



YOU CAN RUN...

Jonah 3:1-5, 10



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A month or so ago, when Jeremy – the cello kid that I mentor -- and his mom were here visiting, the Sci-fi channel was broadcasting a star wars marathon. Cool! All six of them – in a row! We had a great time! We made comments about the storyline. He updated me on the episodes I hadn't seen, and I told Jeremy all about how I saw the original Star Wars on the big screen -- turns out I'm really old! And we had fun talking about how nobody likes Jar-Jar Binks.

Since I'm so old, I have to admit that I have not always been a fan of the newer Star Wars movies, now known as Episodes 1, 2, & 3 – they're not Star Wars! I've always liked the original movies—sure the acting is a little cheesy, and the effects are primitive by today's standards.

But all 6 episodes were on and we were determined to watch them all. And this time I noticed something. When you only watch the original 3 movies, Darth Vader is an evil, cruel, brutal villain. He's somebody everybody loves to hate, because he's the right hand of the emperor -- the instrument of oppression, injustice, and cruelty in the galactic empire. Villain. Period.

But something different happens when you watch the newer movies. You meet Darth Vader as sweet, little, wounded Anakin Skywalker – abused and abandoned. You can't hate Anakin. Even when he whines like a spoiled teenager about not getting the recognition he thinks he deserves. Even when he turns to the dark side of the force and becomes Darth Vader, we still have the image of that poor, sweet little boy!

The book of Jonah is like the Saturday Night Live of the Holy Bible. It's kind of funny! But it has a definite sting to it. It's satire and it has an axe to grind. It's one of those stories where we love to see the villain get what's coming to him. But we'd better beware – The bad guy in this story may be someone we know.

Our reading this morning is a bit short, I think, so let me fill in a few details. It's a grand tale. Jonah, whose name means "dove," is the son of a man named Amittai, "faithfulness." You would expect him to jump at the chance to deliver a message from God. Besides, as a prophet, it's kind of Jonah's job.

“Go at once to Nineveh,” God tells Jonah, “and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” God takes Ninevah's evil ways fairly personally, and demands that the chosen prophet, ‘Dove, Son of Faithfulness,’ go there and preach a sermon of warning. But no...

"... Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish (west of Israel, across the Mediterranean, where Spain is now, not East where Nineveh is).... He went down to Joppa, found a ship bound for Tarshish, paid the fare (yay, Jonah), went down (again!) into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the face of YHWH."

"That will show old YHWH. I'll run as far as my little legs and this little ship will take me." Or so he thinks. Because once the ship heads out into open water, "...the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up."

Meanwhile, "Jonah had gone down (there he goes again!) into the hold of the ship and had fallen fast asleep." Notice how the author keeps saying Jonah "went down" – it's a literary device showing how Jonah thinks he's moving farther away from God. The ship's captain comes and wakes him up, demanding that he "call on his God," thinking that calling to one's God might do some good. After all, all of the pagan sailors are calling out to their gods for rescue. You would think that the prophet Dove, son of Faithfulness -- would have thought of calling to his God for help—but no...!

Jonah heads up on deck, the waves growing higher and more violent, Jonah draws the short straw, and the sailors pepper him with questions: "What do you do? Where do you live? Got any kids?" The prophet (the word "prophet" means "mouthpiece" and Jonah hasn't said a word, yet!) finally speaks proclaiming, "I am a Hebrew, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." He tells them more than they asked for -- it's a little weird. He claims that he worships the God who made the sea, while he is running away from that same God on the very sea that that God made! It makes you wonder if he really believes what he is saying or not. That question will come up again.

Whether or not Jonah believes his own words, the sailors do. They demand to know why he is running away from the God that made the sea! Jonah, realizes he can't get away from this persistent deity by land or by sea, so he tells the sailors to throw him overboard, and that will solve their problems. But they won't do it. Instead – get this – the pagan sailors try to save Jonah! But, it's too late. With great reluctance, and after a prayer worthy of Jesus himself, they toss him over the side, the sea goes quiet, and just like that the formerly pagan sailors become worshippers of YHWH. In short, Jonah has converted them all, which was not even part of the plan – or was it?

Now Jonah is quickly sinking into the Mediterranean Sea. Could this be the end? Nope -- God's not through with him yet. A huge fish, swallows him and Jonah is fish chow – almost -- for three days and three nights. From the belly of the fish he prays a prayer that some have found quite beautiful, but I'm not so sure. He quotes from several psalms before getting to this little

nugget: "Those who keep vain idols abandon their steadfast love." Except the only keepers of idols in this story are those ex-pagan sailors, who far from abandoning their love, are at this very moment showing it through great sacrifice and vows.

Then Jonah makes a promise: "But I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay." He never sacrifices in this story and he makes no vows; all he does is run away! He finishes with this gem: "Deliverance/salvation belongs to YHWH" -- which it does, as the story makes crystal clear, but at this point the only deliverance Jonah has in mind is his own. After a prayer like that, the big fish throws up! Can't blame the fish!

So despite his best efforts to the contrary, Jonah winds up in Nineveh, walking into town, declaring God's impending judgment. And, surprise! -- The people of the Nineveh repent! Even this brutal and hated city— the prophet Nahum called it "city of bloodshed" (Nah. 3:1)— isn't beyond the power of God's Spirit to soften their hearts. The "King of Nineveh" himself proclaims a fast on the odd chance that they might avert disaster.

And not only is Nineveh not beyond the power of God's Spirit, it is also not beyond the scope of God's compassion and mercy! In response to their repentance, God relents. There will be no fire and brimstone. But Jonah, instead of rejoicing over the success of his preaching, goes off on a hillside to pout. Turns out he *wanted* the people of Nineveh destroyed—men, women, children, and even the animals! In fact, he admits that's why he ran a way in the first place—he didn't want God to have mercy on any of them (cf. Jon. 4:2). Seems Jonah loved to hate the Ninevites.

What gives us this terrible love to hate certain people? For some I think it's fear. We're afraid that someone will take away what is ours, or violate our sense of safety and security by a crime or an act of terror. We are so afraid that we can only respond to certain people whom we have "decided" are criminals and terrorists with fear and hatred.

For others, it is religious arrogance. They are so certain that they are on God's side and God is on theirs, that anyone who differs or disagrees with them in any way become not only their enemies but also God's enemies. And if they're God's enemies, then we're perfectly right to hate them. Or lock them up in prison camps as long as we please. Or summarily strip them of basic human rights.

I think that was Jonah's problem. He bought into a version of the Jewish faith that basically said that they were God's chosen people and everybody else was not. Kind of like Christians do nowadays... All of the grace and goodness that God lavished on the Jewish people caused those who bought into this idea to think that somehow they were immune from the possibility of displeasing God in any way (kind of like Christians do...). They believed, regardless

of what they did, that they were automatically on God's side (kind of like we do...). And as a result, everybody else was excluded.

But it would seem from the story of Jonah that God had a lesson for all those who think they have an exclusive claim on God's love. Even godless, ruthless Nineveh is not beyond the reach of God's Spirit. Even the people that Jonah loved to hate are not outside of God's mercy and love!

Of course, it's easy for us to sit back in our padded pews and shake our heads at these religious egotists. But the fact is that we've all done it. During the Second World War, for many people it was Adolf Hitler or Emperor Hirohito. See how the hatred shifts as one enemy after another falls by the wayside. During the "Cold War," the people we loved to hate had names like Khrushchev and Brezhnev. After that it was the Ayatollah Khomeini. Then it was Saddam Hussein. Then it was Osama Bin Laden. But no matter what, we always seem to have this terrible love of hatred. It seems we're not capable of seeing them as God's beloved children who were once innocent and sweet like Anakin Skywalker.

One article I read didn't pull any punches: "Jonah is a sanctimonious, Bible-spouting mountebank who hates anyone who is not just like him. I fear that he too often is us—those of us who just know we have all the right answers, while "they" (whoever your "they" might be) just as certainly do not. Jonah is the prophet gone bad. He is at once hilarious and monstrous."

We laugh at Jonah. We've identified the villain haven't we? I don't think we can help it. But we can see it in ourselves and name it. And fix it. The good news is that whether we're Jonah or Nineveh – or even the sailors, God is there, loving us, nurturing us; and that wonderful good news isn't just ours to hoard; it is a message that applies to all people, everywhere. Even those we love to hate.