

Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2018 - "Justice AND Mercy"

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 21, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We heard some of the story of Jonah today. A while ago at Good Shepherd, we had lots of fun with Jonah's story when the kids in Vacation Bible School acted it out for the congregation. There was a big fish, a canoe that became a sailboat, sailors wearing shower caps and fake mustaches. It was marvelous.

But even without our very entertaining kids and their props, there's lots of comedy and fun in Jonah's story. It isn't told to recount a historical event but to help us to know more of who our God is. Sometimes we act as if the God of the Old Testament is totally different from the God of Jesus, but there is one God. The story of Jonah helps us to know our God.

The story is fun, but it can also be pretty disturbing. Our reading today ends with the words: "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and God did not do it."

God was planning a calamity? God does that? And then God changed his mind? God does that?

Sometimes we talk as if God is gentle, sweet and loving, but also fairly weak and irrelevant. This God wants us to be nice, to avoid conflict and not get too upset about anything - God as the ultimate Midwesterner. This God would never plan a calamity.

Other times we act as if God is some great big, angry judge who keeps score of right and wrong, good and bad. The good believers are rewarded, the rest are punished. This God is fierce, relentless and unchanging.

In the story of Jonah, we see that God is very different from either of those caricatures. This is good news, as well as a challenge, for us.

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh - the capital of Assyria, superpower of the ancient world. Assyria was notorious for using its power to oppress, exploit, torture, and dominate. God is angered by this wickedness and wants justice. God tells Jonah to cry out that Nineveh will be overthrown. Except Jonah doesn't want to enter enemy territory to announce God's justice. He hops on a ship that's going completely the opposite direction from Nineveh.

But God doesn't let Jonah go. God hurls a mighty wind into the sea, a storm arises, and the ship threatens to break apart. The sailors on the ship hurl Jonah into the sea and he's swallowed up by a big fish that God sends. God is not sweet, irrelevant, and harmless. Rather, God is bent on justice and is actively involved in the ongoing work of creating, ordering and restoring our world.

So, Jonah ends up in the belly of a fish for three days. He prays and God tells the fish to hurl Jonah out.

(All the hurling that happens is part of the comedy.)

Then God tells Jonah, a second time, to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah listens and follows, but just barely. He sulks through the city and says, “forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” His comically short sermon makes a huge difference. Everyone in Nineveh, from the king on down to all the animals, puts on sack cloths, sits in ashes and repents.

The other biblical prophets give powerful poetic speeches and God’s people just ignore them. Jonah does the bare minimum and all of Nineveh repents. He’s the most successful prophet in all of scripture. His mortal enemies listen and turn to God. Good news, right?

No! Jonah gets angry, “angry enough to die”, as he puts it. He tells God, “that is why I fled, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” So, the truth comes out. Jonah has tried to avoid God’s call, not because he’s afraid of the Ninevites - he’s afraid God will be both just and merciful.

Jonah wants God to be the angry judge who will condemn the Ninevites to wrath and destruction. He wants retributive justice, a “show no mercy” approach. But Jonah knows that’s not the kind of justice that God is ultimately about. So even when Jonah is sent to speak about God’s wrath, he’s pretty sure God will be gracious and merciful, too. God may even change the plan in order to be true to who God is - that God might forgive evil, oppressive Nineveh. And Jonah is right. Jonah’s story shows us that God is not only bent on justice and not only merciful. God isn’t an angry judge or an irrelevant sweetie. Instead, God holds both justice and mercy together out of love for the whole creation. God is angered by evil and actively seeks to change it. And, God seeks always to restore goodness and compassion.

God also asks a lot from us. God wants us to embody both justice and kindness. We’re called to be firm and gracious, strong and kind.

Living according to God’s justice is hard and demanding, especially when we’re asked to do it in compassionate, restorative ways. Choosing mercy is hard, especially when we’ve been hurt. So often we’d rather run the other way. But when we resist God’s ways we find we’re trapped, like Jonah in the belly of the fish, stuck in brokenness, anger, fear.

And yet, even in belly-of-the-fish kinds of times, we are not alone. God is active and involved in our world and God will not let us go. When we feel stuck in our opposition to God’s ways we can trust that even then, God is with us and God is working. God in Jesus spent three days in the belly of the tomb. God will not abandon us but instead comes to be with us, set us free and to raise us to new life.

The God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love sets us free and raises us up for lives of justice and kindness for the sake of this whole world.

Let’s take a moment for prayer.