

Temper Tantrum

O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Jonah 4:3-5

Have you ever witnessed a child throwing a temper-tantrum in the middle of a grocery store (hopefully it was not your own). The child may do any number of things: He or she may pound on the floor with their hands and feet. They may lie on the floor and scream at the top of their lungs. They may throw things or sling their arms about. Or they may be very creative and do all three. But in all of this the child has a purpose - he or she is demanding to get their own way.

Jonah, whose feast day we celebrate this weekend, and who I Hovnan am aptly named after, ends up throwing a temper tantrum with God. Before we try to peel Jonah from the ground and out of his tantrum, let's first review how he got there. The story begins when Jonah is given an intimidating mission by God to go and preach repentance to the Ninevites, the ancient super-power of Babylon. Jonah famously runs away from God's call. But after coming to the end of himself, emerging from the depths, he gets a second chance. He goes to preach repentance to Nineveh, and it turns out they do repent, and dedicate themselves to more Godly ways. If Jonah was an inferior story it would have ended here. Man of God runs away, repents himself, and then gets others to repent and follow God. But that this is not how the story ends, because the Bible is not a sitcom; it rings much more true to life.

After Jonah preaches to the Ninevites and they do repent, he is not all smiles, he is miserable. Is Jonah angry? Yes, surely, because the Ninevites were the enemies of Israel and had done some terrible things, yet God forgives them. Is Jonah hurt? Sure, he was thrown off a ship, swallowed and spit up by a whale. But Jonah is more than angry or hurt. He actually says this to God; 'O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' Jonah is having a tantrum, and if you have ever experienced one, the reasons for it go beyond a child that is angry or hurt, it is a child wanting their own way. Jonah yells at God, I told you so, I knew you are a merciful God and would end up forgiving them, that's why I didn't want to go in the first place. Jonah's tantrum is a force bigger than anger and hurt, bigger than faith in God, it's as big as the whale that swallowed him, it's Jonah's ego. That's really what is going on here, and sadly I can relate.

Let's see if you can relate. Has this ever happened to you? You tell your boss, or your husband or wife, or your kids, listen we really need to take responsibility and stop doing this or that. You repeat it till your blue in the face. Three weeks, or three months, or three years go by, and all of a sudden, your spouse or your kid, or your boss says you know we really need to take responsibility and stop doing this or that. "Are you serious?" we shout. I said that three months ago. This was my idea, I saw that we were going in the wrong direction, I told you 10x and you wouldn't listen, and now you do it and think it's your idea! In the middle of a tantrum, like Jonah, we don't care that our family, or work or a city full of men, women and children avoided something bad and grew better. When our egos are involved, the problem isn't important, the solution doesn't help, we just want it our way and want to be right.

This is human nature, and really the key way the evil one uses pride, the mother of all sins, to make us miserable. Where Jonah really stings though, if we have ears to hear, is that Jonah was a man of God, a prophet. We expect the world to behave with such ego, but believers, pastors and parishioner in the church? How can egos and temper tantrums occur in this holy place? Aren't we supposed to rise above that?

We are and we often do, and if we are to rise above our egos, we first have to know how low we really are. And so there is wisdom in the church fathers placing the feast of Jonah just a few weeks before Great Lent. We need this reminder in church life, because it is just too easy for our egos to catch us off guard in church, where supposedly we have no egos. We need this reminder because it is so very easy, like Jonah, to go about doing what God wants done, but then get angry when God doesn't do it how we want. We need the reminder of the last words of the book of Jonah which is an unanswered question. "Should I not have mercy?" asks God. "Should I not have mercy" on all, God asks us, knowing that you and I and everyone fall miserably short of the righteousness of God, and knowing that the only thing that stops a temper tantrum is for both parent and child to let go of their wills and lean into the arms of God's mercy and grace; now and always; amen.