

The Last Word

The feast and fast of Jonah are upon us in the Armenian Church calendar. Though our children have no problem seeing the truth of this story of a man being swallowed by a whale, for you adults, remember that Bible stories aim for a much deeper truth than just the literal. That's why the story of Jonah has rung true for thousands of years, and why this truth can speak into our lives today. Here begins the story. There was once a man named Jonah. One day God asks him to go to the city of Nineveh, a city where no one was living the way God wanted them to live, and tell them to change their ways. Jonah doesn't think this is a good idea, however, so he decides to run; boarding a ship in the opposite direction.

Here already, is the first reason why this story is so true: because from the first man Adam to all of us sitting here, we all run away from God. We've all been asked by God to do something, to be someone. Maybe we've been asked to forgive a family member or friend. Maybe we've been asked to go deeper in our spiritual lives. Whatever it is, in so many words we tell God "no way," running and hiding behind justifications. "Forgive? But they never apologized to me!" "Deepen my spiritual life? But Sunday is my only day off!" I do it, and you do too, and that's the first reason this story rings true.

But it doesn't stop there. Jonah gets on the boat. And midway through the journey, a storm comes. The others start to panic. They throw the cargo overboard. They start to pray. They find out that Jonah is running away from God, and they figure nothing is going to get better with Jonah in the boat. Jonah realizes this himself and tells them "throw me overboard...it's the only way you'll survive." Jonah probably thought those were his last words, but the last word is always from God. God sends a whale, to swallow Jonah, and for three days Jonah is inside the whale. Jonah calls out to God and says "I'm here, use me!"

And here is the second reason this story is true: because God sends us whales. God sends us second chances and third and fourth and fifth....God sends us places, often dark places, where we have to slow down for a little while and think about how we ended up like this. And God waits patiently with us until, three days or three years or three decades later, we decide that we have had enough, and we can't do it our way anymore. God sends us whales because in the end, God doesn't let us go. Even when we try to throw ourselves overboard, God still has a grip on us.

When Jonah prays and says to God, your will be done, the whale spits Jonah back out, onto dry land. Jonah goes to Nineveh, and tells them to repent. To his astonishment, the whole city does repent! And God says, "I will not destroy Nineveh because they listened." Now, this would be a good end to the story. Jonah runs. Jonah gets swallowed by the whale. Jonah repents, Nineveh repents and everything works out. But Jonah is not a sitcom, and this is not the end.

Because Jonah isn't happy about all this. Jonah had been through a lot on his way to Nineveh. Jonah was minding his own business. God put him in the belly of the whale and it had not been easy for him. And now Nineveh, the city that could do nothing right, gets off scot-free, and the punishment from God which Jonah threatens, never comes. And so Jonah tells God this: "I'm mad at you". In fact Jonah says to God, "I am so angry at you that I could die." And here's the third reason this story is true: because, whether we admit it or not, I think all of us have been mad at God before, some of us even this mad. "God, what are you doing? I did everything you wanted me to do, why didn't everything work out like I wanted? Why is this so hard?"

The truth is, that if we have a real relationship with God, a deep one, we will get angry. Jonah shows us that part of living a life of faith is caring enough to get angry from time to time. But alas, Jonah's anger is not the last word, because God always has the last word. God ends Jonah's story by saying in so many words "Jonah, I did what I did out of love for all the people of Nineveh and out of love for you."

And here now is the last word, and the ultimate reason why the story of Jonah forever rings true. The story of Jonah is the story of God's love, God's tough love. God loving Nineveh enough to suffer through their evil so that they might seek their redemption. God loving Jonah enough to suffer his anger and indignation, so that Jonah might feel come to know God's amazing grace. For God's love is the last word, it is the first word, and it is the Word by which we find our salvation, now and always and unto the ages of ages; amen.

Sermon adapted from "The True Story of Jonah and the Whale" by Emily Heath