

MY JOURNEY WITH JONAH

Sermon Notes for Blessing of Jonah Statue - July 9 and 10, 2017

Jonah was once thrown overboard, so he has a connection with water. Our practice for baptisms is to invite children to come, dip their hands in baptism water, take the wet hands to adults, bless ourselves, so we all remember our own baptism.

Today we will process with Baptism water to our new statue of Jonah and sprinkle him with the water. There are 8 verses of Scripture which will be inscribed on the bluestone at a later time. 7 verses are from Jonah, and one verse is from St Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus says *'There is something greater than Jonah here.'* Jesus knew the story of Jonah. Our Jonah is pointing where *'that something greater'* is – go inside this church.

The person who created Jonah in bronze for us is Shelley Kolman Smith, of Poetry, Texas. If you have any work in bronze you would like to consider, she has a beautiful website. Perhaps you would like a statue of yourself for your front lawn.

Why is Jonah here at our church? Here is your answer for all time: Children pay attention; people will ask you for the next 100 years. Your answer: *'O, we once had this funny old pastor who thought the story of Jonah was the story of his life – and he kept trying to convince us it is the story of our lives too.'*

Here is what happened to me in seminary when we studied Jonah. I kept trying to figure out how all the incredible events of that book took place, especially the fish part. I remember reading a recent publication in those days that Jonah is not an historical story – it is a Parable. Then, Jonah made sense. I was headed in the right direction now.

It is like you asked me in what direction is the Atlantic Ocean – and I point to the West. You get to Lake Jordan and say that is not a very big ocean. Someone who lives there tells you – you are going in the wrong direction – go East.

When we read Jonah as a Parable, here is what we learn from our statue verses:

1

The word of the Lord came to Jonah. The word of the Lord comes to each one of us. We will not be called like Jonah to convert the people of Nineveh. We are called to our own unique tasks, in our own times.

2

Jonah found a ship going to Tarshish. What did Jonah do when he was called? He did not go. He ran - in the opposite direction. He wanted no part of dealing with those people in Nineveh, no part of what God called him to do.

3

This great storm has come upon you because of me. When the storm came to the ship, the sailors were frightened. Jonah told them the storm was his fault because he did not respond to God's call. He made trouble for the sailors. Have we ever made trouble for others? Have we ever been uncooperative to bring good to others? Have we ever admitted we made a big time mistake?

4

Out of my distress I called to the Lord. Jonah is safe. He is grateful. This is the beautiful Chapter 2 of Jonah, his prayer. Where is Jonah safe? In the belly of the fish, where he can do nothing, he is trapped. He is in the Lord's hands. His words: *'You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord.'*

5

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Jonah gets a 2nd chance. We all get a 2nd chance to do the right thing, to follow the Lord's way.

This past week a man aged 65 came to visit me. I taught him religion for 3 years in high school. We talked about old times. We exchanged news of what happened since those days.

He knew stories I had not heard of what happened to some school mates. There were many stories of 2nd chances, including his own heartfelt recovery. There were some other sad stories of no recovery. For me – his visit was a reminder we cannot bring back the past, especially bring back people who once made my life so joyful and people for whom I had great expectations.

My visitor was African American. He was a good basketball player. I was the Athletic director for the school. Does that surprise you, me an AD? I had to schedule games.

One school I asked – the AD said *'what is the complexion of your school?'* I knew what he meant – how many Black kids? We had 5 of 12 boys. He proposed: playing segregated at his school [public schools were not integrated then], playing integrated at ours. I consulted with the team and they thought that would be progress.

At another school they did not realize we were so integrated when we arrived at their gym. There were ugly words spoken. We won the game by a big score and when leaving the gym there were taunts. I asked a policeman to help us get to the bus. He just turned and walked away. This leads to #6 from Jonah

6

The people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast. We have our individual sins for which we need 2nd chances. We also have our community sins: we as a people make laws, enforce customs, we discriminate against some groups of people, we exclude from care those who suffer, we keep for ourselves privileges not given to others. Like the whole people of Nineveh, there are still communities which need conversion.

7

The gourd plant cost you no effort. After not getting credit for the conversion of Nineveh [remember: Mosul today is where Nineveh was] Jonah left town in a huff and pouted under the shade of the gourd plant, which then wilted and died. Jonah needed a 3rd chance. The Lord reminded Jonah: *'this plant cost you no labor, and you did not raise it.'* Our lesson: this gourd plant and all the plants of the earth are God's gift. We must care for these plants, as we must care for the people of far-away Mosul.

8

There is something greater than Jonah here. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke there are 6 references to Jonah. Jesus taught about Jonah. Both Jonah and Jesus were once ensnared in the violence of a storm at sea.

In our bronze rendition of Jonah he is moving toward the *'something greater'* inside our church, Jesus. Next week we shall follow to where Jonah is looking. As we bless the statue of Jonah today, join me as we remember our own journeys of the past and the people who were with us. And we seek blessings for all our journeys yet to come. – Father Donald Staib

