

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:14-20

“And now for the rest of the story...” – you’ve got to love that hook. It’s the pause afterwards that’s masterful in setting your interest. Paul Harvey’s about to tell me something fascinating about a famous person, a profound event, or illustrate how the fate of millions hinged on a seemingly insignificant set of circumstances and their outcome. Well, it’s either that or we’re going to get an equally enthusiastic pitch for the latest Bose Wave Radio – you just never know. Could be magnificent, could be mundane – it depends on where he decides to go after the pause.

I mention this broadcasting phenomenon, or genre, because in many ways that’s what we’re asked to consider this morning. We need to take another look at two Bible stories that we’ve most of us heard a lot. Apart from Noah, David & Goliath, and Jesus, Jonah is one of the most recognized characters in the Bible. Everybody knows Jonah. Jonah, right, the guy that was swallowed by the whale? Sure I know that one! Everybody knows that one. What about it?

December 25th, BC 760 a young Jew was born into a priestly family serving in the court of the king. The young boy would become a rabbi like his father and then rise to even more prominence as a prophet. Indeed the Lord smiled upon him and blessed him, giving him wisdom and insight beyond his years and a high estimation by people far and wide. Then one day the young prophet had a crisis so severe that he fled from his hometown without a word to his family, hopped on board a ship signed up as a merchant marine and set sail for parts unknown. He would eventually be submerged and drown by a creature under the Lord’s direction, and taken to the gates of death to be judged for his sins by God. And then be resurrected and returned to land after vowing to be obedient to God and serve with all his life – with his whole being.

Some years later, December 25th, BC 8, a young Jew was born into a priestly family, a family secretly serving in the court of the king. The young boy would grow to become a rabbi and be considered by many as a significant prophet. Indeed the Lord smiled on him and blessed him, giving him wisdom beyond his years and a high estimation by people far and wide. Then one day the young prophet had a crisis so severe that he left his hometown and family and traveled to a river where he was submerged and

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drown by a creature under the Lord's direction, then judged by God and returned to land. There he vowed to be obedient to God and serve with all his life – with all his being.

The first young man would go on to have great initial success but a subsequent falling out with the Lord. The later would also have great initial success, but go on to be the incarnation of the most popular religion on earth. Do you know their names, have you guessed who these two twin prophets separated by hundreds of years are? The first was Jonah, star of Sunday School trivia and comics, the later is Jesus Christ, messiah of the world.

What was it then that caused these eerily similar stories and characters to come to such drastically different ends? Six words; nine syllables actually. That's the difference between these two stories and their outcomes. So little we could easily skip right over it, especially since we already know the important parts of the stories right? Six words; nine syllables – ultimately the distance between life and death.

“Repent and believe in the gospel.”

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Jesus includes this in his message from the Lord, Jonah does not. And from that point on the stories divert in drastically different directions – in fact in exact opposite directions. Jesus will enter the wilderness for 40 days of being tempted, but which he survives through obedience and selfless devotion to God; literally, physically he will empty himself when tested by Satan and the environment. Jonah will also go into the wilderness for 40 days, but to throw a tantrum and insist on his own way with god, renouncing his devotion and obedience.

Jesus is then ministered to by angels, relieving his hunger, thirst and fatigue.

Jonah is then scorned by God and loses even the comfort of shade.

Jesus preaches the message and fishermen immediately convert.

Jonah, well the fishermen in his story convert, but not to become his disciples – rather they threw him overboard.

Do you see the intentional contrast here? Do you feel how the trajectories are radically changed? All this because Jonah holds something back. What?

vv 3:10-4:3

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Jonah knew what he left out in his message to the people of Nineveh. He's effectively saying, "Lord, I knew if I told them that part about repenting you might have mercy. They don't deserve mercy! I'd rather die than see them spared." Ironic that this is the same guy who was begging for his life in chapter two.

What on earth could make Jonah behave so erratically? Let me suffice it to say that Jonah had good reasons. The Ninevites make Saddam Hussein and his henchmen look like girl scouts. If ever a people deserved wholesale condemnation and hatred, they were the ones. And Jonah can't let go of that. That's why he's holding back as he proclaims God's message, as he attempts to be faithful to the Lord. My sense is that it's something we all can identify with. I daresay we all withhold something while attempting to be obedient to the Lord. Maybe it's time, maybe it's money, maybe it's a grudge, maybe it's focus...there are so many ways we can hold back – and for so many good reasons.

Make no mistake though, these exceptions, these ways in which we hold back from being completely obedient to God are symptoms of the cosmic struggle for CONTROL. Control of our own destiny, and yet we can see how that sort of control is an illusion. It's easy to see Jonah's ridiculous struggle for control and how futile it is – but that's us too, me and you; just as ridiculous and just as wrong. Underscoring just this point to the Philippians Paul says:
vv.2:1-11

Whatever it is that you're holding onto, that's holding you back from being completely faithful and obedient to God – get rid of it! There's no way it's worth it. Drop it, like the fishermen dropped their nets, and follow him. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel. That's the rest of the story. Amen.