

## **Sermon: God's Plan: Some Assembly Required**

Year B, Lent 2

[Genesis 17:1-7,15-16](#); [Jonah 1:1-3](#); [Jonah 3:1-4](#); [Jonah 4:9-11](#)

Offered March 1, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH  
Catherine Merrill

So the kids have been studying Jonah for a couple weeks. Well, a three week topic turned into one week because of snow, but they studied Jonah and each time they take on a topic, we're going to come back together and worship, exploring how their study can teach us.

In both of the readings today, God is speaking. In the first, God spoke to Jonah; in the second God spoke to Abraham. Those are just tiny parts of their much longer stories, but we're going to use them as the way into the stories. We're also going to put the stories side by side and see what the two stories say to each other. I'm going to break you into small groups and then ask a series of questions that have no right answers. You'll talk about them for a really short time, 2 or 3 minutes and then we'll pool our answers. At the end, I'll wrap up by connecting our pooled answers to Lent and Jesus.

First a quick review of Jonah's story.

- God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah sails away in the other direction.
- God sends a massive storm, then a giant fish to get Jonah headed towards Nineveh.
- Once Jonah is headed toward Nineveh, God tells Jonah what he's supposed to do there
- Jonah preaches to Nineveh, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."
- Nineveh repents. Meanwhile, Jonah has slunk off to sit under a vine that withers and Jonah complains to God about making him a liar and about the vine withering.
- God chides Jonah for his lack of compassion.

Now an even more abridged version of Abraham & Sarah's story since theirs is much longer

- God calls Abraham to leave his country and people and follow God's instructions to find a new land. God will make of Abraham a great nation, a blessing to all.
- Abraham sets out with his barren wife Sarah and they travel for decades and have many adventures.
- They eventually settle in the land God had led them to, where God renewed the promise of them founding nations. Since Abraham was in his 80s and Sarah in her 70s, that seemed unlikely, so they decided that God must have meant that Abraham would have a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar. Hagar did have a son, Ishmael.
- When Abraham was in his 90s, God spoke to him again, saying that, as promised, he would be the father of nations and Sarah's descendants would be kings.
- Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Hagar and Ishmael left the land where Abraham and Sarah lived and go on to found a nation elsewhere. Ishmael and Isaac stand together at their father's funeral.

It's hard to remember all that, so I'll hand out little summary pages that go through that. Let's get into small groups and we'll get going on the questions.

Question 1: God tells both Abraham and Jonah that they need to leave the place they're in and go somewhere else because God has something in mind for each of them. The first time God speaks to them, do you think they believed God? Why or why not?

[Small group discussion]

Question 2: The next time we see God speaking to Abraham and Jonah, God is reminding both men of the mission God had originally sent the men out into the world to do. Abraham will father many nations; Jonah needs to preach in Nineveh. Do you think they believed God this time? What does their reaction this time tell you about the two men's attitudes toward God?

[Small group discussion]

Question 3: The last time we see God speaking to Abraham and Jonah, it seems very different. Abraham hears yet again about all those descendants God has planned for him, even though he's in his 90s. Jonah is yelled at for his lack of compassion. But in another way, it seems like God is explaining the plan one more time. What do you think is holding each man back?

[Small group discussion]

[Cath's attempt at incorporating the small group discussions and connecting Jonah & Abraham's stories to Jesus and Lent.]

Last week I quoted Joan Chittister who said that "Lent is our salvation from the depths of nothingness. It is our guide to the more of life."<sup>1</sup> Think about Abraham and Jonah at the start of their conversation with God. If they had dismissed God, shrugged God off, what would their lives have been like? Think about their stories: wandering for years, whales, having kids in their 90s. Maybe that's more more than anyone could handle. But even in the height of adventure, even when they had the most more going on, God was right there with them. But that's hard to remember in the middle of what's going on. It's hard to remember that your parent can help you out, or that your kids may have really different expectations or that your spouse could live in a foreign land after decades of wandering around. Jesus knew that we thought we had to solve everything by ourselves, so he certainly taught again and again that God was with us, always. But he also lived with other people, and he taught them to depend on each other, to help each other out. Jonah didn't have anyone with him (and given what a grump he was, that's understandable). But Abraham had lots of people with him and yet he got the most off track when he tried to do things all by himself.

Lent is about life, real life, and about finding a path to Easter where real life can transform into the life God wants for everyone. Abraham knew perfectly well that no 70 year old woman is going to be a mom. Jonah knew perfectly well that having some outsider come into a big city and tell it that it was going in the wrong direction was pointless. The world just didn't work that way. And there's God, saying over and over, "I know. I get it. I've been watching all along. If you'd just work with me, the world can stop being like that." Jesus kept talking about transforming this world into the kingdom of God. He wanted us to see how much of our attitude that world worked one way was an assumption that we were making. He wanted us to let go of the idea that we knew what was the best possible outcome and to stop settling for even less than that. He wanted us to let our lights shine and see what happened when the world started lighting up.

In both of the stories today, both men know God is speaking to them. There's no doubt in their mind. It may frighten or inspire them, but they know it's God and they know it's for real. And yet somehow something holds them back from committing to the path God has laid out. There are days when I'm as crabby as Jonah and I just want God to lay it out for me, to stop making me

---

<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 122.

figure out how to love this neighbor who won't even let me cross the street when I am plainly standing out here in the freezing cold and she is in her nice warm car. When we want God to send an email detailing the next 17 steps, we would do well to remember that even when God does that, we can stall, we can hold back. Lent doesn't have a master plan. We don't have to reach such and such a prayer by Day 9 to make it to Easter on schedule. Easter is going to come. Jesus preached that the Kingdom is going to come. We just need to keep moving. We just need to keep listening and believing. We can be saved from the depths of nothingness by taking one tentative step after another on the path we find God laying out for us.