

Sermons from Park Hill: January 27, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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**The Book of Jonah
“What If We Said Yes to God
in the First Place”**

The whole Book of Jonah is just one story with four chapters. I want to deal with the whole book, but reading all of it would get a little long, so I'm going to give you the *David Bahr Reader's Digest* version. It's really a delicious story; it drips with humor and satire. But, you might also find something of yourself, like I do, in one of Jonah's weaknesses, faults and foibles.

The story:

“God spoke to Jonah and told him to go to the city Nineveh and tell them to shape up, or be shipped out. But Jonah didn't want to, so he got on a boat and fled as far in the other direction as he could – as far away as the end of the known world. He didn't want to give the Ninevites any chance to avoid their destruction.

But while on the ship, a great wind threatened to sink it, so the crew threw all of the cargo

overboard. But when that didn't work, the captain asked, “Which of you has done something to offend one of your gods.”

Jonah was down in the hold sleeping. When they found him, everyone came together and they cast lots, like who pulls the shortest stick, to find out who was at fault for this terrible storm. And sure enough it was Jonah. They asked, with horror, what have you done to your God? He told them he was running from his responsibility, and to his credit, he suggested that if he were off the ship, the sea would be calm again. So they threw him overboard. And he was right. The winds stopped and the ship was saved.

But God wouldn't let Jonah get away with running away. So instead of letting him drown, God had a big fish come and pick him up – or rather, swallow him. As the story is told, God didn't want to kill him; just teach him a lesson he couldn't forget.

He was swallowed and there he sat for three days in the belly of a big fish, reflecting on his predicament, and how all of this came about because he ignored what God wanted him to do. He ran away. Upon better reflection, deep in his smelly underwater waiting room, he promised to offer thanksgiving to God for having saved him. But, then he was angry later because God expected him to keep his promise. Conveniently, the fish had actually taken him right to the shore outside Nineveh and spit him up and out onto the beach.

God gave Jonah another chance, and even provided a ride for him to get where he was supposed to go in the first place. Again God said, go to Nineveh and tell them to shape up, or be shipped out. So Jonah went this time, having

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learned to listen when God speaks. But still not happy about it.

Now Nineveh was a huge city, so big it took three days to walk across it. Jonah walked for one day into the city, stood there, and preached the shortest sermon in recorded history. With no exertion and no enthusiasm, he spoke these eight words, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." Not only was it the shortest, it was the most effective sermon in recorded history, because all the people believed him and proclaimed a fast and put on clothing called sackcloth, representing their humility and plea for forgiveness. Even the king took off his robes and proclaimed the course of action for the whole city, hoping that God would change God's mind and save them. Upon seeing the sincere change of heart and ways, God agreed.

But Jonah was furious and told God off. "I know you're gracious and have great mercy, you're slow to anger and full of love. But this is ridiculous! Just kill me and spare me from having to see these horrible people saved." But God replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?" So Jonah went out sulking and sat on a hill outside the city so he could watch and wait to see if anything bad might happen, as he still wished.

This was in the desert and it was hot, so God had a bush grow up and shade Jonah so he could be more comfortable; and Jonah was very happy. But then God sent a worm and the tree died the next day. The winds and sun made Jonah miserable. Once again he said, "Just let me die." God asked Jonah, "Should you be angry about the bush?" "Yes," he said bitterly, "angry enough to die." "But," God asked, "why should you be so angry about a bush, and why are you so angry about that

city being saved? Shouldn't I care about those people? They don't know any better." And abruptly, that's where the story ends.

Every time I read this I'm drawn to at least one of the silly (and sad) things that Jonah did. And every time I have to consider where I might be acting like Jonah. As we look at it more closely, perhaps you can find yourself somewhere too.

There are lots of lessons in Jonah, but I want to highlight five things. These are the things that, when I spend time being honest, I have been challenged by in the past and areas that still challenge me today. I'm going to present it as a check list. So here's my list; and maybe you can keep your own.

1 - God asked Jonah to do something. Jonah didn't want to so he ran in the opposite direction. This one's pretty simple. Have I ever run away from something God wanted me to do? Yes. How about you? That was simple.

2 - From the bottom of one of the worst messes he had created in his whole life, Jonah made a promise and prayed that God will bless him. And then, once he's no longer in crisis, he is angry that God expected him to keep his promise. So, let's see. Have I ever wanted to be let off the hook for a promise I made? Check. How about you?

3 - Jonah would rather see the Ninevites suffer than change. These were people he disliked so much that he'd rather see them suffer than turn their lives around because that's what they really deserve. Have I ever... I just realized these are like questions from the new TV game show called

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The Moment of Truth. So, have I ever gotten secret pleasure from seeing, let's say, right-wing fundamentalists squirm because of a scandal. So, now we have a dramatic pause, cue the pulsing music... True. I have gotten such secret pleasure. And you?

4 - Jonah sulks because he has been so effective at what God asked him to do. When these undeserving fools put their lives together, he's disappointed; actually he's really angry at what he considers the injustice that those people didn't get what they should have had coming to them. Moment of Truth. Have I ever felt anger about someone else's turn of good fortune? Sadly, yes.

5 - And instead of being happy that he was so successful all the way around, Jonah made himself miserable because of his jealousy. Have I ever wasted my time feeling miserable because of jealousy and resentment? And the Moment of Truth... Yes.

Just imagine what would have happened if Jonah had simply said yes to God in the first place. Think of all the grief he could have avoided for himself if he had just done what God called him to do. Of course, we wouldn't have a story. And the truth is, we *are* much quicker to run the other way than to say yes. We are much more likely to turn in the opposite direction than we are to simply get right to it – whatever it is that has been asked of us; at least that's been true at various times in *my* life.

That's one thing from the story. But not only that, I have to think about all the other ways I have acted like Jonah – my checklist – when he feels sorry for himself, when he is so gripped with anger and a desire for revenge that he'd rather die than see an enemy escape punishment. That's a little extreme...

And Rabbi David Saperstein says "the great message of this book is what we might call perspective."¹ God has to teach Jonah to put his problems in perspective. When God forgives the Ninevites, Jonah feels so sorry for himself. He is happy again when the broom tree shades him from the hot sun one day but when it dies the next, Jonah becomes so angry that he wishes he were dead. He's lost all perspective. "These little things loom so large in his mind that he can see nothing else." The Rabbi reminds us that often the most cruel and insensitive words we speak to our spouse are over things like the cap on the toothpaste. Perspective. Or consider the loss of a *lifetime* friendship from *one* misunderstanding. Hurt feelings when all sense of judgment and proportion is lost. Or, he writes, people who have given years of dedicated service to a church or synagogue or a cause who quit bitterly when a relatively minor incident fails to go their way. Feelings from issues – like Jonah's – that just don't rise to the level of proper perspective.

Yet feelings like revenge are so seductive. Remember the pastor from Colorado Springs who was so publically outspoken against gay marriage who we later discovered was at the same time sleeping with a male prostitute? My first reaction was "good for him. That's what he deserves." Tarnished. But then his pastoral advisors claimed he was "cured" after three weeks "counseling;" and he becomes a revered spokesperson for the ex-gay movement, he's "proof" that we can change. That just kills me. And I pull a "Jonah." Just put me out of my misery. He should have...

A few years ago, I listened with glee to the news that two huge mega-churches in Ohio who were backing an ultra-conservative right wing candidate

¹ "More Than a Fish Story"
www.csec.org/csec/sermon/saperstein_4311.htm

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for governor were going to be investigated by the IRS for their partisan politicking. I felt *schadenfruede* – happiness at the misfortune of another – because I was so opposed to the values they stand for. I thought they deserved the pressure; that they had brought it upon themselves. But, what if it had been my Jonah job to help them get the message, change their ways, and escape trouble without any consequences? I'd have felt ripped off, miserable that they didn't suffer after all. And, in fact, nothing really did happen to them, except that their candidate proved so scary that people in his own party didn't vote for him. But for their happy relief I'd feel *freudeschmerz* - sorrow over someone else's joy. Then I have to come back to Jonah and realize my need to repent. And repent again when I secretly held onto the feeling that it's really them I think should be repenting; not me.

These games of jealousy and resentment can be exhausting...! What do you feel when a rich neighbor wins more in the lottery? What do you feel when an annoying co-worker gets a promotion – not even one you wanted? That's feeling sorrow over someone else's "underserved" good fortune.

How about the joy we feel about someone else's "deserved" misfortune? Larry Craig in the Minneapolis airport... But when I am tempted to gloat, to feel joy at their misfortune, I need to pull the Book of Jonah back out and read it. That's when this Christianity I claim gets in the way of my fun. We're called to a higher standard. But it is also where we step in with another perspective: sorting through the jealousy and resentment. God says to Jonah, don't get upset if I want to show love to whoever I want. That goes both ways.

Jonah's story ends abruptly, leaving open all kinds of possibilities – more growth, more mistakes, more jealousy, more repentance, more resentment, more understanding, more love to overcome my joy at my enemies downfall, more love to overcome my sadness at my enemies good luck.

The best lesson, however, is that if there is something we try to run from, if it is where God wants us to go, we'll find ourselves there eventually – once the kicking and screaming have passed, we'll be there. When all the bargaining and games have played out, once we've gotten our motives and perspectives in check, once we've been spit out of the fish belly onto the beach of our own Nineveh – we'll be in the place God wants to use us: where we would have been if we had said yes to God in the first place. It might not be as interesting for a drama, but if we simply said yes to God in the first place, imagine what we could have accomplished and how much grief we would have spared ourselves – and others. But let's not focus on the woulda, coulda, shoulda. Jonah did get it done and saved an entire city of people. What's God asking you to do? What has God been asking you to do all along?