

In God's Theatre: The Play and Real Life Dramatized through Each One

Jonah 1:1-3,17; 2:9-10; 3:1-10; 4:1-11 and Matthew 11:28-30

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January 21, 2018

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On June 26, 1963, United States' President John F. Kennedy spoke in Berlin, Germany. The city had not long ago experienced a land blockade by East German authorities. Berlin was a city vulnerable to the power-plays of East Germany. Identifying with the struggles of how tough it could be to be a citizen of Berlin, President Kennedy spoke the famous words, "Ich bin ein Berliner," meaning, in fullest expression, "I am one with the citizens of Berlin." While the story from Jonah (which Matt, Chelsea, and Joanie have helped us hear this morning) tends to have us most readily identify with Jonah, the intention of the story – which ends with Jonah's resentful attitude and with God's question – is, "Can Jonah, and can we, get to the point where we say, "I am one with the citizens of Nineveh?"

Scripture helps us explore (1) what it means for God to be seeking us and (2) what the implications are that God is seeking us. Today the literary and Scriptural vehicle for God's exploring through human lives in the earthly theatre is the story of Jonah and a three verse saying of Jesus from Matthew. This means that we are more than a passive audience in God's theatre.

When we hear the story of Jonah, it is about more than God, Jonah, some sailors, a big fish, and the people of Nineveh. The story, rather, is one of God's Spirit exploring us who hear the story, moving from words on a page read-and-spoken by readers (or actors) to those who are engaged listeners and those who consider their own lives related to God's call. We are more than a passive audience in God's theatre. As a stage-play, "Jonah" touches real-life where God's people "are" every day / right now.

A major exchange occurs between God and Jonah in the first three verses of chapter four: "But the repenting of the Ninevites was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. Jonah prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, 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 resisted going to Nineveh because Nineveh was a tough place for a foreigner from a place like Israel; plus, when he gave it some thought, Jonah concluded God might spare the Ninevites if they repented; so why did God need Jonah to inconvenience his own life and to place his safety at risk, if God might be going to extend mercy to the citizens of Nineveh all along?

Professional Bible students cannot – to this day – tell you and me exactly where Tarshish is. In the history of some cultural traditions, Tarshish became sort of like "Shangri-La" – a city of romantic perfection. So rather than taking the challenge to serve in the hard place where God desired for Jonah to serve, Jonah booked passage to a legendary city of ease and "make-believe," which is not reality at all. We also can say that, as soon as Jonah hears God's call, he has "worries" and "resentment." He has worries that the mission is risky and is likely impossible; and he has resentment that God calls him for this challenge when God may turn out demonstrating graciousness to a class of people Jonah resents from the outset, and then Jonah will only resent God more, for being who he suspects God wants to be all along – gracious!

How easy it can be not to be disturbed by God's vision challenging us people for change – for real inner change in relationships with other people, with each one's self, with God. Jonah had worries and resentment when he wanted to run from God's call, and even when he made a u-turn and traveled to Nineveh after the ship, the sailors, and the fish could not get him to the non-reality of Tarshish. Once headed toward Nineveh and while at Nineveh, Jonah's worries and resentments only increase.

In 1936, United States citizen and internationally recognized literary figure Thomas Wolfe traveled to Germany. On the surface he journeyed there for two reasons: (1) German restrictions on currency required that for him to collect royalties on his novels sold in Germany, he had to be in Germany. No checks would be mailed out of the country to him. He also traveled to renew friendships

and to view the summer Olympics. Beneath the surface, he carried worries and admiration. He had heard rumors that Germany in 1936 was experiencing serious flaws beneath the surface. This worried him, because he admired Germany. He was the toast of upper crust society there. His 1929 novel, "Look Homeward, Angel" had received as many favorable reviews in German literary circles than in the United States, and his 1935 novel, "Of Time and the River," which was not unanimously positively acclaimed in the United States, had been better received in Germany. Thomas Wolfe admired the Germans' good taste in his literary skills. He loved the precision of German society in 1936. The Olympics seemed almost perfect, including the Olympic stadium in Munich, where, for track-and-field competition, The Fuhrer Hitler was seated only 3 rows away from Germany's United States guest. The Fuhrer was visibly displeased when the American author whooped loudly and waved his arms upon viewing Jesse Owens victory in the 100 meters. Later during his visit, in private meetings, Wolfe heard whispers of peoples' anxiety. They told him that a Nationalism sickness was spreading in German society.

Unlike Jonah going to Nineveh with worries and resentment because Jonah resented Nineveh – and had all his life – and not even God's graciousness could easily reverse that resentment, Wolfe began to worry about Germany, but he held on to his admiration because Germans so honored and respected him. Until his train-ride west toward Belgium. At the border stop before the train was to cross out of Germany, a traveler who was one of Wolfe's seat-mates in the passenger compartment, was jerked out by German police and accused of smuggling money out of the country. Wolfe could see the look of terror on the man's face. Other passengers whispered that the man was Jewish and was suspected of attempting to leave Germany unauthorized. As the train pulled away, Wolfe could see the man surrounded by the German government's police near the tracks. Panic shaking his body, the man seemed certain of his fate; and Thomas Wolfe guessed his fate as well. Deeply troubled, Wolfe returned to the United States, wrote and published short-story called, "I Have a Thing to Tell You," and sent a discreet letter to his publishers in Germany, informing them that, for reasons he could not detail, he would no longer be able to write for their magazine. ("Thomas Wolfe: A Biography," by Elizabeth Nowell [1960], pgs.317-325)

Jonah was not a Christian. Thomas Wolfe was not all that much of a Christian. Both tell of life-changing experiences beyond Jonah's worries and resentments and beyond Wolfe's worries and admirations. Jonah protested to the end of the dramatized story. Thomas Wolfe in 1936 felt liberated from the plague of Nationalism which he had not previously identified. He knew from the unjust treatment of a fellow human being that new life could only develop as he (Thomas Wolfe) left behind what he had previously admired. How far is that sort of u-turn from what Jesus advocates – "When you are carrying a heavy burden, take MY yoke upon you, and learn from me"?

In 1986, poet Jaroslav Vajda, wrote a four stanza Christmas carol with the title, "Where Shepherds Lately Knelt." This morning soon we will sing stanza 4 as our Statement of Faith. That stanza goes beyond Christmas and the Bethlehem manger to all seasons, centuries, and places. And like the Book of Jonah – only one of two books in the Bible concluding with a question – "Where Shepherds Lately Knelt" also ends with a question: "Can I, will I forget how Love was born and burned its way into my heart: unasked, unforced, unearned: to die, to live, and not alone for me; to die, to live, and not alone for me?"

We've got a story dramatized on stage through a character named Jonah, whose life God explores, seeking Jonah's service. We've also got a story dramatized a long time ago in a far-away land through the life of a character named Jesus; and we've got a real-life story with you and me, with young Olivia, her sister, her parents, and with all of God's people today, tomorrow, and beyond.

What do we expect? We expect the wonderful, yes, through God's love; but the really wonderful only develops as people take the yoke of discipleship wherever God leads, even as Jesus shows in the drama of his real-life, becoming one with all the citizens of God's world, and encouraging us for just such citizenship with God's world-wide family in the drama of our real-life. In a way, everything in the relationship between God and God's people ends in a question. So what will it be beyond the question-mark of God's exploring and challenging you and me with God's love for all, which comes to us unasked, unforced, unearned? – All honor and praise be to God.