

As our Sunday school teachers will attest if asked, Clayton's favorite story in the bible is the story of Jonah. I don't know what makes it his favorite, but if I were a betting man, I would wager it falls somewhere between Jonah's adept ignoring of God's command (which is strange because Clayton ALWAYS listens to his parents) and the comical imagery of a giant fish or whale swimming close to the shore and hocking a Jonah loogie on to the beach. I prefer the latter, for what it's worth. Given the rarity of anything from Jonah appearing in the lectionary cycle, namely today and as an option on the 20th proper of year A, I feel I would be amiss passing it over.

So what is going on with this Jonah? Many scholars have tried to classify the Book of Jonah, with no real consensus, because it isn't really a prophetic book in that there is a narrator telling the story of the unwilling prophet, compared to say, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the like whose text is the actual prophecy from God. Others characterize it a satire, arguing that Jonah is the embodiment of a stubborn Israel. Whatever you decide, the book of Jonah remains a classic glimpse into the life of God and His people. It challenges our notion of fairness, stretches our concept of grace, and solidifies any doubt of God's goodness. I guess you could say there is a lot going on.

Although we only have a small glimpse in today's reading, let's dig in. I'll presume that everyone knows the first half of the story, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah doesn't want to, he flees by boat to Tarshish, storm rises, crew is afraid, Jonah realizes he is responsible, offers to go overboard, storm resides, big fish, three days, lots of prayer, "ptooey!" and then a change of heart. So we arrive at today's reading.

Like Nineveh, Jonah is given a second chance to obey and this time he follows through. He walks through the city and cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" and the kicker is, they listen! The king himself dons the sackcloth and explores the exfoliatory properties of ash. Even the animals are covered in sackcloth, which is quite an image if you think about it. The King proclaims, "No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human 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. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

"Who knows." What a maddeningly profound yet appropriate response. Maybe we didn't get Jonah's full message of doom, but the king's response seems so much more than "we better cover our bases." It, to me, speaks to the amazing and countless ways God can and will break through in our lives. But it worked and he led his people to repentance and new life. His turnabout was so complete, and God's willingness to change His mind so abrupt that Jonah in turn becomes angry at God. He was ready to sit back and watch the fireworks. Isn't that rich? There is a great exchange between God and Jonah in the 4th chapter of the book that I will leave for your exploration, go check it out for if it doesn't bring you back to having opinionated kids as a younger parent, I don't know what will.

Who Knows? It is said that nature abhors a vacuum, I would add that people don't like, on a fundamental level, uncertainty. How many of you have taken a job with an unclear description? How many of you vets have signed up for a mission where the underlying strategy was winging it? We don't like uncertainty. We like to plan. We like to be in control. We like to know what is coming. How many of you honestly don't care one bit when someone answers a well thought out question of yours with, "Who knows?" I think what brings these lessons together this morning, and the challenge for us in hearing them is how we respond.

God asked Jonah, twice, to deliver a message. Jonah told Nineveh to repent. Jesus called his disciples to follow him. How did they respond? How would you respond?

"Who knows" could very well have been the response Peter, Andrew, James, and John said to themselves as they left their boats, their nets, their families, and followed Jesus. It wasn't a satisfying justification, nor was "I'll make you fishers of people" a satisfying job description. Regardless, they left their lives behind for the chance to follow this Jesus. Had you asked them what lay in store, I'm sure all you would get was, "Who knows?" But isn't that the point? Here's why:

"For God alone my soul in silence waits; \*

truly, my hope is in him.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation, \*  
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.  
In God is my safety and my honor; \*  
God is my strong rock and my refuge.  
Put your trust in him always, O people, \*  
pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge.”

This section from today’s psalm characterizes, no, completely embodies and encompasses the who, what, why, and where of our lives. Here is the antidote to our fear of losing control. Here is the confidence required to balance those nagging questions. Here is the firm ground we stand on when upon hearing God’s call we feel as though we are leaping off a cliff. We have been called. We are being called. How will we respond?

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.