

Time Out! – January 25, 2015
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Time Out!
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

When my children were little and were repetitively rebellious, I would assign them a time-out. It could last between 10 to 30 minutes depending on their age and their action. And while it didn't always change their attitude, it sometimes encouraged corrected behavior. Now, I have seen two of my children practice this same disciplinary action.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah received a time-out that no child would want in a foul-smelling belly of a big fish for three days! And when he had been freed from it, he received another chance to obey the commands God had given him. Jonah did, albeit reluctantly.

This little scrap of the book of Jonah, however, doesn't really enlighten us much. We need the entire story, that is a mere 48 verses in length, but is crammed with truth ready to be known. To begin, we need to know why Jonah had a time-out. The story begins: "*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'*" (Jonah 1:1-2). God says, "*Go at once.*" Immediately! And Jonah left, certainly, but he went as far as he could go in the opposite direction!

Then, the story continues, a stormy sea; being thrown overboard by pagan sailors who were more willing to do God's will than Jonah; swallowed by a sea creature, but not eaten, just a guest there to think about what he "coulda, shoulda" done. After being vomited on dry land and given another chance, Jonah eventually obeys God. The result: the Ninevites repent in a wonderful way, and God decides not to punish.

Now, if we penned this story, here would be a perfect place for an ending. God, using the prophet says, "*Your wicked ways bring destruction on you all!*" The people "get it." They make compensation. God refuses calamity. It's like a morality play. God hates it when you sin, will forgive when you repent. What else do we need to hear?

Actually, Jonah needed more, and maybe we do too. If so, let's do a little summary of what follows. Jonah becomes truly incensed with God for forgiving such an immoral community. *"I should have known! Your forgiving nature is precisely the reason I didn't want to come here. These undeserving people, even in repentance, don't deserve your forgiveness and should not even exist. As for me, I'm just going to just sit here, mope, and hope to die. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it!"*

At this point, God, rather than acting on Jonah the way Jonah had hoped God would act on Nineveh, gives precious shade for Jonah, and then sanctions the comforting vine to die. Now, God starts a dialog with Jonah the prophet regarding what grace actually looks like. The story ends abruptly, without any hint that Jonah agrees with God. And while this ending doesn't satisfy our obsessive need to solve things in 60 minutes, it does present to an opportunity to contemplate how the story might go if we put ourselves in it. We might learn something about ourselves. More importantly, perhaps we could experience God in a more profound way.

Or, if we step back from the story for a moment and ponder the possibility that we might be represented in this story by the pagans, or the fisher-people, or even the Ninevites.

It may be that our whole life we have been worshipping other gods, existing in a life that brings spiritual illness rather than spiritual health. That we begin to understand that our God is not small-town and limiting. Instead, God longs for a living, loving relationship with each of us.

So, how do we respond to this God? Is it possible that we delight in our God that loves everyone, who knows no boundaries? If we so believed, would it be possible to turn our heart toward God, give up on our past, and live modified lives?

Maybe you already have the answer. In the past you were not in God's embrace, but now you are living by the Spirit and pulled to follow God who loves, forgives, and transforms our hearts and lives.

But what if we look at our lives and find that we are more like Jonah, educated in the faith, around people who look and act like us, and believe that God can only love

people like us? What if we require that only we are God's messengers of love of God's love to those we believe "worthy" of it?

What if we don't want to forgive like God? Rather, what if we want punishment for those who have damaged us, who don't believe like we do, whose lifestyle offends us? What if we pronounce, "*God welcomes everyone but when you arrive, you must become like us.*"

Who are our Ninevites today? People of different ethnicity or language? People whose politics, gender orientation, or addictions are different than ours? Are they Corporation's CEOs? Politicians? Prostitutes? Drug addicts or alcoholics? Do we want God to transform their hearts? Or perhaps we would rather be vindicated in our own hypocrisy? It is right to look into our hearts? Maybe self-evaluation would be a better option than spending 3 days in a fish belly.

The Good News is that no matter who we are, God's love and mercy stays the same. Jesus came, not for some but for all. Love, Forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation, for the just and the unjust. The good news is that God is the God of second chances! When we shout, as Jonah did, "*Hell no, we won't go!*" when we won't follow God, well, God's love will follow us all the way to hell and back.

Eventually, God summons everyone to the heavenly banquet. We are not bouncers and gatekeepers, we are privileged invitation bearers. With gladness and joy let it be so! Alleluia. Amen.