

## Ode to a Worm

sermon digest

March 14, 2010

Jonah 4:5-8

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Many years ago I served as a counselor in a summer camp for girls. Over the course of the summer, we learned and sang a host of new songs—some for fun, others for giving expression to a growing faith. One fun song about eating worms has stayed with me over the years and served as a way of poking fun at myself or someone close when we have tended to become submerged in the blues. The song goes like this: "Nobody loves me; everybody hates me. I'm going out to eat worms. Big thick shiny ones, little thin tiny ones, they are very good. Bite their heads off. . . ." It continues from there with all of the gross details that children so love to use to torture squeamish adults.

Today's incident with Jonah focuses on a worm and is a sort of tongue-in-cheek story, like the song. Jonah's petulance at the ways of God is just about as serious as going out to eat worms. Disgusted that God would have the poor taste to be gracious and merciful toward none other than Israel's own historic enemy, Jonah finds a nice vantage point outside the city, crafts a nice little nest for himself, and settles in to see just how far God will go in God's ill advised behavior.

Wanting to be sure we understand the situation, the story writer adds a few details, putting Jonah's puffed up self importance in perspective. Sitting with arms folded, daring God to do the right thing, he waits for God to wise up and rain fire and brimstone. He is totally oblivious to the fact that he does not have God boxed into a corner. Yet God, the storyteller makes clear, is the one calling the shots—not Jonah. Just as God directed the storm and the fish, "God prepared a gourd, and made it come up over Jonah" to give him shade. "So Jonah was exceedingly glad" and settled back to watch the show. But then, "God prepared a worm" to attack the bush and then "a vehement east wind; and "the sun beat upon the head of Jonah."

Despite his delusions of grandeur, Jonah is not in control here. From the mighty fish to the lowly worm, from the great wind on the sea to the violent wind on the land, from the animals of the field to the plants of the desert, the storyteller assures us God is in control. Jonah's response? "Just let me die."

Jonah's is not the only biblical account about someone coming to the end of his rope. The great Moses, frustrated with the people's weeping in the wilderness for their lack of meat, angrily attacks God for putting the burden of such a people on him. "Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them? I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once!" (Numbers 11:12, 14-15).

The great Elijah, flushed with victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, had to flee into the wilderness to escape the mad ravings of Queen Jezebel. Finding refuge under "a solitary broom tree" (sound familiar?), Elijah asks to die. "I have been very zealous for the LORD," he assures God, while his fellow Israelites have all forsaken the covenant. "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life."

The great Jeremiah comes onto God in a fury more than once. He is frequently called the weeping prophet—sometimes because he weeps for God's own grief over the tragic straying and suffering of God's beloved people, sometimes because of his own pain at seeing his countrymen destroyed at the hands of their enemies, but sometimes just because he is tired and frustrated with trying to swim upstream. After being locked in stocks following his prophesy in the courts of the temple, he rails at God: "You have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. And later, " Cursed be the day on which I was born! Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (20:7, 14, 18).

If Jonah is not one of the greats (and the storyteller seems to be quite ready to assure us that he isn't), the problem with him is not that he must wrestle with despair, for the acclaimed great men of Israel do wrestle. Perhaps his problem is more appropriately identified as his unwillingness to submit himself to the discomfort of the struggle. He has made his judgment. Nineveh deserves destruction—nothing more and nothing less. He has extended himself only to the extent of uttering condemnation: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). He is unwilling to do anything more, and he doesn't want God to do anything more—anything more, that is, than unleash destruction.

Contrast Jonah's self-absorption with Jeremiah's "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (20:9). The sense of urgency you get here is reminiscent of Jesus' own words when the Pharisees command him to stop his followers from singing his praise on the entry into Jerusalem: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40).

Contrary to Jonah's antiseptic protection of his feelings for any sense of sympathy or empathy for the Ninevites, the great prophets have a burning in their bones that compels them to put themselves in the way of the unfolding of events that spell disaster. Perhaps, as with Jeremiah, it is identification with the pain of God or perhaps it is their own sense of love and care for those to whom they are called, but they cannot keep quiet. Their message may meet opposition and seem to be going nowhere, causing them deep frustration. The only thing they know to be worse than that frustration, however, is fleeing it.

For many, seminary years are a time of trying on new personae and practicing the trade of ministry. I recall with some humor the great seriousness with which we learned, for example, pastoral care and the great lengths to which we went in practicing it on one

another. We sought to outdo one another in trying to take one another seriously. Sometimes we would lighten up and in playful banter with one another would make a ruse of our bedside manor. Someone, for example, would mention having a sore foot; and we would quickly respond, "I know of someone who had that and their whole foot fell off!" Or someone would mention having a cold, and we would respond, "Oh yes, my aunt just died of a cold last week."

Taking our ministry seriously and learning everything we could about how to minister effectively was important; but learning not to take ourselves too seriously was important, too. That is where we find Elijah in his encounter with God in the wilderness. "It is all just too much," he told God. "Everyone else has bent the knee to Baal. I alone am left." But the story continues. God will later gently inform Elijah that he is not alone in his faithfulness. Actually, 7000 others have not bowed the knee. But notice as well, God does not condemn Elijah for his discouragement. He gives him sleep and then awakens him twice to eat. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Elijah got up, and ate and drank; "then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God" (I Kings 19:7-8).

God did not shame Elijah for his discouragement, but neither did he leave him there. As often happens, God led Elijah farther into the wilderness, for it is in the wilderness that God often does God's best work. Elijah did not go empty handed. He went with God's sustenance; and encountering God anew in the sound of silence, he went back to work. That seems to be God's way with prophetic burnout. The best way past discouragement is not bailout but getting in touch again with who God is and what new tasks God is calling us to do.

Despite the brilliance of Elijah's victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah had to learn that there was more to being a leader than a spectacular splash on top of the mountain. Leadership required his returning to be among the people to speak faithfully and live out faithfully day by day what God was calling him to do.

Jonah was a lone ranger. He withdrew to the solitude of a lonely hill and nursed his wounds. Elijah returned to his people, and so did Moses. "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel," God told Moses, "and bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself" (Num. 11:16-17). God relieved Moses' heavy burden by giving him workers to share the load. That should be a reminder to us when we ourselves feel that we are self-righteously carrying forward God's work all by ourselves. Righteousness that is clutched only to ourselves and not shared is no righteousness at all. Sometimes we may feel alone in our task, but a critical part of that task is to go about the work of day by day calling people to share in that task with us. God's kind of righteousness builds communities of righteousness, love and mercy.

Centuries beyond the stories of Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah, the Apostle Paul wrote to a church in Galatia under the siege of missionaries preaching a message of circumcision and detailed obedience to the law. Paul did not in return give the church a detailed blueprint of what it meant to live by the gospel of Christ, but he did call the young believers into becoming a mutually supportive community. Several years ago, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America took Paul's words to those new Christians and placed them over against a silhouette of one of Martin Luther King's marches for civil right. The juxtaposition of that event and those words speak volumes to those of us who would be faithful today: "But I say, walk by the Spirit. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart" (Galatians 5:16; 6:2,9).

God's calling is lived out in community. It does involve missteps on our part and thus we need one other for gentle correction as well as support. God's calling, however, is not accomplished overnight but in the long haul. So, hear this, brothers and sisters: Do not grow weary and do not fear the wilderness. Remember; it is in the wilderness that God's best work is often done. So, be faithful and make yourself available to God's bidding. And above all, hear this: go. Go with God.