

PICK YOUR POISON OR ANOTHER WAY  
[written in oral form]

Jonah; Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62:5-12  
3rd Sunday of Epiphany, Year B

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The gospel of Mark text presents four fishermen called by Jesus to be his followers and his disciples.

This is the quintessential paradigm for how to respond when God calls.                           Mark sets the “mark” very high.

None of the four hesitated. No one requested conditions.

They dropped their nets, and James left his father in the boat. His father was likely quite perplexed.

Not one said, “Oh, I’d love to, but let me clear my schedule first” .. Or... “Absolutely, however, I must close my affairs and make proper plans for my absence”..... or..... “I’m not sure,... my budget is really tight, and I really don’t think I can afford to right now.”

All left the comfort and safety of their homes and their lives,... as they knew them, and journeyed into the unknown, obedient to the call.

What they did--how they responded maybe very hard to comprehend.

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In contrast,.... Jonah’s behaviour, from the book of Jonah, is far more relatable.

Even so, there is much more to this story than the trials and tribulations of a recalcitrant prophet.

Sometime around 400 BCE, there were lots of captive Hebrews living in Babylonia, ... but it was no longer their host who was keeping them captive. They had settled in. They had made adjustments; it was like home.

In this “different” place, they celebrated their customs, their “old” language,...their ethnic cuisine, and they honed their religion to better fit their new situation. Sound like another group of people we know.

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During the exile, the Jewish leaders emphasized legalism instead of the **relationship** aspect of covenant, and this legalism tended to give them a sense of superiority over others – the others being the pagans / the gentiles.

The one God was solely their God, and they came to believe that justice and grace was only for God’s select– themselves.

They knew the old stories and the old writings, .... but ... those innuendoes about God’s pervasive justice and grace,... well.... wasn’t thought about anymore.

They had become settled. They had become content. They had become comfortable with the world, as they saw it. God was on their side; they were the “good guys.”

Sometimes it takes a mythological fable / a wonderful narrative that will be told for generations,... to get people to consider another way.

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The story about Jonah was likely a metaphor for the time in captivity.

Jonah was a prophet from way back, from when times were good,... when things were as they “should be.”

In the age of Jonah, children listened to their parents, they memorized scripture passages, and everybody went to church, and everybody knew the good old hymns.

This story even includes a nice song, right in the middle of it.

Moreover, there’s intrigue, action and adventure,... and the narrative possesses the transfixing, chilling, terrifying crisis that happens in the middle of a storm ... out in the open water.

The Hebrews were dry land people. The great sea was not a comfortable place for them. Most had never seen the endless water, let alone been on a ship out on the sea.

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And so it begins,...once upon a time, The God called to Jonah, “Rise up.... and go to Nineveh and **cry** against them that The One true God is aware of their wickedness.”

They were behaving badly,... in the eyes of God. Of course, **they** were “those” wicked people, non-Jews, deserving punishment.

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Nineveh was a huge city in the middle of Assyria—one of the super powers. It would take an extreme amount of courage for a Jew to go there and present God’s message.

To be sure, Jonah was a brave man. Milktoast was not an adjective that would apply to Jonah. Courage wasn’t the issue,..... he had enough courage to try to run from God by going on a ship across the sea.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh;

However,..... Jonah .....had a sneaky feeling that if “Those” gentiles,... by chance.... decided to repent,.... then God **would** be merciful and gracious to them.

Jonah couldn’t tolerate such a thing!

It is far better to have enemies facing the wrath of God – knowing that someday they would pay for their evil ways,..than to have enemies.... become..... .well..... like Jews / like friends...../ like himself... thus as equals in the sight of God.

That notion was an abomination for Jonah,.....So, without even replying with words to God,..... he took off the other way.

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*I do think this story may have some lessons for us and for the Palestinian situation.*

Anyway....

At the port of Joppa (which is now Tel Aviv) Jonah caught a ship heading away, ... far away. Trying to act calm, like an old salt, Jonah boarded the ship, ...and to conceal his nervousness, he went down inside the ship to hide and to sleep.

He was avoiding everyone, especially God

Silly Jonah,..... God is not bound by dry land, just as God is not confined to Jonah's ethnic group.

After a while, far from land, a Great WIND came upon the sea. The wind was "Ruach" – the breath of God.

All sailors are used to storms, BUT this one was different. This storm had a purpose

As with most people in a crisis, each sailor started praying... each to their own god.

The praying was NOT working, so they started to toss excess cargo overboard to lighten the ship. As they were searching for items to throw into the sea, the captain saw Jonah, down below, sound asleep.

*-Sound Asleep!*

*It is very draining and exhausting running away from God.*

That captain asked Jonah, "How can you be sleeping,.... and WHY are you not praying to your God. Rise up and Pray! .... Maybe, your God will have mercy on us, and not let us perish.

*Imagine that: Jonah was confronted Again with the concept of God being merciful to the Gentiles....., and not only that, but here you have a gentile asking a Jew to pray to the One God.*

*How crazy is that?*

Sailors knew that epic storms don't just happen. They knew that somewhere / some god is feeling a tempest-anger about something. .. Or ... someone. So, they decided to cast lots to find out who is the cause / the reason for the supernatural anger.

Casting lots is a random, non-bias selection.

In other words, it's a way of inviting the divine to intervene and reveal the villain.

Jonah's number came up.

Yet, to check the validity of the selection/ to make sure Jonah is the guilty one.... they asked him a bunch of questions: "who are you? Where are you from? What's your occupation?" and so on. They begged Jonah to explain himself / to clear the condemnation–to prove his innocents.

*Interesting,... pagan, inferior gentiles... are doing justice. They are striving to be fair,..... whereas Jonah was not willing to tolerate the same for them. That truly is interesting.*

*Maybe God isn't limited to our definition / to our religion.... and to our holy scriptures?*

The storm was getting much worse. Wave after wave was washing across the deck, threatening to pull all into the sea, and .. piece by piece, destroying their ship.

The sailors learned about Jonah's escapade, BUT Still they didn't want to hurt him, so above the roar of the wind, they yelled to Jonah, "What shall we do to you so that the sea may quiet down?"

Jonah replied,..... "Pick me up and throw me into the sea... Because I am convinced that I am the cause of this terrible storm."

*Jonah realized that everything gets very ugly, tossed and turned, when one rejects the will of God.*

Still, he wanted the burden / the blame on the sailors. He wouldn't jump in on his own.  
So, did the sailors quickly hurl Jonah overboard? ???  
NO!

These "outsiders" / these... "**Those people**" ... instead tried to row harder than the storm,.. But the Great violent sea.... countered their every stroke with triple the intensity.....  
Rocking up down, back and forth, around and around... with surges of water everywhere,..... the sailors still refused to sacrifice Jonah. They didn't want to kill him.

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*And,.... here it gets really weird,..... those heathen, non-believers... started praying to God,... NOT their own god, but to Jonah's God.*

They were putting their trust and faith in the One God. They were surrendering / submitting to The God.

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*What a contrast.*

The sailors cried out for mercy, and .....they asked God that if they were suppose to toss Jonah overboard,... that God would forgive them for being responsible for his death.

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Obedient to God's will, the gentile sailors..... threw Jonah into the sea, ..AND Instantly... the storm ended; ....all became calm, ..... almost all:

One would think that the sailors would be relieved, and thus assume all was well,..... and so go on with their lives, but that didn't happen.

They begged God, for mercy, and made vows, and gave offerings to God. They had encountered the God,... and they surrendered to the one true God / they worshipped God. They came to understand what the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 62–God is mighty; God saves, and God is a refuge.  
In true humility they worshipped God.

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As we all know,..... the story continues,.....and the next part may be hard to swallow. ....

God, selected a large fish that came and swallowed up Jonah.  
That part is plausible.

Surviving three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish is hard to stomach / hard to fathom, but that is what happened.

Can you imagine..... stuck in the middle of the great sea, under the water,... inside a giant fish..... in totally darkness,..... waiting to be digested .... completely consumed?

Yuk, ..... and what a nightmare!!

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This is, no doubt, a correlation to certain people living in captivity / to people not being where or who they should be.

Yet, those “special” people hadn’t run away like Jonah did..... but... perhaps a stubbornness to the “good old ways” / a refusal to change / a rejection to do what it takes to include others... is no different than trying to run and hide from God????

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Jonah was not in a very good place.

In the stinking darkness he waited with nothing to do but sing old, favourite songs and contemplate which poison he would pick.

Poison one is to refuse God’s will and try to run from God... realizing and accepting the toxic consequences in that selection.

Poison two is reluctantly, begrudgingly being obedient to God’s call, resenting every minute of it,... and just wanting to get it over with so... he could go on with his life.

Living a lie / being a hypocrite can indeed be lethal to the soul.

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As it happened, God told the fish to vomit out Jonah.

And, amazingly the fish threw him up... on dry land—*most impressive*.

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I suppose God thought Jonah may have pondered his life choices and saw the light, because God tried again with Jonah.

God asked a second time, with a softer approach. This time, God asked Jonah to “proclaim” God’s message for Nineveh, instead of “cry out against them.”

Sadly, Jonah didn’t have a change of heart. He was merely going to try a different poison—poison 2, and so Jonah went to Nineveh... to appease God.

\*Notice that Jonah didn’t respond to God with words. He simply submitted.

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Jonah..... “cried” out the warning as instructed by God,..... and “those” people / “those” modern, impure, shallow thinking pagans **believed the message**, yet heard a merciful and accepting God calling them to repent.

The masses believed, even the king and the leaders humbled themselves before God.

They repented and pledged to change their ways.

They were no longer going to be wicked, and they were not going to do Violence anymore, either.

They were going to embrace God’s justice and grace.

They put their hope and their trust in God,..... and ... just as Jonah dreaded / exactly what Jonah feared would happen... happened:

GOD CHANGED GOD’S MIND.

God didn’t destroy Nineveh.

God didn’t even kill a few token pagans for good measure.

God forgave them. God was merciful and gracious.  
It was a new way.... with new rules

Jonah was furious. He was livid.

*Drinking poison can make a person a little crazy,... crazy enough to lash out at God for being gracious.*  
????? Wow!

He yelled at God, “I knew it,... I KNEW that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

*What a very strange protest.*

*I wonder why Jonah didn't want God to be merciful?????*

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It seems Jonah would rather suffer and be unhappy than change.

Apparently, Jonah wanted the world / all others to conform to his way, and if that wouldn't happen, then... he'd rather be miserable than yield to a different way.

This poison even made Jonah want to die.

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God tried to comfort Jonah, but Jonah would have no part of it.  
So, God let Jonah feel,..... really feel his own, self-inflicted torment.

Poor pitiful Jonah; he could NOT handle God being inclusive and merciful. He couldn't accept that God and the rules would change.  
But, things changed, and God didn't want the 120, 000 people in Nineveh to die, nor did God want their animals to perish, either.

However, God did want Jonah to change... to also be accepting, gracious and loving to all people, regardless if they were not part of his group or way of thinking.

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Jonah picked his poisons, but there was another way.

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When Jesus called the four fishermen, they all responded with an unqualified yes. They gave their all / their lives to Jesus.

In comparison, Jonah wouldn't let go of his.

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The following is a little test to measure how deep our faith and trust in God is:  
contemplate a few conditions / situations that would be deplorable to live in or deal with, and then ask,  
“Would I do that or go there if God asked me to?  
What if it meant a radical change in theology.. or a different way of doing church ... or a very different location... or giving away all our money?  
?????

Would our response be a selection of poisons..... or changing to be more like Simon, Andrew, James and John?

In other words, is our faith genuine or merely a word in our religion?

Also, consider this: some indications of toxicity are being frequently discontent, being frustrated and angry with others because they're messing up, ... not tolerating different ways/new ways of doing things, or..being in a state of torment because life is not unfolding as it should.

Those feelings are symptoms of ingesting spiritual poison,..... or of being ingested–trapped in the wrong place.

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Nevertheless, this message is not meant to be a burden, nor is it intended to add stress, shame or guilt.

Remember, Jesus called fishermen to continue to fish.... just in a another way.

God called Jonah, a courageous prophet to courageously prophecy,... but in a different way—with a loving compassion.

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The way / the formula for salvation and to get out of living in fish guts is to simply trust that God is loving and gracious, to each of us, including you and me. It is knowing that God is trustworthy. The salvation formula is simply trusting in God.

Simple,..... until we mess with the formula, and make it noxious.