

Sermon 07-08-18
In the Belly of the Whale
Jonah 1:1-17 (NRSV)

Sermon Starter

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If you have been hanging around here the last few Sundays, few being a relative term since the announcement of my appointment was made in April, most of you know I am the new kid in the pulpit. I am Pastor Steve Pudinski. Stephen if you want to get formal. To quell what some of you may be wondering, yes, the rumor is true. I am a California kid, born and raised. The next question that is probably popping into your head is whatever brought a California kid to the farm country of eastern Iowa? Well, let me sum it up in one word. Jonah. Take a look.

Newsboys - “Belly of the Whale” Music Video with Veggietales

Now, before we go too much further, a little disclaimer. In no way am I equating the lovely town of Tipton, Iowa, to the ancient city of Nineveh. However, there are some key points in the Jonah story that played a major part in why I am standing before you today.

The Calling

Rewind to a time in late February or early March. Kelley and I are traveling toward San Francisco on Interstate 80, taking a respite day by heading to the beach. She is on the phone with one of her girlfriends and I am half listening to one side of her conversation and the radio. Suddenly I say to my lovely wife, “We need to go to Iowa.”

I think the resulting conversation went something like this:

K: “Johanna, I need to hang up now. Steve just said we need to go to Iowa.” Then turning to me she asked, “Are you crazy? Where is this coming from?”

S: I don’t know. I suddenly got this feeling – this voice came over me – that said we need to go to Iowa.”

K: “What brought this on?”

S: “I thought you wanted to go back?”

K: “I never said that.”

S: “I’ve got this feeling that we need to go to Iowa. I can’t explain it.”

So, like many of us who are faced with decisions we decided to make a list – a list of reasons why we couldn’t go to Iowa. Sound familiar to anyone. We came up with a few reasons why we

couldn't go. A few things we thought might hinder us, like healthcare and reduced retirement benefits, just to name a couple. We even decided it would be best to pray about this and listen. However, this feeling that I needed to go to Iowa just did not go away. Neither did the word "Jonah."

Think about this for a minute. Jonah heard the call of the Lord and then immediately sets out to flee from the presence of the Lord. He goes down to Joppa; he goes down to the docks and gets on a ship; he goes down into the hold of the ship; he is thrown overboard, going down into the water; and he is swallowed by a big fish, going down into the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

What is the symbolism in scripture when we see something happening in three days? It is going to be a story of transformation. Someone or something is going to be transformed. Jonah has a change of heart and repents and is spit out on the beach after three days. How long was Jesus in the tomb? Three days; and look at the transformation that is still taking place because of that event.

So, Jonah, ship, water, whale, three days, transformation. All well and good if you live by the sea. We lived inland. The ocean was two hours away. I wouldn't even want to speculate what might be in store for someone like me who might say no to the Lord when there isn't a big fish in the neighborhood.

As it was, that list of reasons we could not go to Iowa, everything just melted away. No issues. My DS, who had been my mentor since my start in ministry, was not happy but understood. My Bishop at the time, Minerva G. Carcaño, interviewed me for thirty minutes then said what I thought was going on, "This is the calling of the Holy Spirit."

So, here I am, after applying to the Iowa Annual Conference, being interviewed via Skype, receiving a call from DS Kiboko and one week later being introduced to the Tipton UMC SPRC as the new pastor. Total time less than six weeks. And no big fish. Who said God doesn't work in mysterious ways, especially when he wants something. I'm here to tell you nothing will stop the Almighty!

Who Am I?

So, who am I? I am a person who was born and raised in California and only lived outside of the Golden State when directed to do so by Uncle Sam. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, for those of you familiar with California, in the city of San Leandro. I lived briefly in Simi Valley before going into the Army. I spent three years on active duty and then finished out my military career in the Army Reserve, retiring as a Chief Warrant Officer 4 after 26 years.

However, ministry is my third career. When I left active duty, I spent a short three weeks flipping pizzas for Shakey's Pizza and then entered the California Highway Patrol. I worked road patrol, road a desk when I got bored with chasing taillights, and then decided if I had to work the streets, life was better as a Sergeant. I not only promoted to Sergeant but to Lieutenant and Captain as well. I was even assigned as the detail leader for a team that protected the

Governor of the State of California for four years. The last five years of my career I spent as a Captain, commanding an office in Humboldt County, supervising 50 employees, both uniformed and civilian, responsible for patrolling 1500 square miles of the Golden State behind the Redwood Curtain on the northern CA coast. I retired from the CHP after 34 years, 11 months and 17 days (but who's counting).

My Ministry Years

I retired from the CHP June 30, 2007 and was appointed as a Licensed Local Pastor to the Smith River United Methodist Church effective July 1st of the same year. Yes, less than one day's rest. I went to Licensing School at Claremont School of Theology in CA, first year Course of Study at Perkins School of Theology on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, and finished years two thru five at Duke Divinity School in Durham, NC. In 2013, I was moved from Smith River UMC to the First United Methodist Church of Roseville, a historic downtown church. In June 2017 I was elected as an Associate Member, and now in 2018 we are in Tipton, Iowa.

Many of us have favorite scriptures and at times those scriptures might change, depending on the course our lives take. When I was searching my heart and beginning my quest to enter the ministry the last two verses in the Gospel of Matthew spoke clearly to me, becoming my guiding verses, **“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”** (Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV) That last phrase in verse 20, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” is a constant reminder for me of the presence of Jesus in my life.

Last Sunday we heard Melinda preaching about who is God and faith. One of the questions she raised had to deal with hope. When I met with Staff Parish Relations Committee back in April, I gave them a pop quiz. It also dealt with hope. I asked, “What verse in all of scripture gives you the most hope?” There were some surprising answers.

Most people will say that John 3:16 offers them the most hope. It is a verse many of us learned when we were in Sunday School, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”** (NRSV) When we were asked that question in seminary, the majority of us chose John 3:16 as well. However, I have come to cherish the words of Romans 8:38-39 and the hope that comes from these comforting words, **“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (NRSV)

That is what you are going to be hearing from me. I am a teaching pastor. I am going to bring you the stories of Jesus and how they impact our lives. You will hear grace, forgiveness, and love, and not necessarily in that order. I am going to share the Gospels, with an occasional sojourn into the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, and the Epistles or the New Testament. I

will warn you right now, I love to preach on the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John. I know many people do not like that text, but where else can we find sea monsters and dragons in the Bible? Nowhere, except in Revelation.

Yet, I do not just teach from the pulpit. I enjoy teaching through Bible and book studies. I enjoy bringing new ideas and thoughts to the forefront for discussion and learning. I enjoy such writers as Adam Hamilton, Diana Butler-Bass, Mike Slaughter, Jim Moore, and Nadia Boltz-Weber, not to mention N.T. Wright, Stanley Hauerwas, and even Marcus Borg. In fact, don't be surprised if one Sunday there is a third element on the Communion table – chocolate. As Nadia says, “Nothing says resurrection like chocolate, baby!”¹

And speaking of resurrection – new life. I am for growing and making disciples, just like the mission statement of the United Methodist Church says, our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Most people stop right there. But if we read the next sentence, our task is given to us, the local church. “Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant areas through which disciple-making occurs.”² We do this by going...well, to quote Buzz Lightyear, “**To infinity and beyond!**” We go outside to make disciples. We leave our four walls and venture into the world. I hope you will join me.

Kelley and I are excited to be here. I pray you are just as excited to have us here. Over the course of the next few years as we learn about each other, you will hear about our blended family of six girls and a boy with a smattering of grandchildren. You will undoubtedly hear more about our four-legged family members if not meet them. You will learn that I love Christian and country music while Kelley is more into pop rock and the hits of the 70s and 80s. Kelley loves to quilt, knit, and sew, while I love to read, take pictures, listen to music, and collect antique fairy lamps.

Most importantly, we love the Lord, who is number one in both our lives. As we begin our time here in Tipton, let us all explore the love our Lord has for all of us. May we all continue to direct our focus toward our risen Lord and the gift that He ushered in for us, the gift of salvation and eternal life. A gift that can be had because through our faith we believe in the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of us all. Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ Phyliss Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It is Going, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), p-12

² Paragraph 120, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016*, copyright ©2016 The United Methodist Publishing House.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, July 8, 2018

Jonah 1:1-17

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’

⁷ The sailors said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, ‘Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ ⁹‘I am a Hebrew,’ he replied. ‘I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?’ For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’ ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, ‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷ But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Liturgist: The Word of God for the people of God.

PEOPLE: Thanks be to God.