

There is not a whole heck of a lot that those of us gathered here have in common with people from the Middle East. And there is almost nothing we have in common with people who lived in the Middle East 2600 years ago. That's why it is sometimes so difficult to understand this book. But no matter what period of human history we study, there is always one element of each culture with which we can relate. It seems that every civilization told stories. The art of story telling is as ancient a practice as anything we know. All of us love a good story. In Biblical times, those stories were of course told orally, passed on from one narrator to the next and from one generation to the next. Though that art has not completely disappeared, thanks to people like Garrison Keillor and the storytellers that continue to exist in Navajo tradition and other indigenous cultures of the world, we prefer today to tell our stories utilizing other genres. But whether we are reading a novel or watching a movie, all of us continue to take part in this ancient practice that almost assuredly goes back to the first humans.

Even more amazingly, some of the themes heard in stories that were told by ancient people continue to be with us today. One of the most popular, whether today or yesteryear, is the story of the big fish. A few weeks ago we showed a clip from one of our modern fish stories, Peter Benchley's novel turned movie, Jaws. Benchley's novel sold over 20 million copies and the movie became one of the top ten grossing films of all time. One of the classic novels of the modern era is Herman Melville's tale, Moby Dick. That 1851 book was also made into a movie in 1956 starring Gregory Peck. In American literature, Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea is still a favorite of high school English teachers and is without a doubt an American classic. It too became a movie in 1958, starring Spencer

Tracy. Then there are all the stories of legendary leviathans that still may exist. Loch Ness Monster stories continue to circulate, as do many other tales of human encounters with giant sea creatures.

In addition to the classics, all of us regularly hear fish stories from our friends and relatives. Every single person here has undoubtedly heard tales from a fisher person we know about the one that got away. If fish stories are so popular with us, then imagine how in favor they must have been in a culture where the staple food was fish.

It is no surprise therefore, that we have numerous leviathan tales in our Bible, the most famous of which is the one we hear today in our first reading. But the weird thing is that even though all of us are so very familiar with the fish story genre, something bizarre happens to us when we hear the fish story in our sacred text. Though no adult I have ever heard has ever asked if Jaws or Moby Dick is a true story, people regularly hear today's wonderfully hysterical story of Jonah and the whale and listen to it as if it is a literal truth. As I was preparing this sermon, I laughed myself silly reading commentaries and sermons that felt a need to justify why the book of Jonah made it into the Bible. I read sermons by educated adults who felt it necessary to attempt to scientifically justify the story of Jonah and the fish. A few ministers spent quite a while explaining that we really don't know what species of fish this was. Another had a long discussion about whether this was really a whale instead of a fish. Still another said, and I quote, "the miracle of the whole thing is the fact that the fish didn't digest Jonah, but he vomited him up onto dry land." Oh, so that's the miracle. But the piece'de resistance was the Pastor who informed his congregation that he had read a story about a modern man that was swallowed by a fish. The fish was caught and cut open and there inside the fish, still alive, was the man. Using his best enlightenment mindset, the

pastor took this stranger than true story and used it to interpret the book of Jonah. Why, he asked would the people of Ninevah listen to a Hebrew telling them to repent? He then explained, well, you see, this man he read about who was swallowed by the fish, his skin was scoured by the digestive juices of the fish. He looked like an albino, he said. "So that's it!" he concluded. Jonah, whose natural skin color was Mediterranean olive must have looked like a ghost, and that's why they listened to him!

Sometimes, I am so embarrassed by my profession. Hello? The story of Jonah is a fish story. It's just like every fish story we've ever heard. Lighten up clergy. It's supposed to be funny, laugh already! The story of Jonah is meant to be a rousing tale of a prophet that has gone off the deep end, in a manner of speaking. Yes, there is an important message here, but you can't understand the point if you don't realize it's supposed to be funny. Only when we realize that those sitting around the campfire hearing the story of Jonah would have been howling with laughter, will we be able to hear the important points here about the nature of God, the role of a prophet and the errors all of us make in God's world.

To reach this end, the author uses a story line that no one will forget. He utilizes irony and satire as his chief literary weapons. Our first reading begins part way through the story. God has already come to Jonah once, telling him to go to Ninevah and "cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." Ninevah was a major city in Assyria, a nation that conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The people there worship Marduk, the storm God. The people of Ninevah would thus be seen by Hebrews as not only pagans, but their arch-enemies.

When Jonah hears God's solemn request to preach to the people they hate in Ninevah, what does Jonah do? He gets up and runs to Tarshish, which is in the exact

opposite direction! This is the story of a very reluctant prophet and the Early Hebrews would have been laughing themselves sick hearing about him running away. In the next ironic twist, Jonah then gets on a boat and finds himself in the teeth of a ferocious storm. Get it? The god of Ninevah is Marduk, the storm god, and in running away from this god, Jonah finds himself right in the middle of what he was trying to escape. More laughter.

It is at this point in the story that we are reminded of the cause and effect theology of the day. When anything went wrong in life, it was assumed that a god was punishing someone for something they had done. This understanding of God was understood by everyone, not just Hebrews. So a storm at sea must mean that someone on the boat had done something wrong. Jonah, knowing perfectly well that he had just run away from God, knew that it must be him causing the storm. He knows that to save the others, he must allow them to toss him into the sea. He accepts his plight, knowing that there was no sense making matters worse by having innocent people die as a result of his sin.

But then the storyteller surprises everyone listening again. They all know that Yahweh, the Hebrew God, is a just God, and that Jonah will now be swallowed by the sea for his actions. But instead, as we all know, he is swallowed by a fish. Despite everything that Jonah has done wrong, God has compassion and saves him. The story teller makes an exceedingly important point about the nature of God and life. It is not all cause and effect. God doesn't punish us when we screw up. But once again, the bumbling prophet Jonah misses the point. He's burped up by the fish, and that's where our reading starts this morning. When Yahweh asks him a second time to go to Ninevah, Jonah finally says yes, but still only half-heartedly. He finally goes to Ninevah, but he gives the lamest prophecy ever imagined. Eight lousy words. But to Jonah's complete chagrin, the people of Ninevah

listened to him anyway and they turned from their ways.

Even though Jonah has just been saved by God's compassion, when God offers the same compassion to the Ninevites, Jonah blows a gasket. Like us today, Jonah doesn't really want God to save these people. After all, they are today's Hamas for Jews, they are our al Qaeda. As the story reaches its conclusion, the sharp listener would have realized that this was more than just a funny fish story. It is the story of a people who can change, even though they do not believe in the same God Jonah does. It is the story of a God who does not work alone, but always works through us, even when we are as half-hearted about the effort as Jonah. Finally, this is a story of a God who saves our mortal enemies, the ones who we are convinced are evil and the ones we want to get their come uppance for what they did to us.

The fishing metaphors continue, of course, into today's Gospel. And once again, we hear a story that is about change. We learn that Jesus does not choose his disciples through a lengthy interview process, but instead picks very ordinary folk with absolutely no credentials at all. And just like the Ninevites in our first reading, these fisherman hear virtually nothing to convince them of anything. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is nearly here. Then he simply says "Follow me." The weird thing is, just like the Ninevites who immediately turn to God, these unlikely fisherman do the same thing. They drop their nets, leave their vocation and completely change their lives. Now that is a leap of faith. Also like the Jonah story, we learn of a God who does not work alone, but works through these fisherman, through regular ol' people like you and me. It is a reminder to us that what brings about the kingdom is when we participate in bringing it about together. Some have heard this Gospel as an individual call to repent, to turn around, and follow Jesus. But the whole point here is that it is not one

person called, but the entire fishing community. We are called together to fish for people, to go out as a community and meet with and care for the Ninevites in our lives, the people who don't worship like us, the people who don't believe in the same God, the people we see as our enemy.

The parallels in both of these tales to the place you and I sit right now are striking. We too, have been called to change. We are presently being called to a new way of life in this country, where we stop seeing the person of a different skin color or sexual orientation or religion or political party as the enemy. We, like Jonah and those fisherfolk, are being called to seek out our Ninevites, and then rally them with us into a new community of respect for one another. We are being called to reach out to the other, even those who have attacked us and hurt us, and realize that they too are children of God, that they too, like the Ninevites, will not face God's wrath but will experience God's compassion. I believe that God is also telling us right now the same thing God told those fisherman. The kingdom of God is near. It is now up to us to participate with God and bring it to fruition.

Tuesday's inauguration was chock full of symbols that represented the groundswell in our country to bring about this change. Two million people gathered to celebrate the end of polarity and the beginning of a new age of acceptance of others. Though there were more people on that mall than ever before, the feeling of mutuality and respect was so strong that there was not a single arrest all day. For the first time in recent memory, we heard an inaugural speech that spoke of us reaching out to our Ninevites instead of smiting them, asking for no more of them but an unclenched fist. In perhaps the most hopeful symbol of our desire to leave the days of polarization within this country, we heard that inaugural address bookended by two preachers on totally opposite sides of the tracks. I know that some in the

mainline community, as well as some in the gay community, were very upset by President Obama's choice of Rick Warren to do the opening invocation. But beloved, this is where we must begin if we are to bring about the complete change experienced by the fisherman in today's Gospel. If we are going to mirror the inclusivity of the God who saves the Ninevites, of a God who chooses a bunch of smelly fisherman to be Jesus' disciples, we begin with reaching out to the ones who have hurt us.

Warren's invocation reminded us that this new inclusive way of life that each of us are striving together to bring about will not be a simple change. Coming from a church tradition that taught him that there is only one path to God, it was a monumental challenge for Warren to pray in a way that reached out to his own Ninevites, people that his faith tradition teaches are condemned to hell. He began so well, first reaching out to our Jewish sisters and brothers by praying the first sentence of the Shema from Deuteronomy. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one." He followed that up beautifully with the phrase most often used by Muslims when referring to God, "the compassionate and merciful one." He also prayed for the common good of all. But before closing his prayer, a prayer that I was praying would symbolize the new stitching together of the patchwork quilt of America, Warren did not invoke a name for God accepted by all faiths. He instead called upon Jesus. He then attempted to lead the two million people gathered and those listening and watching all over the world, of so many different faiths in a prayer that was representative only of his own faith. It was not unlike the half-hearted Jonah in today's first reading, who did not really want to preach to a people who did not believe in the same God he did.

But still, it is a start. Sometimes we will have to take baby steps as each of us stretches ourselves to reach out to our own Ninevites. It is not a simple thing to let go of

everything we know like the disciples did to bring about the kingdom of God. Rick Warren stretched himself to pray in a manner that spoke to people of other faiths. And that reaching out is a beginning to end the rift that has separated us for so many years. It is a first step in bringing about change, it is a first step to creating a community that works together to bring about God's kingdom for all.

But it was in the inaugural benediction by The Rev. Joseph Lowery, the reading you just heard as today's Epistle, that captured the entire vision of today's readings. It encapsulated Jesus's message today that the kingdom of God is so near to us. It brought us home to the realization that we can change, that we can reach out to one another, that we can work together. It convinced us that with God's help, can create a world where we shall no longer be afraid, that place where the banner on our church is fulfilled, where justice does roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

It will not be easy, beloved. But think about the distance we have already traveled. The question now is this. Will we be like Jonah, running the opposite direction, when we are called to end the cycles of division, disunity, disjunction and disconnection? Will we be like Jonah and only half-heartedly extend a hand to our enemies and those who have persecuted us? Or, will we be like those fisherman, dropping everything as we march together to embrace those different from us, to reach out to the ones the world has cast aside? We can do it. We will do it.

Let all those who do justice and love mercy say Amen.

Say Amen.

And Amen.