

*Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.*

IN THE FIRST READING JONAH WAS QUITE REPELLED BY THE CALL GOD GAVE HIM. AND IN THE GOSPEL THE DISCIPLES SURELY HAD NO IDEA WHAT THEY WERE GETTING THEMSELVES INTO WHEN THEY DROPPED EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED JESUS. WOULD THEY HAVE BEEN SO QUICK IF THEY HAD KNOWN ABOUT THE CRUCIFIXION?

IT IS PROBABLY BEST TO START THE STORY OF JONAH AT ITS BEGINNING SEVERAL CHAPTERS EARLIER THAN OUR READING. GOD SAYS TO HIM, "SET OUT FOR THE GREAT CITY OF NINEVEH, AND PREACH AGAINST IT; THEIR WICKEDNESS HAS COME UP BEFORE ME." JONAH, LIKE A HOUSE CAT, DOES EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE. HE DROPS EVERYTHING AND RUNS AWAY. HE RACES TO JOPPA AND BOARDS A SHIP TO TARSHISH, TRYING GET AS FAR FROM GOD'S WILL AS POSSIBLE.

THE STORY IS WELL KNOWN: GOD SENDS A TERRIBLE STORM. JONAH ADMITS TO THE CREW THAT HE IS THE CAUSE OF THEIR TROUBLE BECAUSE HE IS FLEEING THE COMMAND OF GOD. "PICK ME UP AND HURL ME INTO THE SEA AND THEN THE SEA WILL CALM DOWN FOR YOU. FOR I KNOW THAT THIS GREAT STORM HAS COME UPON YOU BECAUSE OF ME." WHEN NOTHING ELSE WORKS, WITH GREAT RELUCTANCE, THEY TOSS HIM OVERBOARD. THE SEA IS QUIETED. JONAH IN TURN IS SWALLOWED BY A "LARGE FISH," USUALLY REFERRED TO IN TRADITION AS A WHALE.

RESIDENCE IN THE WHALE'S INTERIOR GIVES JONAH AMPLE TIME FOR RETROSPECTION. HE PRAYS PSALMS ABOUT WHAT HE HAS DONE. GOD SAVES HIM AND TELLS HIM A SECOND TIME TO GO TO THE GREAT AND SINFUL CITY OF NINEVEH TO ANNOUNCE THE LORD'S MESSAGE. JONAH SUBMITS AT LAST AND IN TODAY'S FIRST READING, THE WHOLE CITY IS CONVERTED.

WHY DIDN'T JONAH JUST FOLLOW GOD'S COMMAND INSTEAD OF RUNNING AWAY? PERHAPS, JONAH DIDN'T WANT NINEVEH, THE PAGAN CITY, TO CONVERT AND BE SAVED. IT WAS AN ENEMY OF THE HEBREWS. WE KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO RUN FROM WHAT GOD ASKS, SO WE CAN SPECULATE. AS FOR THE APOSTLES, THEY DIDN'T RUN AWAY AT ALL. ALMOST IMPULSIVELY THEY FOLLOWED JESUS. POSSIBLY THEY WANTED POLITICAL ACTION. WITH JESUS' GENTLE GUIDANCE THEY FOUND OUT GRADUALLY WHAT FOLLOWING THE MESSIAH REALLY MEANT. WHEREAS JONAH HAD IMAGINED THE WORST AND RAN AWAY, THE APOSTLES IMAGINED THE BEST AND FOLLOWED JESUS INTO THE WORST: THE PASSION AND CRUCIFIXION. FORTUNATELY, THE RESURRECTION FOLLOWED. FORTUNATELY FOR US ALL, SINCE SUFFERING SEEMS TO BE INEVITABLE IN HUMAN LIFE. SO ARE WE RUNNING AWAY FROM SOMETHING OR RUNNING TOWARD SOMETHING? EITHER WAY WE WILL HAVE SUFFERING. EITHER WAY GOD KEEPS AFTER US, TEACHING US THE MEANING OF LOVE. THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE ACADEMIC QUESTION OF THE JESUS OF HISTORY AND THE CHRIST OF FAITH. THE GOSPELS PAINT A PICTURE OF JESUS THROUGH THE LENS OF PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM AS AN ADULT, A WORKER OF WONDERS, A RENOWNED TEACHER, AND MOST OF ALL, AS SON OF GOD. WE ARE LEFT TO WONDER: WHAT WAS JESUS REALLY LIKE. IF WE TAKE THE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE THE HIDDEN YEARS: *"HE INCREASED IN WISDOM AND IN YEARS, AND IN DIVINE AND HUMAN FAVOR."* AND READ THEM IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS' PUBLIC LIFE A CERTAIN PICTURE EMERGES. IT SEEMS THAT HE GREW UP HAPPILY, QUITE COMFORTABLE IN THE RHYTHMS OF FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND RURAL LIFE. WHEN HE BEGAN HIS MINISTRY, HE ALREADY KNEW HOW TO CELEBRATE AT TABLE WITH FAMILY, NO STRANGER TO INTIMACY, COMMUNITY AND ENJOYMENT THOUGH HE KNEW TRAGEDY, REJECTION AND EVEN DEATH ITSELF. HE WALKED AMONG SINNERS AND BROUGHT US. HOPE: *Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.*

