

**January 24, 2021**

When I was in Seminary, one of my Old Testament professors, made us promise that once in a while we would preach from the Old Testament. So... today, I'm fulfilling my promise.

The story of Jonah begins with God asking him to go to Nineveh where they are pagan, violent and wicked people. But Jonah isn't too happy about doing that, because he has an inkling that God might do what God does, God might forgive them. So, Jonah buys passage on a ship and he goes in the opposite direction.

A storm comes up, the sailors think that God must be angry with them and they cast lots to see who is to blame. And of course, "the lot fell on Jonah." The sailors are fearful of the storm, and even though they don't want to, they throw Jonah overboard.

God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah, and he spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Jonah prays to God, he says "Deliverance belong to the Lord." The Lord heard him and spoke to the fish, and it spit Jonah back out unto the dry land.

God then spoke to Jonah a second time about going to Nineveh, and this is where we pick up our scripture reading for today. Nineveh is a large city; it takes three days to go from one end to the other. Jonah enters the city and walks for one day; he's not even in the middle of the City. Then he cries out eight words, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" In the Hebrew Language, it's only five words.

And wondrously and miraculously the whole city of Nineveh repents. Even the animals repent! The King has everyone in the city fast, no one is allowed to eat; not even the animals.

Jonah sees what happens and he becomes angry. He pleads with God to take his life, saying that it would be better for him to die than to live. God then asks Jonah a very interesting question, he asks, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Is it right for you to be angry? Jonah then goes to the outskirts of the City and pouts.

God appoints a bush to grow up to shield Jonah from the sun. Jonah is then suddenly very happy. But the next day, the story twists again, God appoints a worm to destroy the bush, and the sun beat down on Jonah so hard that he grew faint.

Again, Jonah pleads with God; he says that it would be better for him to die than to live. And a second time, God asks that interesting question, “Is it right for you to be angry?” The this is essentially how the story ends.

Interestingly, almost everyone in this story experiences some kind of transformation. Everyone, that is-- except Jonah. Isn't that ironic?

Jonah is supposedly the righteous person in this story, the bearer of God's message. And yet at the end of this story it is Jonah who is unchanged, he clings to his prejudice and he ends up being angry and despairing.

We are in the season of epiphany. Epiphany means to shine the light on something... We've been shining the light on Jesus and talking about new ways of seeing... Epiphanies are transformational. They change how we see things.

Quick story... I have a kind of peculiar disclosure to tell you about. I can be very particular about some things. In fact, I can tend to be a perfectionist. I don't know how or why I became this way; it just is.

When Kris and I bought our first home in south Minneapolis, we didn't have a washer/dryer, so I used to make a weekly trip to the local Laundromat. One afternoon I was folding shirts, and I noticed an Asian woman watching me. Her daughter was with her and I could hear her make comments about what I was doing. I was self-conscious so I pretended to ignore their fascination.

Finally, the woman came up to me, she gestured at my perfect stacks of clothes and said, "You fold good." I thought of correcting her grammar, but didn't. Then I thanked her-- and remembered feeling a little shocked. It was the first time I was ever aware that I can be very persnickety about some things... I hadn't thought of myself that way before.

I'm not a perfectionist about everything, but for some reason, for some things, I am. When I was doing a lot of wood working, I tended to be a perfectionist about my tools. I had peg board over my work bench and I hung up all my saws, hammers, chisels, planes, you name it. I knew where everything was and I loved the feeling of having it organized. The world is just a better place when everything is organized!

This tendency has served me well over the years. I guess you could say it is a gift of sorts... I don't have a lot wrinkled shirts and I know exactly where my tools are... So, this tendency has had its positive side, its positive outcomes.

Later in my life, I've learned that every gift is also accompanied by a shadow. And the shadow of perfectionism is anger; if someone messes with my perfect world, look out!

One day when my son Jon was probably six or seven, my parents came to visit. I remember walking with my dad and Jon, three generations together through the yard. As we got close to the barn, I noticed a hammer lying in the grass. It was one of those really nice Estwing hammers.

I blew my top, I started ranting and raving at Jon, waving my arms, telling him how irresponsible he was, how he couldn't be trusted to put anything away, la, de, da... You name it...

I was just in this rage when I happened to look over at my dad; he looked disappointed and said "Todd, do you remember the saw?" And whoosh! In an instant I remembered a time when I ruined one of my Dad's electric saws by leaving it out in the rain...

In an instant, I saw my hypocrisy, in an instant I saw myself as an angry monster. It was a little like having whip lash. I had an epiphany about myself!

With six words, my dad gave me a mirror to see myself... And it was humiliating and transforming. In a very real way, it was a cross. Suddenly, I found myself putting to death my anger, my violence toward Jon. And in its place came resurrection and love. The cross is all about that transformation.

As we live into our baptism, each day we die to our self-righteousness, our angers, our prejudices, our violence... And we are raised; we are transformed into a new creation of graciousness and love. We are called to follow Jesus, and let God's changes flow through us.

A couple years after that experience, I happened to be folding laundry, and I was folding Jon's tee shirts. He walked by and grabbed one to put on. Then he changed his mind and half-heartedly refolded the shirt and threw it back on the pile; I could feel my blood start to boil.

And then I had an epiphany... I remembered the saw... I remembered the cross, I smiled, that time, I could let go of the anger, and I knew in my heart it was just a different kind of perfect. Amen