

Jonah 3
Jonah-Take 2
August 25, 2019
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

*Title Slide

I am a very proud alum of Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa. I earned a masters of divinity by completing more than 82 hours of graduate coursework. As is the case with any graduate program, there were certain courses that were required and others that were elective. For example. all students at Phillips are required to take both Intro to New Testament and Intro to Hebrew Bible. The first class I took at Phillips was Intro to Hebrew Bible. At the time, Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison, the Hebrew Bible professor, was on sabbatical, so another faculty member was teaching that class. But by the time I was ready to take my second Hebrew Bible course, Dr. Davison had returned from sabbatical.

It was, and is, no secret at Phillips that Dr. Davison's classes are tough. Having heard this, I asked my friend, Bill, who was almost finished with seminary, if he had an advice on how to successfully navigate Dr. Davison's courses. He answered by telling me this story:

I took Intro to Hebrew Bible my first semester at Phillips. I was doing okay in the course, so when it came time to write the first assigned paper, and Dr. Davison told the class that if anyone wanted to hand in a rough draft of the paper early, she would look it over and offer feedback, I thought I didn't need to bother with that. I would be fine. So, I wrote what I thought was a decent paper and handed it in.

When the graded papers were returned, I realized I had received a very low D, in fact barely a D. I was horrified. I made an appointment with Dr. Davison to talk to her about it. The day of the appointment, I went to her office, threw myself at her mercy and started the conversation

with, "Should I just throw myself off of a bridge? You say the word and that's what I will do." We had a good laugh and talked about what I had done wrong. And she reminded me that I could always hand in a rough draft and she would look at it, which I did from that point on.

After Bill finished telling his story, he said, "My advice is to always hand in a rough draft." I took Bill's advice and, in every single Hebrew Bible class I took, I always turned in a rough draft of every paper for Dr. Davison to review. My most vivid memory of that process was the time I turned in a draft for her to review and it was returned to me with the words, THIS IS NOT THE ASSIGNMENT, in red ink at the top. I don't remember what the assignment was, but I'm glad I had a second chance to figure it out.

Dr. Davison's classes were notoriously the most difficult, yet I always earned an A. I worked really hard for each grade, but I credit her willingness to read my rough drafts for some of that. Truthfully, it was through those second chances on papers that a lot of the important learning occurred and, along the way, I developed a love for the Hebrew Bible and found my own voice as a preacher. When we are given a second chance, we are given the opportunity to get it right or at least to try it again. This week, as I've prepared for this sermon, I've had the opportunity to think about second chances and the people who have made them possible for me. I hope you give yourself that same opportunity. It left me feeling grateful and hopeful.

In today's text, Jonah was given a second chance. Before we get to that, recall that Jonah's story began with God calling him to go to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites of their impending doom. Rather than going there, he boarded a ship and sailed the other way. While at sea, Jonah fell asleep and a horrible storm threatened the ship and all who were on it. The men on the ship prayed to their gods to save them. Finally, they

awakened Jonah to learn he had run from his call and the God of Israel was not having it.

In order to save themselves, the men on the ship tossed Jonah overboard, into the darkness of the sea. We might imagine that would be the end of Jonah's story, but it wasn't. He was swallowed by a big fish and, once inside the fish, Jonah turned to God in prayer, knowing that God was present, even in the midst of both physical and spiritual darkness. And so, that's where we find Jonah as his story picks up, in the belly of a fish. This is Jonah 2:10-3:10.

*Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

3 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This was Jonah's "Take 2," his opportunity to try again to live into his call. The story up to this point doesn't tell us specifically why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, but maybe we could guess. Built by King Sennacherib, Nineveh was the very large capital of a super power. It had walls, huge buildings and fountains. The Ninevites were strong enemies of Israel, with no need to listen to the cries of a street prophet coming to pronounce judgment. Jonah knew that. And really, we can't blame him for not wanting to go. Who wants to be the bearer of bad news, let alone be the bearer of bad news to bad people? But God didn't give up on Jonah's call, and when Jonah realized he couldn't run from or hide from that call, he was given a second chance.

Jonah's rather vague message, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" was heard by people all over the city, including the King. Having heard the grim message, everyone dressed in sackcloth, which was a symbol for mourning, they began to fast. The author, using a bit of comedy in the form of exaggeration, even has the King order the animals to fast and wear sackcloth.

*It's important to note that, while it is fairly common for us to force our pets to dress up, in Jonah's day, goats (and other pets) did not wear pajamas (or other costumes), even though it's adorable. Interestingly, these acts of mourning and repentance were done, even though Jonah's message said nothing about the possibility that a change in their behavior would change the outcome.

In fact, the reaction of the Ninevites stands in stark contrast to Jonah's actions. Jonah, an Israelite, who presumably knows God, hears the voice of God and runs the other way. But the Ninevites, foreigners and enemies, hear God's voice and believe, and even more, put their belief

into action. The one who knows God, acts as if he doesn't; the ones who don't know God act as if they do. I don't know about you, but I have no trouble at all thinking of examples of this in our world today. I was reminded this week of a friend who grew up in another faith tradition. That church has officially "broken fellowship" with her because she is a lesbian. The church leadership actually voted her out and sent her a letter telling her so. People who know God, acting like they don't.

According to Pew Research, as of 2014, a quarter of the population identifies as "none," when asked about religious affiliation. 10% of Americans identify as theists.

*There is an organization made of non-believing high school and college students called Secular Student Alliance. At their July 2016 conference, speaker after speaker urged attendees to go out into the world and serve their communities. The theme for the group's 2019 conference was "Better Together: Creating Meaningful Community." (Jay Wexler, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/6/7/18652423/atheism-america-facts>)

People who don't know God, acting like they do.

Where have you noticed people who claim to know God acting as if they don't? Or people who do not claim to know God acting as if they do?

I want to go back to Jonah's story for a minute and point out what I think is the most compelling thing about the story of Jonah. We've talked about how all the characters in the story have acted. But I think we haven't talked enough about God and how God acted with respect to Jonah and all "the others."

*This story has a lot to say about the character of God because, you see, not only did God give Jonah a second chance, but in this story we saw God give the Gentile sailors on the ship a second chance and even

the Ninevites (also Gentiles) and enemies of God's people, a second chance. This story makes it clear that God is a God of second chances, not just for people like us, but for all people.

The world is full of all kinds of people who desperately need us to fight for their second chance. One of our three core values at Disciples Christian Church is justice through service. As we engage this core value, we are fighting for, and providing for, second chances for our neighbors. One example of that is our work with Family Promise. The families in the Family Promise program are experiencing homelessness for a variety of reasons. Some of the parents have been unable to find a job that pays enough to support their family. Some parents have struggled with addiction or mental illness. Others have been in relationships where they were not safe, so they are new to single parenting. All of them are in need of a second chance to be the kind of parent, employee, and partner they need and want to be.

With the help of host churches like ours, Family Promise provides families with a safe place to stay, meals, opportunities to learn how to write a resumé, become a valued employee, create a budget, and maintain a household. Some parents participate in parenting classes while they in the program. Once the parents are employed, they are able to save their paychecks for a deposit and rent. While in Family Promise, they are introduced to organizations in the community who will continue to provide assistance even after they are in their own home. Family Promise and its partner organizations provide families with second chances and we get to be part of that, by hosting families each quarter and by providing financial resources.

Where are the other places you are fighting for, and providing for, second chances in our community?

It is a good to be part of a community of people who take second chances so seriously. Let's never stop doing that. And let's never forget that we don't do this work alone...we do it together and we do it on behalf of a God who loves us too much to ever give up on us getting our act together. Amen.