

“Repentance as Comedy and Fairy Tale and Redemption”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
Ash Wednesday  
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Scripture: Jonah

If I was to say to you, “a Baptist minister and a Presbyterian minister went into a bar together,” what would you expect to follow? Or if I was to say, “Knock, knock,” you would say \_\_\_\_\_. And if I was to say, “Ash Wednesday,” what emotions do you think of immediately?

It may sound strange then, but the book of Jonah is the perfect one for us on this Ash Wednesday. But Jonah may catch us off guard if we think of Ash Wednesday as only a dark and gloomy and depressing day. Those who assume that the Bible is to be taken literally will struggle to understand what we just read. For just as if I was to say, “knock knock” and you knew a joke was coming, so too, we need to recognize that this book of Jonah is first, and foremost, a comedy. A comedy with deep, pointed insights certainly, but from beginning to end, a comedy.

The comedy runs from beginning – when the narrator announces that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, but Jonah ran the other way trying to get away from the presence of the Lord. And we readers are left to chuckle for unlike Jonah we know that you can run, but you can’t hide when God is seeking you out. And the comedy continues. Jonah, the non-sailor sleeping easily during a storm that raises the hair on all the more shipshape sailors. If any of you are landlubbers like me who get seasick easily, you get the comedy here. One fantastic scene after another follows. And even the ending is comedic – God responds to Jonah’s self-righteous anger, and closes the book with the line,

“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

You may believe, along with me, that God cares about the rights and pain of animals, but coming as this does out of the blue, it is meant to be a funny ending. Jonah is a comedy.

On this Ash Wednesday, Jonah – not the character certainly, but the book – gives us permission to laugh. But the comedy serves a deeper purpose.

Jonah is also a fairy tale. And like other fairy tales, we are to suspend our normal critical “just the facts, ma’am” approach. The point we are to ponder is not what type of fish is big enough to swallow a grown man, or whether or not then it would be more appropriate to call it a whale. The point is to laugh, appreciate the fairy tale element of a

magical rescue, and cackle when the sound effects man burps after spewing Jonah onto the beach.

Kings play a prominent role in the Bible. A few, like David, get positive reviews but they are usually foils to the will and work of God. Think Pharaoh. Mean, power-hungry, trusting more in empire or realpolitik than faith. But not the king of mighty Ninevah. A prophet, his clothes dripping wet with a rather nasty fish smell to him starts walking through the streets. And what happens next? The king and all the people actually believe Jonah. The king makes a proclamation that extends even to the animals – public fasting for everyone, and all (including the animals) should be covered with sackcloth. And even before that non-species specific show of penitence, the mighty king steps down from the throne, removes the royal cloak, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes.

And some people think a tiny cross of ashes on their forehead is too showy? He sat in the ashes! Now it is a good thing that this service is here at Central and not at First Baptist or [Rev.] Bill [Englund] might fill up the baptismal pool with ashes and everybody would follow the king's lead and take a seat. That would be difficult to explain to the drycleaners.

Like a fairy tale, we have a sudden switching of roles. The frog turns into a prince. The king of the evil Ninevites suddenly is the good leader of the repentant people and the prophet Jonah turns sullen, self-righteous, and mad at God for not smiting 'em. People actually listen to the prophet and do what he says – and he gets mad! And with his anger, new characters enter the scene: a fast-growing bush – think Jack and the Beanstalk; and a worm with strong front teeth - think Monty Python and the rabbit with the big pointy teeth. Jonah as fairy tale.

But I want to tell you that there is gospel truth in this comedy and fairy tale. And the humor maybe allows us to see just how human Jonah is and how similar he is to us. Isn't it natural to try and run from God? Do we not save our most fervent prayers for when we are in a tight spot? Don't we believe deep down that God is on our side and will smite our enemies and that God can't wait to punish 'em? Don't we want to be prophetic by pointing out all the other miserable failures and watch them shrivel up under God's magnifying glass while we shine?

The gospel truth is that repentance can happen. Repentance can happen on an individual and national level. And it can be healing. People can change.

And perhaps the hardest Gospel truth of all is about God's own nature, and this truth is made tolerable for us with the humor and fantastical effects. The truth about God for us uptight, self-righteous, know-it-all humans is that God is willing to change and forgive others. And even in the face of our most self-righteous and pouty behavior God can laugh it off lovingly. The gospel truth is that redemption comes in this story, not only to the king and the rest of the Ninevites, not only to the sailors and the captain, not

only to the fish finally relieved of his whining captive, not only to the animals dressed in sackcloth refraining from their feed trough, but also to Jonah.

And if redemption can come to Jonah, what about us? And that is worth pondering as we begin this season of Lent.

Amen.