

FIRST CHURCH IN JAFFREY NEW HAMPSHIRE

“One Page Sermons”

January 22, 2012

“A Fish Story”

Jonah 3: 1-5 & 10

If the definition of a fish story is that it is more fiction than fact, then the Book of Jonah is a whopper. Despite its small size, Jonah is the shortest book in the Bible, it is one of the best known, best loved and theologically sophisticated. It is a timeless story about God, about us, about good and evil and mercy and justice. And it is humorous.

The Book of Jonah asks big questions. Is God's mercy more powerful than God's justice? Can God repent and change? Does God's interest and mercy, God's preference to grant life rather than send death, extend to foreigners outside the people of Israel? Must God always act the way we expect God to act? Have we the right to judge others?

Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophets. Unlike the others, he is the anti-prophet. He is not the first character in the Bible to hesitate when God called. Moses, Amos and Jeremiah deferred. Jonah is the first to run away from God. No matter where he went, God found him. Everyone in this story is more faithful than Jonah. The sailors pray respectfully for a miracle. The Ninevites repent immediately when told to. Jonah is the story of a very stubborn Israelite, the one we would expect to be willing to listen to God.

When told to go to Nineveh, Jonah boarded a ship heading the opposite direction. When the ship begins to sink in a storm, Jonah refused to repent and pray. Thrown overboard to drown, God sent a great fish, let's call it a whale, to give Jonah shelter. When in the belly of the whale, Jonah prayed with such fake piety, that even the whale couldn't stomach Jonah's hypocrisy and threw up, landing Jonah on shore. God told Jonah again to go to Nineveh but this time in less judgmental, more merciful terms. Jonah went, said what he came to say, and sat outside Nineveh waiting for fire and brimstone to turn the Ninevites into a bonfire. Surprise! The Ninevites repented and God forgave them, ironically making Joan the most successful prophet in history.

Jonah wanted none of this. He complained to God. “I knew it! God, I knew that you would change your mind and forgive. That is just like you. So why did I risk my life to go to Nineveh? Why should I or anyone follow your rules if you are going to forgive us in the end? Why do you care about these people who are not your own?”

The story is not about Nineveh but about Jonah. In the blindness of his stubbornness Jonah cared more about his reputation for predicting judgment on sinners than for the miracle, the beauty of God's mercy. Frankly, there is a lot of that attitude going around in America today and too much of it coming from people calling themselves Christian. Repentance doesn't change God's judgment as much as it changes us to lead better lives. That is what God wants. Is there anyone here without sin who can throw the first stone?