

Aug 21, 11 Jonah

A WHALE OF A STORY

Though we may not realize it we are addicted to stories. That's true! Think about it for a minute. From our birth to our death it is our story. When you watch TV you are watching stories, unless it's sports, or news, and even then they are stories as well. When friends often get together they tell stories. When some of our kids came for Karen's wedding we sat around as some stories were told and some I didn't remember, and some I think they embellished. The news is often ongoing stories of what is happening in the world at that particular time. Movies are stories. Now stories don't have to be true, and some make a point, and some don't. Most movies you see, or TV shows you watch perhaps don't make points, but some do. We call most of those stories 'entertainment,' for they are there to entertain us with their wit and cliff hanging drama. Some are there to scare people. I don't like those movies or stories. They kind of remind me of evil things with no life benefits, but that's me. Sometimes people get caught up in the stories as well, or even can put themselves in the story as some authors want you to do. Thinking of that my mind thinks of the movie from a few years ago called "The Bucket List" starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson who were two guys with terminal illnesses. One decided to make a bucket list, that is, things they wanted to do before they died. When Jack asked Morgan if he had one, he said no, that he had not thought of one. Thus the theme of movie began to evolve as Jack persuaded Morgan to join him on completing his bucket list before one of them died, leaving the other to complete the list. Then the adventures began.

Now I am sure there have been some who saw that who though not ill, gave some thought what they would like to do before they died. Places they might want to go, things they might like to accomplish. Some might seem funny to one person, but to them, well

it's like a dream list. Like President Bush jumping out of a plane at age, what, 80 or 81, 82? Thus people could plug into that story. My point is that we love stories either in movies, TV or life. Many have great messages.

That of course brings me to the stories in the Bible. For you see, in these, God does want us to plug into them. One hymn we sing around Palm Sunday is, "Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear... stories of Jesus, tell them to me."

Wouldn't you like to be sitting in a class with Jesus as the teacher, listening to him tell the stories of stilling the storms, turning water into wine, walking on the water, healing a variety of illnesses, and so much more. He would mesmerize you with his story.

Such perhaps was the case when the disciples of John joined Jesus for supper and they listened intently to the one that John the Baptist had pointed to and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It was then they followed Jesus to his place of rest and listened to his stories that touched their hearts so much Andrew ran off to get his brother Peter to come back to listen to him because he found the Messiah.

Today's story is one that Jesus once spoke when confronted by the Pharisees and teachers of the Law looking for a miraculous sign from him in order to believe that he was sent from God, or if he didn't, perhaps the crowd that was following him would think he wasn't who they thought he was. And then he proceeded to tell them the Jonah story relating it to what was to come in his life, his death, and 3 days later rising again. But not only have that, but the story of repentance for the hated people of Nineveh, their arch enemies, which even these people hated just liked Jonah. It was a tell tale story because in reality, they who were seeking a sign would not believe, and Jesus knew it. For they had rejected sign after sign. And though John's Gospel tells there were many more signs Jesus did, all the signs and wonders and miracles we read about, those stories are there for one

point, and one point only, THAT PEOPLE WILL BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH AND THAT BELIEVING IN HIM, THEY WILL HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.

The story of Jonah is a whale of a story. But like the story of Adam and Eve we must remember the facts. In the garden the fruit they ate is not really mentioned, though many have said it was an apple. In the story of Jonah the fish is not mentioned by name, but when Jonah was heaved overboard it is recorded *“But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah...”*

The story in a nutshell is this. God spoke to Jonah and told him he had a mission for him to do. Now when God gives you a mission, it isn't one where you say 'I'll think about it. Give me a day or two to consider my options.' Case in point when I was serving at Buffalo and Dawson and was on vacation my DS called to see how my mom was because she had read in our newsletter we were going on vacation to MA to see my mom who was pretty ill. I thought that was awfully nice of her. As I told her how she was and thanked her for calling she waited a second or two and then shocked me with these words; “The reason I'm calling is to let you know you are being moved.” I, being my first time concerning a move said, “Okay, I'll think about it.” Which she then said, “Nothing to think about. You have already been appointed and your new DS will call in 5 minutes to tell you where and when you will start your new appointment.”

God said to Jonah, *“I have a mission for you. Go to Nineveh and tell them “their wickedness has come before me, and I am going to destroy the city and all in it.”*

It wasn't the message that was the problem it was the people to whom the message was directed. It was to be a warning to them how God was about to destroy them. It wasn't a long message. Just that within 40 days after he began preaching Nineveh would be no more. However, Jonah knew in his heart how gracious his God was and that if the people

turned from their wicked ways, God would forgive them. The problem wasn't God's. It was Jonah's. He hated these people because they hated his people and done some nasty stuff to them. He wanted no part in their repentance. Let them be destroyed. Remember how the disciples wanted to call down fire upon the hated Samaritan village as they walked along with Jesus? Jesus said no! I guess we could say they could have been like today's terrorists who continue to do evil in this world, not just to us, but to other countries. Can they receive forgiveness from God? What do you think? Or how about people who do horrific things in this world. Is the grace of God for them as well if they repent? Even on a deathbed? Do we think we are better than them? Even on a gurney in a prison as they receive the injection that is going to end their lives in a few seconds? Is God's grace for them too if they ask for forgiveness? God grace is offered and open to ALL WHO WILL RECEIVE.

What did Jonah do? In the first two verses we see God calling Jonah and telling why he is sending him to Nineveh. Verse 3 begins not with "And Jonah gathered his things, his best repentance and forgiveness sermons and got on line to Google MapQuest and planned his route to Nineveh listing all the motels and restaurants along the way and the fastest way to get there." WRONG! Verse 3 begins, "But." Now that's not a good word to start with when God tells you he has a mission for you. "*But, Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.*" He rebelled against God. Instead of heading to Nineveh, he went in the opposite direction and kept on going until he came to the seashore where he boarded a ship headed to Tarshish to get further and further away from his mission field and from his God.

Here is a lesson you can learn from the story. You can run, but you can't hide from God. We should understand that. God is like the hound of heaven, seeking the lost, watching over his sheep. Though Jonah might have thought he had left God back in his

country, he was going to find out, God is everywhere. Why God let Jonah get this far who knows, but when you read those 4 short chapters you realize a whole lot of things. And one is, you can't run away from God because he is everywhere you go and he won't let you go. If he is calling you he will keep calling until you surrender. I know that for a fact!

But Jonah's rebellion almost cost people their lives. That still happens today.

Sometimes things people do effect the lives of their families. Just watch the daily news, or read the paper and you find families destroyed by the choices of others. Or as we get close to 911 we don't forget the lost lives because of the terrorists actions. On that ship headed out on a nice clear day it looked like a fine day for a ship ride. Sun shining, wind at their back, crew happy, so were other passengers that might have been on board. When they pulled away from the dock Jonah kept watching the coast line getting smaller and smaller until he could not see it anymore. Perhaps he said, "see you later God" as he decided to go below and rest in his cabin and take a nap. Remind you of any one? Remember Jesus sleeping during the storm and the disciples were afraid they would drown? Don't know how long it was but that sunny day turned into a terrible storm that rocked that ship something fierce. The crew tried its best to keep it afloat but it began taking on water. They feared for their lives while Jonah slept. Thinking they were being punished for something they did, they began to accuse each other, but no one confessed to any known sins that might have upset God. They woke Jonah to tell him the problem and when he went on deck and saw the horrible storm, he told him he was the one at fault so throw him overboard. But they hesitated, and the storm got worse, perhaps because they were delaying Jonah's rendezvous with destiny. Finally they decided one man must die to save the rest....sound familiar? Remember following the raising of Lazarus the high priest said, "It is better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation shall perish."

I don't know why Jonah didn't just jump himself, but anyway, the crew picked up Jonah and heaved him overboard. Two things quickly happened, maybe even before Jonah hit the water. First, the storm stopped and the sea became calm and the shocked crews praised God for his mercy and grace that just fell upon them. Those who may not have known about God just witnessed his power and strength and perhaps fell on their knees seeking forgiveness. Second, before Jonah hit the water his limo, a huge fish came out of the water high in the air and caught him before he even got his feet wet.

Now that's a whale of a story. But that's not the end. For Jonah lived there 3 days and nights in the belly of the big fish praying, seeking forgiveness from God, sorry he had disobeyed him and he deserved what fate he was about to receive. At the end of those 3 days, from the bottom of the sea where the big fish had been traveling like a nuclear submarine, Jonah felt the huge fish seemingly making a turn upward and before Jonah could blink an eye the big fish opened his mouth and spit him out onto the beach. When Jonah cleaned himself off he began to walk toward the town where he found himself. Still brushing himself off best he could so people wouldn't get sick from the smells of whatever was in the bottom of the big fish, he saw a neon sign flashing that read "WELCOME TO SIN CITY NORTH-WELCOME TO NINEVEH."

Jonah's heart began to beat faster and faster as he realized the storm, the fish, and now this, were all part of God's master plan. Yes he could run, but he couldn't hide. Thus he went and preached his message not with conviction throughout the city as he had been instructed, but in anger and then went to sit under a tree and pouted because he knew what the end of the story would be. For you see, where God's story is proclaimed things can happen. When the people heard Jonah speak that God was not happy and was going to destroy them, they thought maybe if they stopped doing the stuff they were doing maybe, just maybe God would give them another chance. So from the king down to all the animals

they declared a fast of repentance seeking God's forgiveness. At the end of chapter three we read these words. *"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."*

It was a new day for Nineveh. They changed the sign entering town to WELCOME TO NINEVEH-THE CITY OF SINNERS SAVED BY THE GRACE OF GOD.

While Jonah's story had a happy ending for the city of Nineveh, it really was a sad ending for Jonah who is left pouting contemplating this question from God. *"Shouldn't I be concerned about that great city?"* And the story of Jonah ends and we are never told what happened to him, or if he asked God to forgive him for his attitude, an attitude that certainly wasn't God driven.

In my Max Lucado Bible Max says there are three things we can learn from the Jonah story:

One, God calls his people to relay his message even to their enemies. How true that is. That's what we are called to do, "Go make disciples." Two, God is more powerful than our schemes and plans. Three, we cannot tell when God's message will be received and heeded. Look at those people who have received Christ into their lives. From the disciples to those in the book of Acts, to some of us here today.

Thinking back to Jesus and his telling the Jonah story, perhaps his point was that they were missing the point of the story of God's Grace offered to everyone who would believe. Maybe he was saying to them that his story, his miracles that they often questioned were for all God's people, not just them. It was for their enemies. It was for the dreaded and hated Samaritans. It was for the sinners sitting in the barrooms. The prostitutes in the towns. It was for those who were poor. It was for the rich. It was for those who they had rejected as people not worthy enough to be called God's people.

Maybe he was telling them to open their eyes and see the hurting. Open their ears to God's message for they needed to repent of their attitudes and go and forgive their enemies, and open their hard hearts to show God's love and offer God's grace to all people that those who believe and repent can find forgiveness and healing along with eternal life no matter who they are or what they have done.

"Tell me the stories of Jesus I like to hear," the song goes. The second verse goes, "words full of kindness, deeds full of grace, all in the love light of Jesus' face."

What story did you hear from the story of Jonah this morning? Was it you can't hide from God? Was it that God's grace is offered to all people, even your enemies, those you refuse to forgive? Was it that those who repent, change their ways, can receive God's grace, that no one is to be denied the grace and mercy of God? Was it that God's Grace is offered to you too? Or was there something else that God taught you this morning?

That's why I love to tell the stories. "I love to tell the story more wonderful it seems than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams. I love to tell the story it did so much for me, and that is just the reason I tell I now to thee. I love to tell the story 'tis pleasant to repeat what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet. I love to tell the story, for some have never heard, the message of salvation from God's own holy Word."

Yes, I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory, the old, old story of Jesus and his love" found in God's Word.

And I'm sticking to God's wonderful story of grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy offered to all who will receive.