knowledge that we have, are often wrong.

In this wonderful biblical story of Jonah, the prophet makes a number of assumptions, all of which turn out to be wrong. God offers this story to us, I think, so that we can have an opportunity to ponder the faults and errors that occur in the assumptions that we make, because we are still making these errors, and they are still leading us away from the directions that God wishes us to go.

Because I do not want to make an error in assuming that everyone knows the whole story of Jonah, I want to start with a quick recap. Most of us remember that a whale, or some kind of big fish is involved, that Jonah spends some time in the smelly belly of the great fish, but there is a lot more to it than that.

The story begins with God giving Jonah an assignment. "Go at once to Nineveh," God says, "and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come before me." It was clearly not something that Jonah wanted to do, which was understandable because Nineveh was widely considered to be about the most evil, dangerous, treacherous place in the world. So Jonah basically ran. He disobeys God and boards a ship headed for Tarshish, which was about as far away from Nineveh that Jonah thought he could get. God, who was not pleased with Jonah's decision, whips up a great storm right over the ship. The sailors realize something particularly terrible is happening and quickly figure that somebody's god was upset with somebody on that ship. They cast lots to see who the culprit is, and all signs point to Jonah. When they confront him, he comes clean and admits he is fleeing from his



70 Union Street North
Concord, NC 28025

(704) 788-2100

info@firstpresconcord.org

God, who he proclaims to be very powerful. Jonah himself comes up with the idea that they should just throw him overboard to save themselves. Grudgingly, they comply. Fortunately for Jonah, God “provided a large fish” that swallowed Jonah (and presumably a lot of air, because Jonah was in there for 3 days and 3 nights). While in the belly of the fish, Jonah offers an eloquent hymn of praise to God, which takes up all of chapter two.

Apparently, the fish was doing some crafty navigating during those three days, because it basically turns Jonah around and ends up spitting him up onto a beach pretty near Nineveh. As he is sitting there coughing on the sand, God speaks to Jonah a second time, saying “Get up, go to Nineveh, and proclaim to it the message that I will give you.” Jonah realizes that it’s probably pointless to resist, that he might as well go ahead and do what God asks him to do. So he enters the massive city and preaches a five word sermon to Nineveh. [*Sounds pretty good right? A five word sermon? Well, don’t get your hopes up.*] But it was not a feel-good sermon. “Forty days more,” Jonah preached, “and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Surprisingly, the king of Nineveh listens to the sermon. He covers himself with sackcloth and ashes and offers a very personal and heartfelt repentance to Jonah’s God. He then orders everyone to repent, and they do. They turned right around and abandoned their evil, violent ways.

God, in turn, responds with great mercy to the once-evil city. And it makes Jonah as mad as he could possibly be. “I knew you were going to do this, God,” Jonah says. “I knew you would respond with love and mercy instead of the fire and brimstone that these people deserve.” The story ends with a question that God asks to Jonah, which he does not answer by the way. God essentially asks Jonah, “Why shouldn’t I be concerned about this city, its people and its animals? Why should I not love them, too?”

So, with that backdrop, I want to focus on three key assumptions that Jonah makes that prove to be wrong. He made faulty assumptions about the sailors, about the Ninevites, and ultimately, about God.

First, the sailors on the ship to Tarshish. **The assumption Jonah makes here is that they could not be trusted — that because they were not like him, they could not have his best interest in mind.** It’s the same kind of assumption that we sometimes make when we are boarding a plane. If we are speaking truthfully, many of us might get a little nervous if we see someone of Middle Eastern descent taking a seat on our flight. We might be tempted to make all kinds of assumptions about that person — their religion; their opinions about the United States; their motives for being on a commercial airline flight. Jonah made the same assumption about the travelers on board his ship.

Christine Yoder, a wonderful Old Testament professor at Columbia seminary, has observed that Jonah embodied this assumption by detaching himself from the sailors physically, spiritually and emotionally. He went so far as to go to sleep while all these other guys were working, even when the storm whipped up. The Septuagint, a later Greek translation of the Bible, even added that he was down there snoring. Most commentators think this detail was added both for comedic effect, but I think it also accentuates the thoughtlessness of Jonah. I once heard a saying that “if anyone has ever told you that you snore, you should know that this particular person has weighed very carefully the pros and cons of letting you live.” As both a victim and perpetrator of snoring, I believe it. While all the other people were working to save the ship, Jonah doesn’t seem to care about what might happen to them.

Even when he starts talking about his God, he makes it about him. His description of God as the creator of the sea and dry land is a formula that the Bible uses all the time, but Jonah adds a new wrinkle by inserting a reference to himself right in the middle. “The God of heaven, the one I worship, made the sea and the dry land.” Nobody else has the gumption to do that. Even when he is in the fish, Jonah’s lofty prayer to the God who has saved him and will save him takes a dismissive shot at the sailors. Ironically, while Jonah is slamming the faiths of these sailors from the belly of the fish, they are at that moment up on the deck of their ship pledging a new loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jonah.

Looking at it in yet another way, we might observe that these sailors, who have all kinds of reasons just to chuck Jonah overboard without a second thought, actually go to great lengths not to do that. Even after their casting of lots identified Jonah as the problem, even after Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea, they anguish over that decision. Putting their own lives in danger, they try to row the boat to shore instead. One Hebrew midrash, which is essentially commentary that rabbis have created to explain the story, adds another comic twist on the scene. In the midrash, the sailors first drop Jonah into the sea up to his knees and then pull him out. When his knees are in the water, the storm subsides. But as soon as they pull him back up, the storm goes back to full rage. Then they drop him up to his neck and the storm stops again, and when they pull him back up, it whips right back up again. Finally, they can’t deny it. Sorry dude, looks like you really are going overboard. It’s like a cartoon, but it does underscore the fact that Jonah’s assumption about these men was all wrong. Even though they were of other religions, even though they were from other lands, even though Jonah had done nothing to show respect or concern for them, these men valued Jonah and wanted to preserve his life along with theirs.

A second erroneous assumption that Jonah makes relates to the Ninevites. Here, **Jonah assumes that an entire city, an entire group of people, was beyond hope — that they were completely incapable of critical self-reflection, repentance and love.** As a society, we seem to be doing a lot of this these days. There is clearly evil in the world, and there are clearly people in this world who seem to have no moral boundaries to limit the awful things that they are willing to do. Too often, however, I think we fall victim to the temptation to dismiss them entirely. We make assumptions that we already know enough about those people, that the things they have done have freed us from any spiritual obligation to be gracious, that we are now free to do whatever we want in retaliation and that, whatever it is that we choose to do will be blessed and consecrated by a God who is always on our side.

Here again, the fate of Jonah’s assumptions invites us to ponder our own assumptions about the people in this world who live in places that we have deemed evil. The sermon Jonah offers to Nineveh includes no trace of mercy, no possibility for heavenly grace. It is essentially a spiritual egg timer, set on forty days, that promises the delivery of a whole lot of pain when the buzzer goes off. At least, that is the message Jonah thought he was preaching. It never occurred to him that the eyes of the Ninevites might actually be opened in a new way, so that they might respond to God with sorrow for what they had done, that their heartfelt repentance may lead to a desire to live in more loving ways. Once again, Jonah was wrong, which raises the possibility that we too might be making some faulty assumptions about people in this world who may not look or act like us but are still well within the loving reach of the same God who loves us.

This brings us to the final bad assumption Jonah makes, which is an assumption he makes about God. **Jonah assumes that he knows not only what God will do, but also what God SHOULD do.** In other words, Jonah assumes that he understands fully what justice means for him, for the Ninevites, for the sailors whose faith he sees as empty and vain, for the whole world. In chapter 4, which we have not read this morning, Jonah comes really clean about this. He admits that one of the reasons he ran to Tarshish was a concern that God might not do what he thought God should do. “I knew that you are a gracious God,” Jonah said, “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Jonah wanted that kind of love for himself, but not for those other people. He wanted them to die like pigs.

This is one of those places that close attention to the Hebrew text really shows us something. Let’s assume that Jonah delivered the sermon that God told him to deliver, that in forty days Nineveh would be “overthrown.” The Hebrew verb *haphak* can mean military destruction and conquest, which is clearly what Jonah assumed that it meant. That is what Jonah wanted that word to mean. But more often than not this verb means simply “to turn.” And that, is it not, exactly what happened. Not in the way Jonah assumed it would, but in the way God knew it would, because in the Old Testament, in the true faith of the Hebrews, the concept of repentance is nothing more than an act of turning. It is a moment when one assumption about life gives way to an opposite assumption about life. It is a moment when one who has been turning away from God finally realizes that, and then turns around to meet the gaze of a God who is always calling, always forgiving, always loving. In this story, the Ninevites were turned, the sailors were turned, they were all overthrown by a new concept of God’s love.

Ironically, all of those people did it willingly, quickly, and joyfully. It was Jonah who needed the most help to be turned. God goes to great lengths to turn him around — with a great storm, a great fish, and a surprisingly great welcome in Nineveh. But in the end we are left wondering whether Jonah’s faulty assumptions — about others, about God, and about himself — will ultimately be overthrown by a radically new understanding of justice, a heavenly brand of justice that is always subject to the influence of a greater and more powerful love.

Through Jonah, this question is pressed for us as well. What assumptions are we making about people who are unlike us? Are there people in this world whom we have assumed are unreachable or unredeemable? In what ways are we pressing our own limited perceptions of justice, perceptions that are often self-serving and self-aggrandizing, upon a God whose vision and love are so high that we could never comprehend? In what ways might we be putting too much faith in our certainty that we know best what God should do?

My prayer is that, as we draw closer to God and continue to grow up in every way into Christ, who knits the whole body together, that our assumptions may become less and less like Jonah’s, and more and more like God’s.

Amen.