

Mission, Misgiving & the Mighty Power of God

Preached at St. Anne's Episcopal Church – Tifton, Georgia

January 21, 2018

[Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#)

One of the funniest stories
in the entire Bible
is the story of Jonah.

Jonah's the kind of story you learn
when you're a kid in Sunday School,
but by the time we grow up,
about the only thing
most folks remember about Jonah
is that he's the guy
who got swallowed by a whale.

But there's much more to this story
than just some dumb fish,
and there's *way* more
than what we got this morning.

If all you had to go on
was the little snippet you heard today,
you could be forgiven for thinking,
"This is the most boring Bible story ever!"

In today's short burst from chapter three,
God says, "Hey Jonah, go to Nineveh,
that great and foreign city,
and tell them it's time to repent."

And as today's passage goes,
Jonah says, "Sure thing, Lord,"
and he gets up, goes,
and gives the shortest, worstest sermon
you've ever heard.

It's all of one sentence,
and he doesn't even mention God!

All he says is,
"Hey Nineveh:
In forty days,
you're all gonna die."

Can you imagine?
But that's part of why
this story is so funny.

The story of Jonah is funny

because

Jonah

did

not

want

to do this,
and yet it worked anyway.

Jonah didn't *want* to be a missionary.
Jonah didn't *want* to be a prophet.
But when he finally showed up . . .
when he finally gave in . . .
God took his rotten attitude,
God took his feeble words,
and God *used* them
to change an entire people.

As crummy and reluctant
as Jonah's message was,
the people's belief was immediate.
It says right there in verse five:
"And the people of Nineveh
believed God."
Not Jonah, but God.

* * *

I hope you see
the tremendous grace
in all of this
for you and me.
Oceans and oceans of grace.

Don't you get it?

Don't you see?

When God puts his hand on Jonah
and says, "I want you to do this,"
it's never actually about Jonah.

Same for us.

We don't have to be convinced of our ability.
We don't have to know how we're going to pull it off.
We don't even have to *want* to do it.

When God says,
"I want this to happen,
and I choose you to get us there,"
*God is the one
who will bring it to pass.*

Our imperfections,
our doubts, our fears, our second-guesses
just don't matter.

* * *

Truth is, I have been a Jonah many times in my life.
One of the greatest examples of that
has to do with our years of mission work
in the Diocese of the Dominican Republic.

Eight years ago,
I was a lot like Jonah.
I had no desire
to do mission work
in a foreign land.

“We’re too busy,” I said.
“There’s no interest at St. Anne’s.”
“We could never raise the funds.”
“We don’t speak Spanish.”

But then, in April of 2011,
I found myself reluctantly transported
not by a whale but by a determined colleague
and deposited on the shores
of the Dominican Republic.

And despite all the barriers
I had set up in my mind,
despite all the reasons I had
for not being there,
God introduced me to real people
with real desires, real needs,
and a real fire in their belly
for the work of God in their lives.

I met the people of Espiritu Santo—
the folks we at St. Anne’s

now call our 'sister congregation,'
and for whom we pray every week—
and they said,
“Father, we long to have a church here.
We are poor. We cannot afford it.
We meet our priest for Communion
under the hot sun in an open yard.
Father, won't you help us?
Father, won't you and your people join us?
Father, won't you help us build our church?”

And then I came home.
I came home to our opulent sanctuary
here at St. Anne's:
our parquet floor and our dimmable lights,
our massive altar and our glorious pipe organ,
our brand new prayer books and our perfectly polished silver.
I came home to it all,
and in that moment
I was convinced.
I was converted.
I was changed.

And so, for seven years now,
we've been going one week at a time,
taking little teams—sometimes five, sometimes eight—
working bit by bit to build this church:

a project we did not conceive of or begin,
for a people whose language we hardly understand,
but whose lives we now love and care about deeply.

Of the twenty-one members of St. Anne's
who have gone over the past seven years,
I think all of them to a person
would tell you the same thing:
we may be like Jonah—
we may be the missionaries,
the ones making the journey,
the ones going on the trip,
the ones crossing the ocean,
the ones buying the supplies,
the ones showing up,
the ones doing the work—
but in our story,
it's not the people of Nineveh
who are being converted.
It's not the people of Espíritu Santo
who are being changed.
It's us.

Sure, God is using us to do for others
something I never thought was possible,
but God is changing and blessing *us*
through all of this, too.

* * *

When it comes to Espiritu Santo,
God has been busy lately.

Sort of to our surprise,
the church we've been building
for seven years . . .
is almost complete.

There was an unexpected,
anonymous Dominican donor
who recently gave \$10,000
toward the completion
of Espiritu Santo.

And when he did, he said,
"I challenge St. Anne's.
If y'all can match this,
it will be enough
to finish this church
by the end of this year."

And folks, they're already using his gift.
Skilled laborers just put in the tile floor,
and next are the windows and doors.

From what I can tell, all they lack now
are plumbing, electrical, pews,
and one more good paint job.

All that for just \$10,000 from you and me.
Actually, now it's only \$7,400
because two St. Anne's families
have heard me talking about this lately
and have already gotten us a quarter of the way there.

* * *

To be honest,
I don't know what you think about mission.
Maybe you're like I was.
Maybe you're a Jonah.
Maybe you doubt whether it makes any difference,
whether it's worth it at all.

But I'm here to tell you,
whatever you believe,
God has done this.

Despite your reluctant rector,
despite our doubts and fears over the years
as to whether we could be of any actual help,
despite all the reasons we thought it couldn't be done:
the Lord our God has brought this to pass.

So as we approach our next trip,
and as we sell tickets for our Talent Show fundraiser,
I am asking you, just as our sister congregation once asked of me:
“St. Anne’s, won’t you help us?
St. Anne’s, won’t you and your people join us?
St. Anne’s, won’t you help us build our church?”

As we’ve learned from Jonah,
you don’t even have to *want* to do it.
Whether your gift is cheerful or reluctant,
God can use you . . .
God is already using you.

I say the story of Jonah
is one of the funniest stories in the Bible,
mostly because it’s so true to our feeble human nature.

But this time, it turns out the joke’s on us.
God has brought his goodness to pass,
and even with all our
insecurities, inabilities, and ineptitude,
he has used us and
has graciously allowed us
to be part of the story.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.