

**“BROKEN PROPHETS”**  
**Jonah 3:1 - 4:11**  
**September 18, 2011**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

I started this week laughing at Jonah, enjoying the comedy of him. Everyone loves a good story, and this one about a pouting prophet has everything from drama, to special effects and miracles. For those of you who don't know the story, it goes like this. Jonah was a prophet who received a word from God: Go to Ninevah—which was the capital of Assyria—and tell the Ninevites that God is going to destroy them. Jonah gave the commission a moment's thought, and then probably ran—not walked—down to the nearest port, and got on a ship for Tarshish. That's southern Spain, about as far from Assyria as Jonah can get.

God, undaunted by Jonah's rebellion, causes a great storm to arise. The sailors on Jonah's boat are terrified. They try to divine who on the boat has angered some god. The lot falls on Jonah. He tells the sailors this is his fault and to throw him overboard. The sailors are reluctant, but as the ship continues to pitch and roll, finally they get so terrified that over the edge Jonah goes, where he is immediately swallowed by what the Bible calls a big fish, and which in popular culture has become a whale. Jonah, now in the belly of the fish, in three days repents, and the fish spits him out on dry land. This is where we pick up the story this morning. God once again tells Jonah to go to Ninevah and proclaim that it will be destroyed for its wickedness. This time Jonah does as he is told, going to Ninevah and making his proclamation. In a surprise move, everyone in that great city from the King on down repents, and God decides not to destroy Ninevah. But now Jonah is furious, and he goes outside the city to sulk. Really, as you might have noticed, he resembles nothing more than a pouting child. There God tries to use the example of the fast-growing bush to help Jonah understand God's mercy. Interestingly, we aren't told whether Jonah gets it.

As fun as it is merely to poke fun at Jonah and all his flaws, a little historical context shifts the meaning of this story significantly. Ninevah is the capitol of Assyria, and at the time of Jonah, the Assyrians had been trying to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel for years. Which one of us would happily go, if God told us to go, to the capitol city of our sworn and very brutal enemies to tell them that our God—not theirs—is going to destroy them for their wickedness? Any volunteers?

And then there is the question of why God saves Ninevah. Yes, the people repent, but they have behaved so badly in the past. They are known for their brutality as enemies. The Assyrian empire, on the rise, is trying to expand everywhere, intimidating all kinds of people, and yet, when the people repent, even for an instant, God decides to forgive them. We might consider Jonah a sulky child for literally accusing God: “I knew you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” spitting out the words like nails. But Jonah, from a different perspective, merely wants justice. He has literally put his life on the line with his proclamation, and, having done that, he wants more than ever for Ninevah to be punished for its warring acts. That God would forgive “these people” who have so tormented God's “real” people is unthinkable to Jonah. God's intended lesson with the fast-growing bush that shades

Jonah one day and disappears the next: I doubt it had the result that God hoped for. I believe that Jonah remained at the end as he was in the beginning: a broken prophet.

Despite its comedic and highly dramatic elements, the story of Jonah provokes serious theological questions. The first of these is the question of justice versus mercy, of God's point of view and our own. Our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. How many times have you heard that over the years? If there is one descriptor of God used most often in the Hebrew Bible, it is this one. And most of the time it comes round, it comes as comfort because the people benefitting from God's mercy and graciousness are us, the people with whom we identify, the people towards whom we want God to show mercy. But here God is being merciful to someone else, a mortal enemy, and not a "deserving" mortal enemy at that. What do we make of that? Every Sunday we come to church and confess our sins and are assured of God's forgiveness, and it is a celebration. Do we celebrate equally at the thought of God forgiving child molesters and mass-murderers, those who we consider real sinners, as opposed to us who are just run-of-the-mill, humdrum sinners? We, most of us humans, we have a hard enough time stretching ourselves towards justice. To stretch beyond justice to mercy towards those who hate us, towards those we consider undeserving: how many of us can do that? Where does the quality of mercy end with you? How far do you want God's mercy to reach? I don't think it's an easy question for most of us; it's not one we want to consider. But if we really do think about it and are honest, I believe there'd be a whole big party of us sitting at the fringes of Ninevah, under that bush with Jonah, not understanding, not able to let go, not able to see our way clear towards the ways of God.

Which takes us to the second lesson of Jonah: God is not us. And like the question of justice and mercy, the quality of God's otherness from us is something we might nod to in passing, but we don't want to consider seriously. It is easier for us to think about God as just sort of a bigger, better, more restrained, and more consistently loving version of ourselves. The Bible tells us that we are created in God's image, but in our minds, I think that most of us continually try to recreate God in our image because if we don't, we know we can't come close to understanding the divine. I remember in my first year of ministry in Duluth, I was asked to be theologian for the day at Northland college, a UCC college in Wisconsin. I met with a feminist theology class, did whatever my prepared remarks were, and then the questions began. First question: what do you mean when you say God? I felt like I was gulping like a guppy for what seemed like hours but was probably closer to 30 seconds, but I learned in that moment that while I can talk about qualities of God as I see them laid out in scripture or other places, I can't describe God, I can't draw a portrait of God. And I now I think I know enough to say I shouldn't be able to, because God is God and we, all of us, we know God only in bits and pieces, in hints and guesses. No wonder Muslims have a thousand names for God and Hinduism an equal number of images, because God is beyond our grasp. God defies our language and our ability to reason. God is God, the one so unlike us that God would save even repentant Assyrians from the harsh weight of justice—gracious, merciful beyond anything we can wrap our minds or hearts around.

But, and this is the third lesson of Jonah, this God who is not us, this God who is not like us, for some reason known only to God, God has chosen us to be God's prophets and God's beloved ones. In full knowledge of our flaws and brokenness, our inability to understand the wideness of God's love and mercy, God has always chosen us humans to learn, to speak, to act and intervene

in God's behalf and on behalf of a broken and fragmented world. It is an overwhelming commission: you who can not know me or see me in more than fragments: you make me—my love, my justice, my mercy—visible in the world..We can protest that like Jonah we know and understand too little, that like Jonah our lives are too busy or God's work too hard, but the reality is God has chosen us, all of us, for work that is always bigger than we want it to be, bigger than we think we can be. How do we keep ourselves from being overwhelmed by that commission? How do we keep ourselves from crying out like Jonah, "Just take my life now because I simply can't do this?" Suddenly the Jonah story is not so funny anymore, because we are all too like Jonah for our comfort.

The story of Jonah is given to us much like the bush was given to Jonah: to teach us that we are called to love and serve a God whose ways are not our ways, and to do that as best we can, broken prophets all of us. But there is good news for us in this story too. First, it's easy to miss because Jonah doesn't see it, doesn't want to see it, but Jonah with all his flaws saved an entire city. He saved the city of Ninevah, a population of 120,000 and, we are told, many animals. That's no insignificant feat. Jonah stands in a long line of people of God from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and Jeremiah, Simon Peter, Mary Magdelene, Paul. From one end of the bible to the other and beyond, through all of history, we imperfect humans have in fact been the agents who made visible God's perfect mercy and grace. With all our flaws, in moments we actually accomplish God's work. Sometimes we get it right. Really right. And it's wonderful. And the other times, when we get it wrong, just know that even then we are assured that God's goodness and loving kindness are with us, as they were with the war-making Ninevites, as they were with Jonah. So we have no reason not to try. Thanks be to God. Amen.