

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – Jonah 3

The Old Testament lesson is from Jonah chapter 3 – but the 4 chapters of Jonah are really meant to be read all together – it’s a complete story. It’s a story with some historical references and some fantastic flourishes – fact and fable and parable all mixed together – but mostly it is a story about God’s grace – and it’s a comedy. And it goes something like this:

- Jonah is a believer in God and a prophet of Israel
- God calls Jonah to prophesy some hellfire and brimstone to the Ninevites, a people who do not believe in God and who Jonah hates
- Jonah does not want to do this because the Ninevites might repent! – so Jonah runs away; actually sails away on a boat
- Jonah’s boat gets hit with a storm; he casts lots with some sailors, gets thrown into the sea to calm the storm, gets swallowed by a fish, sings a Psalm inside the fish, gets spit out on the beach
- and God calls Jonah to Nineveh again...that’s where our reading picks up...

- well, Jonah is upset about God saving Nineveh and says that’s why he ran away in the first place, and Jonah tells God he wants to die - then God and Jonah get in a tussle about a dead shade tree that Jonah cares about more than all of Nineveh – and the story ends this way- God says: ‘Jonah, don’t you think I should care about a whole city of people, and their cattle too?’

This is the Word of the Lord

THANKS BE TO GOD

NO is a powerful word. It may be more appealing to talk about the power of yes, but NO can hold its own quite well. You can ask most any parent of a young child and they will testify to you what a powerful word NO is for a child to discover and put to use. ‘mama’ and ‘dada’ are very sweet from the mouths of babes – but when they discover NO

– that is power! And in my experience once the word NO is discovered it quickly becomes a popular feature of any young vocabulary. And we seem to carry it along into our later years quite comfortably as well.

The book of Jonah could be described as a story about NO – or at least it is the NO in Jonah that catches our attention. YES can make for a nice story, but NO makes for an interesting story! Although we have to remember that Jonah is not just a NO-man; Jonah was someone who had said YES to God. After all, Jonah was a prophet – a religious pro! Jonah was a faithful man - a man of God; let's make sure that first we speak well of Jonah – he deserves it – he would fit in well in West Michigan: he was a good temple-going boy from a good temple-going family.

But then this pious professional prophet gets in a predicament – this YES man for God runs into something unfamiliar – he runs into NO. The word of God comes to the heart and mind of Jonah with this call: 'go to Nineveh' – go to the god-forsaken, low-life, good-for-nothing, bottom-feeding, disgraceful, reprobate, despicable, slimy, double-crossing, poor-excuse-for-human-beings Ninevites...although I think Jonah would find that description too generous– Jonah does not like the Ninevites! – 'go to Nineveh and tell them that God is going to bring judgment on them.' And Jonah says NO – says NO with his feet - runs in the opposite direction. Did you notice in the Gospel of Mark that it says that Jesus calls and his new disciples follow IMMEDIATELY!? – well Jonah is just like that only the opposite. Jonah is called and IMMEDIATELY he runs in the opposite direction - saying NO to God as strongly as he can.

It's really a sad comedy, this story of Jonah – what Jonah is smart enough to figure out is that God's word of judgment is actually extending an offer of grace to Nineveh - to the god-forsaken, low-life, good-for-nothing, bottom-feeding, disgraceful, reprobate, despicable, slimy, double-crossing, poor-excuse-for-human-beings Ninevites. God speaks judgment, but Jonah knows there is grace wrapped up in that judgment, and Jonah will have nothing to do with that kind of grace from God – not for those people. Jonah liked

YES for himself from God, but he preferred NO for the Ninevites from God. And even with all the twists and turns of the story - and a sojourn in the belly of a fish -still in the end Jonah is stuck on NO. NO is a powerful word– NO to grace is a powerful spiritual force.

It would seem that the call of Jesus' disciples is the opposite of Jonah - a story about YES; they don't get swallowed by a fish, they are fishermen and will now fish for people – it's all opposite! But the thing of it is, if you stick with the story long enough in Mark, the disciples do run up against NO in following Jesus – they find some of the things Jesus says and does hard to swallow. Take Simon Peter for instance – one time Jesus is talking to him about the cross, and Peter says NO; later the Risen Christ calls Peter to go to the Gentiles – Peter says NO. It's great that at first Simon Peter said YES immediately to Jesus – but following the call means you will run into NO as well: the call of God that will be difficult to follow. Which is why Jesus calls not just once – but keeps calling these disciples all the way to the cross and beyond and always.

You – you all – each and every one of you – you are all here because you said YES to God – somehow, some way in your life and today; whether you are a member or a friend or here for the first time, God's grace has called you and in some way you have said YES. So we are yes-women and yes-men, all of us, in some way – hearing God's call and saying YES to grace – that's good. But let's ponder the power of NO as well.

I was thinking that there are some things about NO. Some ways of expressing NO, that are actually very important to affirm and hold on to. When we see people treated with disregard and violence, when we encounter situations where people are dehumanized, where creation is compromised (maybe those cattle in Nineveh) – there is a NO within us that we must give voice to. When harm is inflicted on you, when your life and person is under assault, when there is oppression from the outside or a broken spirit on the inside – there is a NO for us to voice to stand against that diminishment. When we act in ways that are harmful and broken toward others – there is a NO in us that speaks of a better way. NO is very important – it is a voice of faith that leads us to the YES of God's grace.

But there's another NO too – the Jonah kind of NO. We must also ponder that sometimes the word of God, God's call, will come to you –the Spirit of God will move in you...and you will listen well enough that what will come clear in your heart immediately in response to God's call is NO! At some point the grace of God will speak to you in a way that strikes you as too challenging – too costly – too strange – too risky – too...something – and you'll know that the answer is NO. You'll say NO to God's grace – maybe for someone else – maybe for you – NO.

There is a long history in the Church of saying NO to God's grace for people beyond the accepted boundaries – and God said YES; and God's YES found its way to various Ninevites over and over again – and some cattle too eventually. Church NO; God YES – and that continues today. And I can often feel like I am on the YES side of some of those NO/YES struggles these days – about inclusion and equality, justice and peace, tolerance and integrity. But I would do well to remember that I have journeyed far and changed greatly about many of those issues – God's grace needed to keep saying YES to my NO, and I must find ways to understand that same need for time and grace for others.

But what about the NO I am on the wrong side of? – the NO to God's grace in me and in you? Where is that for you, for me, today? Maybe it's something like this: there is a person I have been dealing with this past week who I have no desire to act toward with any kind of grace, and I feel quite self-righteous about that – whatever Jonah felt about the Ninevites, I will raise him one on this person - NO - no grace deserved for that person (it's not any of you); or maybe it's a person or people who raise questions about your own choices in life – your own assumptions, lifestyle – your own fears and comforts – your own prejudices and certainties, your own faith and practice – NO - a threat to grace as you know it; or someone acting in ways so clearly destructive –NO – an enemy, a threat – no grace. Or maybe it is you – harmful patterns, whether towards others or against yourself – harmful patterns so entrenched that you are certain God's grace cannot reach there – NO - you are sure of it; or perhaps in you it is a new call to listen to God – a change to make – a gift to

discover, open – a direction to step into, to trust – but NO – God’s grace could not be so full, so rich, for you...

Those are very important NOs to listen to in yourself – to be honest about; a NO for you to deal with with your God – you have some options: you could run away – we’ve heard a Jonah story about that; maybe sometimes you have run away from God. But I personally recommend Simon Peter’s method – that anti-Jonah – not because Jonah is bad and Peter good, but because later on in Jesus’ ministry when Peter feels a NO he says it right to Jesus’ face – says it to God. Which we might as well do, because when we feel a NO to God’s grace, God’s grace is still at work in us – pushing us in those NO places. God’s word, God’s call, challenges and stretches and fills you – calling and leading in new directions – giving the YES of grace just as you have decided NO – God keeps on calling.

Jonah – good yes-man of faith – Jonah came across a grace of God that was too much for him and he said NO, kept saying NO...and God kept dragging Jonah along; Jonah’s NO mattered to God, but it didn’t stop God.

You, me, we – YES to God’s grace is in our vocabulary of faith – and NO too. And when we decide God’s grace is not broad enough for others, not deep enough for us - the call of Christ, God’s grace, keeps after us; Jesus Christ keeps calling - the resurrection and life that is the YES of good news to God’s world.

NO is an important word – NO leads us away from God; to God; against God; for God. And God keeps calling us beyond our NOs – God wants us to receive grace more fully and share it more richly. Listen to God’s call of grace; where is there a NO in you? – will you run from it...? – God will keep calling - there is no NO that can change or stop God’s grace for you, for us and for all – and the cattle too. AMEN.