

It comes up just once a year in the Lectionary scriptures – a reference to the story of Jonah. And we preachers only get these paltry verses given, so we have to fill in the gaps from the pulpit – of the rest of the story.

Jonah was a prophet of an unusual type. God called him to go to Nineveh, so he immediately booked passage on a boat from Joppa toward Tarshish. Joppa was located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, just northwest of Jerusalem. Tarshish was located due WEST, in the country of Spain, northwest of the present day Straits of Gibraltar. Nineveh, was located due EAST from Joppa, however, on the shore of the Tigris River in present day Iraq (called Babylonia in biblical times.)

**To review, God said, “Jonah, go east!” and Jonah went west!** A very strange prophet. So a very large storm came up, threatening the lives of all on the ship. And these (presumably in the story) non-Jews decide that God is not happy with someone, figure that it’s Jonah and threw him overboard. He spent three days in the belly of a large fish, got vomited up onto the shore, and then we hear in today’s scripture: “The Word of the LORD came to Jonah a **SECOND** time....”

### **Jonah went east this time.**

It was in my lectionary Bible study two weeks ago when the preacher assigned to presentation of his study on the Gospel lesson (the Mark 1 passage we heard read today) helped me to understand the Jonah passage. Sometimes it works that way. The four scriptures in the lectionary each week ARE picked, after all, to be related in some way to each other.

This preacher used some imagination in presenting the Gospel lesson. He IMAGINED what it was like when James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands, to follow Jesus.

I confess that my research into his little imaginary story led me down a long footnote path – much of the research being given in the “sermon notes” tab on the bulletin.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus, it seems, based on that research, may have been first cousin to Zebedee (by marriage) and then second cousin to James and John. 2 chapters after today’s Gospel lesson, we find out that Jesus had a nickname for these cousins: **BO-A-NER’-GES**, which the scripture tells us means: “Sons of Thunder.”

OK, all this footnote information on Jesus’ family and nicknames is to show that this other preacher’s imagination may be well grounded. In his midrashic telling of the story, when Jesus called James and John, and they left their father behind in the boat with the hired men to follow Jesus, ol’ Zechariah may have yelled out:

**“What?! I worked my whole life to build up a business for you boys. And THIS is the thanks I get?!? Get back here. I mean it! If you don’t turn around – RIGHT NOW – I’m cutting you out of the will! Do you hear me? Don’t you look at me like that. Get back here right now! Hey! I mean it!”**

OK, please let’s be clear. That’s not what the scripture says Zebedee yelled out. Even with the scriptural historic familial relationship and nickname background – scripture doesn’t say Zebedee THUNDERED this out.

But, I ask you: **Can you imagine it? Don’t you know people like that? It’s all about them!**

Well, I’ve run across some people like that. So, the imagined story was easy for me to picture in my mind’s eye. And in that picturing, I suddenly got a notion of what the Jonah story is about.

The last verse Janet read to you was in 4:1 “But this [God’s changing His mind and not destroying the people of Nineveh] was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

Let’s be VERY CLEAR why Jonah was angry. No imagination. Let me read the next three verses:

**<sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup>And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ <sup>4</sup>And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’**

I began to understand. I’ve seen people like this before. **Why do some people insist that somebody goes to hell?**

The most effective sermon ever preached – Jonah cries out: **“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** And the people hear and everyone repents. Eight words and the whole town repents.

And **nobody goes to hell**. So **Jonah is peeved**.

And God scratches His head and wonders, ***“What’s with this Jonah guy, anyway? I call him to go east and he goes west. I give him a second chance (after some pretty spectacular persuasion, I gotta admit.) And now, he objects because I give someone else a second chance.”***

**Why do some people insist that somebody goes to hell?**

I received a blog on the internet last May – giving seven reasons why the blogger did not believe that God sends people to hell. (Please – don’t hear me telling you that this guy is right. But I want to share some of his thoughts with you.)

**Reasons 4 and 5 go something like this:**

**(4) Torturing someone for eternity is not “justice.” Neither is banishing them from God’s Presence forever. Jesus was a Jew, and the Jews introduced (“an eye for**

an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) the notion of punishment fitting the crime as integral to real justice. Nobody can do an eternal sin, so why an eternal punishment from a just God? No loving earthly parent would give an eternal punishment to a child for a transgression; how can we think God would?

(5) The notion that an eternal God – Whose son taught that we must forgive 70 times 7 times – is then not going to do the same for His children?

**What amazes me** about those arguments – **and this is the point of my sharing them** -- is the **response to them that I have heard from some people**. They **insist that SOMEBODY must go to hell**.

In John 12:32, we are told by Jesus **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”**

Nonetheless, **some people insist that somebody must go to hell?**

The **purpose of today’s sermon is not to debate the reality of hell**. The purpose of today’s sermon is to ask the question: **Why do some people INSIST that somebody MUST go to hell?**

Jonah set sail west from Joppa, when God called him to go east to Nineveh, to preach to all those non-Jews.

Some centuries later the apostle Peter was in Joppa. (We read about this in chapters 10 and 11 of the book of Acts.) Peter had an encounter on the roof, where he had gone to pray. In his prayer, he saw a vision of a great tarpaulin coming down from the sky, filled with all kinds of things that Peter’s scripture had told him were unclean. And he saw all those unclean things and pronounced them so. And the voice of God said: WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN YOU MUST NOT CALL PROFANE.

And then Peter heard a knock at the door from a Roman Gentile (a non-Jew, an unclean person) saying that God had sent him to look for Peter.

And Peter learned that he needed to be very careful about who he sent to hell.

God keeps knocking on the doors of our prejudices showing how He wants ALL PEOPLE – all God’s children are created in God’s image.

But **some people insist that somebody must go to hell?**

Jesus could not understand how some people just seemed to require some misery in their lives in order to be happy.

In **Luke 7:31-34**, Jesus bemoaned the people of His own generation:

**31 ‘To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, “We**

played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.”  
<sup>33</sup>For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; <sup>34</sup>the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!”

And in **Matthew 23:15**, Jesus said:

**<sup>15</sup>Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.**

Jesus could not understand how **some people just seemed to require some misery in their lives in order to be happy. Some people insist that somebody must go to hell?**

It wasn't just in Jesus' generation.

The descendants of those grumpy religious folks are still around.

What's our story?

Do we really believe that the Gospel means GOOD NEWS.

I still remember the teaching drilled into my head back during my first pastoral ministry licensing school by an old, crusty preacher from Pennsylvania, who taught us how to do funerals:

**Here's the deal, he said. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. If the devil doesn't get 'em, then God must. It's not your job to decide. That's God's. And if God wants to take 'em all to heaven, then it's none of your business to interfere. Just preach 'em the good news.**

My sisters and brothers, there are a lot of people whose whole faith seems to center around, and be based upon their **insistence that somebody must go to hell?**

There are still modern day descendants of Jesus' scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites, who are willing to make somebody's life miserable.

Does it embarrass you that these people are teaching the world that this is what Christians look and sound like?

Are we really going to sit quietly in our pew on Sunday mornings and then quietly through the week, and let people think that this is what Christianity is all about?

✦ **I believe in a God Who loves us, and Who wants ALL of His children to know life abundant and eternal.**

✦ **I not only believe in that God, but I know that His Son, Jesus, is my best friend. And He accompanies me everywhere I go, urging me on. Urging me to share a love that He was willing to die to show. Urging me to show that same kind of love to others.**

If ol' pastor Leo (my teacher in licensing school) would be followed by more Christians today:

**Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. If the devil doesn't get 'em, then God must. It's not your job to decide. That's God's. And if God wants to take 'em all to heaven, then it's none of your business to interfere. Just preach 'em the good news.**

then I believe a lot more people would be sitting beside us in the pew praising God with us on Sunday mornings.

What are **WE** going to do?

We've got a story to tell the nations. People REALLY are listening to the message we tell and the lives we lead. **We can pout with Jonah: *Daggone it; somebody's got to go to hell!***

**Or we can rejoice with Jesus! And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'** (John 12:32)

What are **YOU** going to do?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> Discussion of James and John's lineage involves "the other Mary." At the cross, the scriptures are clear that those present were Mary (the mother of Jesus) and Mary Magdalene. The third woman was:

[Jesus'] mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25)

Mary, Mother of James the younger and of Joses and of Salome. (Mark 15:42)

Mary, the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee [*i.e.* this Mary is impliedly the *grandmother* of the sons of Zebedee.] (Matthew 27:36)

Putting the pieces together, one might well conclude that Jesus and Salome were first cousins. That makes Zebedee Jesus' first cousin's husband, and makes James and John Jesus' second cousins (or is that first cousin, once removed?)