

3 Epiphany B
Seething at Success

January 21, 2024
Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah is a lot like you and me! Not that any of us have been thrown off a boat in a storm and viewed a large fish from the inside, but that Jonah was afraid to witness. When God called him to go to Nineveh and witness there, Jonah got on a boat that was headed in the other direction – that was the reason for the storm and the big fish. Jonah didn't want to take God's message to those people in Nineveh.

Nearly all of the prophets in the Old Testament were reluctant to proclaim God's word. They were afraid of failure and rejection. That usually happened. People didn't want to hear God's Word.

Fear of rejection wasn't Jonah's problem. He tries to run away because he's afraid of succeeding. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's dreaded enemy. It would be like an Israeli being called by God to go to the Muslim leaders of Hamas to tell them that the Israelite God is going to destroy them. It probably wouldn't be good for his health to do that.

That's pretty much the situation Jonah was in. He tried running away, but the fish convinced him that he'd better obey God. Once he is in Nineveh, Jonah gives only a half-hearted effort. Our text says that it takes three days to walk across the city. Jonah walks only for one day. He doesn't even get into the center of the city. Jonah speaks only five words in Hebrew. Roughly translated: "Yet forty days, Nineveh destroyed." That's all he says. He doesn't tell the people to repent! He says nothing about God. He doesn't offer them a chance for salvation. He proclaims their destruction. That's what he wants God to do to those evil people.

In spite of his half-hearted effort, he is successful. All the people repent and God spares them and Jonah is seething. He is so angry at God that he asks God to take his life. You can read chapter 4 of Jonah to see what happened next.

I see three implications for us in this text. First of all, even your half-hearted and bumbling efforts can be used by God to bring others to experience God's grace. God's Word is powerful.

The opening chapters of Mark are full of events that illustrate this power.

Jesus says, "Follow," and people follow him. He says, "Get up, take your cot and go home," and the paralytic gets up, takes his cot and goes home." He says, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," and the kingdom of God is present. He says, "Your sins are forgiven," and they are forgiven.

Witnessing isn't an option for Christians. When Jesus calls the disciples to follow, he doesn't stop with "follow me." He also says, "I will make you fish for people." The call to follow Jesus includes a call to bring in more disciples – and we don't have to go to Nineveh to do it.

Evangelism is not part of our Lutheran heritage. To create peace in Germany after the Reformation, each prince decided if his principality would be Lutheran or if it would be Roman Catholic. If you were born in a Lutheran area, you were Lutheran. If you didn't like that, you had to move to a Roman Catholic area.

The idea of a territorial church was throughout Europe. There was the Church of England. There was Dutch Reformed Church. The Scandinavian countries were Lutheran. Italy was Roman Catholic. Greece was Greek Orthodox. Where you were born determined your type of Christianity.

Lutherans didn't need to witness. They just had many children in the Lutheran areas. The church grew. That's no longer working. Being born in America doesn't make one a Lutheran or

even Christian.

The best and proven way for congregations to grow is for the members to invite their friends and relatives to church. Talking to others about our faith and our church is a skill that can be learned. I've found a greater willingness among the members here to talk about their faith, to pray with others, and to invite folks to church than other places. We are called to fish for people – although capturing them in a net like on the bulletin cover and hauling them to church probably isn't the best tactic. That wouldn't illustrate God's amazing grace to them.

A second implication of this text which comes from the sermon title: Seething at Success. I think that many people are like Jonah – they are afraid of succeeding in their witness. I asked members at a congregation that said they wanted to grow, "How would you like to be part of a 1000-member congregation?" Every person thought that they wouldn't like it. I'm certain that no one in the congregation gave much effort to growing. They were a bit fearful of succeeding. Their membership shrank when their community quadrupled in size.

Growth means changes. It means you won't know everybody in church anymore or everything that's going on. There can be subtle fears of success in witnessing. The new people may want to change our way of doing things. Change in congregations will happen. Change is a natural part of life.

A third implication from Jonah is prejudice. God saved even those evil and wicked and hated Ninevites from destruction after they repented.

The book of Jonah indicates that in God's eyes, all people, even your enemies, are worthy of salvation.

Success in witnessing could mean that people whom you don't particularly like join our fellowship.

While prejudice often refers to differences in skin tones or national heritage – there are many other prejudices in our churches. Some that I've seen: between wealthy and the poor; between white-collar and blue-collar workers; different education levels. Sometimes it can be between those born and raised in the town, who have been around forever, and the new-comers. Sometimes it can be between the life-long Lutherans and the new converts. Sometimes it can be between the married and singles or families with children and those without; sexual orientation and same-sex marriages is a hot topic in many congregations that can create enemies.

The book of Jonah makes it clear that God holds no prejudices. God wants everyone to be saved – and so should we.

There are fears of being successful. Jonah had them. They are present in the churches today. If you believe that this is one of the best congregations in the area, and you must think that or you wouldn't be here, tell others about it. I think that it is easily within our reach to have every family invite and bring another family to church one Sunday. If that were to happen, we would double our worship attendance in a week. It's exciting to think about the possibilities. It's also scary to think about the possibilities. Where would we put all these people?

God has promised that your witness will work. God's word is powerful. When Jesus speaks a word, it happens. So, in your witnessing, you don't have to be afraid of failing. God will use your witness for good.

What we do need to watch out for is the fear of success. When our witness works, when we grow in membership it will mean changes for the congregation. But we shouldn't fear that either. If God can see us through our failures and difficult times, God certainly can help us through

our successes.