May 7, 2017 Text: Jonah 1:7-17 “God’s Sustaining Love”

The account of Jonah is one of the most familiar of the Old Testament stories. God calls Jonah to a task (Jonah 1:1). Jonah does not want to do it (Jonah 1:2). Jonah runs away (Jonah 1:2). His “escape” ship runs into a powerful storm (Jonah 1:4). Jonah admits that things will calm down only after he is thrown into the sea (Jonah 1:12). Reluctantly, the sailors toss Jonah into the sea (Jonah 1:14-15). A great fish swallows Jonah (Jonah 1:17).

That’s the story we usually remember. (Next week, the story continues inside the fish.)

The name “Jonah” means “dove.” We certainly get an image of a bird that flits to and fro in an effort to get where it wants to go! God says “Go to Ninevah” (Jonah 1:2), but the dove (Jonah) tries to fly off to Tarshish (Jonah 1:2). Because Jonah tries to catch a ship to Tarshish, we can assume that Tarshish is on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea from Ninevah. God says “Go east” and Jonah goes west.

You have to give Jonah credit for authenticity! He did not want to go to Ninevah (Hebrews cared very little for the Assyrians and Ninevah was the capital of Assyria), but he does not hem and haw and beat around the bush. Jonah does not start toward Ninevah and then make like he hurt his toe and can’t quite make it. No! Fortrightly and directly, he turns 180 degrees away from God’s command. (Personally, when I disobey God, I try to be more circumspect about it. I want it to seem that I am trying to obey—be loving, seek justice, care for neighbor, help the poor, forgive the offender—while all the while I am avoiding the clear call of God upon my life. It may not fool God, but it does help to fool me.)

When Jonah lets the sailors throw him overboard, he does not know what will happen next, but Jonah is dealing with a “lemonade out of lemons” God. Jonah does not drown. He is swallowed by a big fish (Jonah 1:17). This may not seem like what this lesson title calls “God’s Sustaining Love,” but as the account unfolds, what seems to be disaster becomes something God can use for good.

What Someone Else Has Said:
George Moses Horton, a self-educated slave (The Black Bard of North Carolina, Joan Sherman, ed., UNC Press), wrote of God’s love: “Love which can ransom every slave, And set the pris’ner free; Gild the dark hordes of the grave, And still the raging sea. Let but the partial smile of Heaven Upon the bosom play, The mystic sound of sins forgiven, Can waft the soul away.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Merciful God, sometimes You have to chase us, but You keep Your pursuing grace with us….”

May 14, 2017 Text: Jonah 2 “God’s Love Preserved Jonah”

The story continues. Jonah was in the fish three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17). (Some students of the Bible wonder if this is a foreshadowing of Jesus in the tomb.) While in the fish, Jonah prayed (Jonah 2:1-9). One interesting thing is that Jonah, still in the fish, gave thanks to God. Now that is confidence in the Lord! Most of us don’t give thanks when we are swallowed up by the fish that swim in our lives!

The writer of this account is clear that even in times of our distress, God is present. Note that it is the Lord who tells the fish to upchuck Jonah (Jonah 2:10). The text is clear that God’s way of delivering Jonah was not all sweetness and light. The fish “sputtered Jonah out.” The fish “vomited Jonah out.” That deliverance has a certain “yuck factor,” doesn’t it?

Remember that all this “fish tale” got started because God wanted to save Ninevah from its evil ways (Jonah 1:1). In a sense, this story is not really about Jonah; it is about God’s relationship with Ninevah. It is easy for us to assume that our life is the stage upon which God wants to act. Sometimes we are the actors that God wants to use in someone else’s story. Jonah lost sight of the big picture—helping Ninevah—and instead made decisions based on what he wanted.

There is one constant in this account: God’s love. It is God’s love for Ninevah that kicks off the story. It is God’s love for Jonah that rescues him from drowning. It is God’s love that restores Jonah to dry land. (And, next week we shall see some more of God’s love for Ninevah.) Jonah is on again and off again. The fellow travelers on the ship don’t know what to do. Even the great fish both swallows and vomits. Only God’s love is constant.

Last fall I stood on the shore of Lake Michigan. There were turgid waves biting into the beach. First, I noticed signs warning people not to venture too close to the water. Then, I saw a chain fence designed to block access to the lake. Then, I saw photographs on large boards. The photographs were of people who had drowned because they did not heed the warnings!

These verses in Jonah form that kind of warning system for us. How easy it is to slip away from God’s call and God’s promises! Before we drown, let us give thanks to God who gave Jonah a second chance. What would another chance mean to you?

What Someone Else Has Said:
D. Brent Laythorn (God Is Not..., Brazos Press) has written: “...The critical danger is not an image of a false god, but a false image of the true God.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You for Your love….”
May 21, 2017 Text: Jonah 3 “God’s Love for Ninevah”

In the Wesleyan tradition, we often speak of prevenient grace. This might be described as the grace of God that keeps on chasing us. Such grace pursues us in the expectancy that in our free will, we shall say “Yes” to God. That is what has happened in today’s study text.

In Jonah 1, God reaches out to Jonah in an effort to reach out to the city of Ninevah. In Jonah 2, God continues to relate to Jonah (in the great fish), still in pursuit of the people of Ninevah. Now, in Jonah 3, we get a signal of God’s unwillingness to give up, neither on Jonah nor on Ninevah: “The Lord’s word came to Jonah a second time, ‘Get up and go to Ninevah...’” (Jonah 3:1). Isn’t that a great word of love—“a second time?” God did not give up on Jonah. God did not give up on Ninevah.

The writings of the prophet Nahum serve as a companion text to the account of Jonah. Nahum spells out what the punishment of Ninevah would look like (Nahum 2:13). In fact, over and over again Nahum depicts the fall that will beset Ninevah (Nahum 1:14, 2:8, 10, 3:1-2, for example). Jonah is more straightforward and to the point: “Just forty days more and Ninevah will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4).

When I read Jonah 3:10 about God “changed his mind,” I recalled something that happened to me a few months ago. My intent on Sunday morning was to worship God and I was going to do so with my church family at Bethany. Then, I learned that a friend of mine from out-of-town was going to be preaching at another Durham church. My intent still was to worship God, but I changed my mind about how/where to do so. My mind changed, but my intent did not.

That is what is noted in Jonah 3:10: God’s will and purpose to love do not change, but how God shows such love changes when Ninevah changes. In today’s terms, we might say that God changes how God would love: instead of tough love, God gave tender love.

The plot thickens. Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah; he didn’t like those people. But, he goes anyhow and proclaims God’s message. Now the people Jonah does not like have received God’s favor. How is Jonah going to handle that turn of events? Stay tuned!

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Why I Am a United Methodist (Abingdon), Will Willimon wrote: “Prevenient grace may precede any direct consciousness of God, any great awareness that one is being led by God, coaxed toward salvation.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your love clings, O God, even when we try to shake it off...”

May 28, 2017 Text: Jonah 4 “God’s Pervasive Love”

Often when reading Scripture, we can find an isolated verse that jumps out and captures some spiritual truth. The Book of Jonah is not like that. In order to get the full message, we have to cover the entire book. The story is not complete until the story is complete!

This fourth chapter once again turns the flow into another direction. (A) God calls Jonah (1:1-2). (B) Jonah does not want to do what God calls him to do (1:3). (C) God sends Jonah on a bit of a fishing expedition (1:17-2:10). (D) Jonah decides to do what God wants him to do (3:1). (E) Jonah does what God wants him to do and the results are what God wanted (3:4, 10). (F) Jonah does not like the result (4:1).

Now, just as God has shown patience with Ninevah, so now God shows patience with Jonah. God sends a plant that quickly grows into a sheltering shrub (4:6). Then, God destroys the shrub (4:7). Jonah is super upset about the death of the shrub (4:9), but God points out that if one should be upset about a shrub, one should surely be upset about the possible destruction of a great city (4:7). God tries to help Jonah see why God would not want to destroy a city. The book ends without our knowing how Jonah responds to this lesson.

What about us? How do we feel when something good happens to someone we don’t like? How do we react when God calls on us to offer grace and peace to someone we think does not deserve it? How do we respond when Jesus says we are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44)?

These four chapters of Jonah’s journey put into focus the unfailing, undiminished love of God. No matter which part of the story we pick up, it rings true when we look at it through the lens of a God who loves with an unrelenting love.

As noted above, this four-week study of Jonah comes to an end without our knowing what answer Jonah gives to God. I can’t help but wonder if God is waiting to get an answer from me.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Man Has Put God on Trial and Found Him Guilty (Westbow Press), E. C. Moses, Jr., has said: “Moses persisted by asking... ‘What shall I tell them your name is?’...So God responded, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’...Wow. He told Moses to refer to Him as one who always IS. His name tells us that He is in the past, He is in the present, and He is in the future. I AM is always in each moment no matter when it occurs.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Again, O Lord, I walk with one who struggled to be faithful. The Bible calls him Jonah, but I wonder if it is indeed my story...”