

Nineveh! Just Imagine!
Jonah 3-4
January 22, 2012 – The Presbyterian Church of Dover DE

Surely the book of Jonah has just about the best last line of any book in the Bible, with God saying, “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” That’s it. End of story.

If the storyteller had let Jonah have the last line, it might have gone something like this: “No! You should not be concerned about Nineveh! They not only do not know their right hand from their left, they don’t know who you are, and they are the enemy of your chosen people! You told me what to tell them, and I did it! Now do it! Wipe them out!”

Has someone in authority over you ever told you to go somewhere you didn’t want to go, to a task you did not want to do, to say words that you did not want to say? When I was in sixth grade at Woodleigh Elementary School in Maysville, our classroom was located across the hall from the principal’s office. Our principal was Miss Alma McClain, and Miss McClain brooked no foolishness. During our sixth grade year, she broke her arm in such a way that she had it in a cast and brace that kept it at about shoulder level. Although it slowed her down a bit, she also saw the metal hand bar as an opportunity to motivate some of us. Anyway, it fell to the more responsible sixth grade girls to help out with the office duties. I guess we didn’t have a secretary – I really can’t remember that. When you were “office girl,” – there were never “office boys” of course - you had the duty for a week, and your desk was positioned close to the classroom door so that you could jump up and dart across the hall to the office to

answer the phone if it rang more than 3 times, or run errands for Miss McClain whenever she cleared her throat to get your attention and nod curtly to summon you. One day, she summoned me in just such a way. She took me by the shoulder and we crossed to the window that looked out over the playground where the fifth-graders were at recess. She said, "Mary Owen, I want you to go down there right now and tell Louie that I want to see him and bring him back up here." This was not good news. Louie lived in my neighborhood and was renowned for his evil and sadistic approach to life. He liked to tease kids; he threw snowballs with rocks in them; it was rumored that he tried to actually hang a neighbor's cat, but was caught before the cat's demise. I did not want to go down there. I did not want to approach Louie. I did not want to tell him that Miss McClain wanted to see him. But I was the Office Girl. I left Miss McClain's office, did not go down the immediately available staircase, but headed to the opposite end of the hall to take the longest available route. But I had to go. I knew she was watching from her window. I would just have soon as been swallowed by a big fish.

Jonah was not an Office Girl; even better, he was a prophet of Yahweh in Israel. And Yahweh called him to go and prophesy against Nineveh – in Nineveh! It would have been one thing for him to rail against Nineveh from the safety of his own community, but to be sent to cry out against the Ninevites to their very faces was anathema to him. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, now known as Iraq – which was as hostile to Israel then as it is now – and sending Jonah there was like sending a rabbi from Tel Aviv to tell Muktada al Sadr that his days were numbered. Jonah wanted no part of it for at least two reasons: a) he knew what usually happened to God's messengers, and b) he had no desire to participate in Nineveh's salvation. Now we

know the story of how Jonah heard the word of the Lord to go to Nineveh and headed in the exact opposite direction, taking a boat out of Joppa to Tarshish, an exotic faraway place, and nearly getting everybody on board killed before God sent a special limo in the form of a whale to turn Jonah around and head him back toward Nineveh. This time Jonah went, because he realized he really had no choice. But he probably consoled himself as he traveled to the city with thoughts of how satisfying it was going to be to pronounce judgment on all those evil Ninevites. After all, they had devastated Jewish cities and killed Jewish people. If they were going to kill him too, he would at least give them an earful first.

Barbara Brown Taylor has a wonderful image of Jonah rolling into town like someone preparing for a big preaching revival. He puts up a big tent, sprinkles sawdust on the ground, arranges the wooden benches. He spreads the word that there is a revival tonight, and as the time draws near he tests the sound system and waits for the crowds to arrive. And they do – thousands of them, with children, servants, and livestock. Even the king is there – right on the front row – in his purple robes. Jonah knows how evil they all are, how richly they deserve God’s judgment, and he cannot wait to get started. He pulls out his white handkerchief and clears his throat. “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” he shouts into the mike, shaking his finger at them.

That is it, the sum total of Jonah’s prophecy in the story: an eight-word sermon. He might have just been warming up to a lot more, but no one will ever know, because no sooner does he get that sentence out of his mouth than the whole city repents on the spot. “Yes!!” they shout. “We believe!” The king orders a fast and leads them all out to

change into sackcloth and ashes, and there stands Jonah all alone in his tent before he has even broken a sweat. Meanwhile, the Ninevites cry for mercy to God, God decides to spare them, and the revival is proclaimed a great success. Jonah should be happy, right? But is he happy? No. He is so angry he could die. The last thing in the world Jonah wants is for the Ninevites to be spared. He wants to be right.

Everyone in the story repents but Jonah. The Ninevites repent, their cows and sheep and goats repent, even God repents. But Jonah slinks off outside the city to sit and pout and sulk and hope that God will decide to destroy the city after all. Jonah has been scandalized by God's mercy.

Eugene Peterson has a great book entitled, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. It's a book about vocational holiness. He uses the story of Jonah as a narrative structure for probing the spiritual dimensions of the pastoral vocation. But it is a valuable book to all of us who care about our vocations as Christians – our holy vocations. Peterson says that Jonah's sulking disappointment came from a failure of imagination, a failure of heart. He had no idea what God was doing – the largeness of God's love and mercy and salvation. He had reduced his calling to his own performance – being in the right place, doing the right thing – but he interpreted everything through his own ideas and his own desires. Jonah thought he had come to Nineveh to do a religious job, to administer a religious program. God had brought Jonah to Nineveh to give him an experience of amazing grace. Jonah is sulking because things didn't turn out the way he expected. His program was not fulfilled. No matter that in his preaching, *God* was heard and believed; *Jonah* was ignored. And so Jonah was feeling sorry for himself, quarreling with God under the unpredictable plant.

Jonah could not *imagine* that God could have mercy on these Ninevites – Jonah’s sworn enemies and the enemies of his people. Jonah could not look at them and see them through God’s eyes – as poor souls who in many ways were clueless about how to live with other nations, but who had nevertheless believed God, and responded with repentance and a desire to be reconciled with God. Unimaginable!!

And yet that is what we as Christians are called to do. To try to imagine the world as God sees it – as God would have it in the fullness of God’s kingdom. Yes, we are to study and ground ourselves in scripture and tradition. That is crucial. But it is also crucial to honor the faithful imagination. We recently ordained and installed our new elders and deacons. God calls them to dream dreams, to see visions, to use their imaginations. One of the promises they made is that they will seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, *imagination*, and love. God calls all of us to that. Some of our imaginings may not be what God has in mind, but we can trust God to help us sort that out. Once again, Barbara Brown Taylor offers a helpful image. She says that imagination is like a child roaming the neighborhood on a free afternoon, following first the smell of fresh bread in an oven, then the glint of something bright on the sidewalk – led by curiosity, by hunger, by hope, to explore the given world from its highest branches to its deepest roots because it is wonderful and terrible and because it is there. When imagination comes home and empties its pockets, of course there will be some sorting to do. Keep the cat’s-eye marble, the red feather, the penny. Throw out the broken glass, the bottle cap, the melted chocolate stuck with lint. But do not scold imagination for bringing it all home. The Holy Spirit can be trusted to go with us when we wander and to lead us back home again, with eyes far wiser for all they have seen.

To be God's holy person in the world requires a certain loosening of the grip, a willingness to be surprised, confused, amazed by the unanticipated ways God chooses to be revealed to us. To find the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, we are called to participate in God's own holy imagination – to see ourselves, our neighbors, and our world through God's eyes – full of possibility, full of promise, ready to be transformed.

“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” End of the story? Let's use our imaginations and go celebrate with the Ninevites.

And to God be the glory this day and forever more. Amen.

© 2012 Mary Baber Reed

Primary sources:

Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 155-161.

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Ninevites and Ne-er-do-Wells,” *Gospel Medicine*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995, 91-95.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993, 38-50.

William P. Brown, “Jonah,” *Obadiah through Malachi*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, Louisville: WJKP, 1996, 17-28.