

WGUMC August 19, 2012 Jonah 3

No matter how bad we are, God is good. All the time. If Adam Steltzner doesn't know that, he should. By now you've probably heard his story. He's a 49-year-old guy who failed geometry in high school because he was too busy studying sex, drugs and rock and roll. During that time, he drove a '69 Cadillac hearse and put a bed in the back of it. That's how bad he was. He was such a disappointment to his father that he was told he would never amount to anything but a ditch digger.

That didn't matter. Adam wanted to be a rock star, so he played bass for some new wave bands around the Bay Area for a while. Then one night, coming home from a gig, he became fascinated with how the stars move. He had a dim recollection of learning about things moving in relationship to other things, and so he decided to take an astronomy class at the community college. Unfortunately, physics was a prerequisite.

So the guy who failed geometry set on a course of study that would ultimately earn him a PhD in Engineering Physics.

Adam Steltzner was the leader of the team that designed the landing system for the Mars rover Curiosity. And ever since the successful landing a few weeks ago, Adam Steltzner and his teammates have been treated like rock stars.

In an interview on NPR, he talked about his discovery: unlike rock music, engineering gave him the idea that there is a right answer and that he could get to it. Physics became his religion.

I'd like to have a conversation with Adam, because I would want him to know that Christians not only have physics, we also have faith, and getting to the right answer is what we're all about, too. And we agree that sometimes to get there will require us to make a big turn-around. We've got a story about a big turn-around in our Scripture today. After trying to run

west, Jonah finally turns around and heads east. Jonah goes to Nineveh.

Remember Jonah, the one who was running from the call of God? Last week, we left him on the beach. He'd been three days and nights in the belly of the big fish. Guess he gave that big fish a big bellyache, because the fish spewed him out on the sand. But there is no rest for the wicked. Not even time to get a shower and a shave. In the very next verse, we read, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'"

The big fish had taught him a big lesson. This time, wisely Jonah went. He wasn't happy about it, but he did it. Sometimes all you can manage to do is show up and you have to let God do the rest. So Jonah went into the enemy city. He walked for a day, and he delivered his message. It was brief. It was brutal.

Only five words in Hebrew, eight in English: "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!"

Not much of a preacher, in my opinion. You wouldn't think he'd be very persuasive. Overthrown by whom? For what reason? On whose authority? He's a little sketchy on the details. And yet Jonah was the most wildly successful prophet in the whole Bible. Not even Jesus himself got this kind of response: "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." Even the king put on sackcloth and then he issued a proclamation that everyone, including the animals, should do the same. Beyond that, they must "turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; God may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

All I can say is: Wow. Maybe I should preach shorter sermons! This is every pastor's fantasy, but it's also a humbling

story. Goes to show you that when it comes to doing the will of God, it's not about us and what we do. It's about the big You Know Who. Somehow it didn't matter that Jonah had a bad attitude. It didn't matter that he didn't have much to say. He was only there so that God's grace could have its way.

Ironic, isn't it? Jonah, prophet of Israel, turned around only after giving God the royal runaround. And now here in enemy territory is this heathen king who turns around so fast everyone, even the animals, have to fast. Here are the unchosen people of God responding in faith and in hope.

That should give us some hope. There's good news in this story, whether you're with Jonah or the King of Nineveh. If you're with Jonah, this is what the story has for you: Don't worry if you don't think you have what it takes to do what God is calling you to do. Just show up and you'll be amazed at what God can do through you. (Remember, it's not about you.)

Jonah preaching in Nineveh is like you walking into Candlestick

Park, getting hold of the P.A. system and shouting: "Just say no!" and then having the entire Giants team on their knees, cap in hand, praying that God will help them give up their steroids for good. Now there's a baseball fan's fantasy! I'm not saying that that is what God is calling you to do. I'm just saying that whatever it is, you can be sure that God will work with you, and in the end, God's team will win no matter how you do.

But what if you're on the side of Nineveh? What if you find yourself living in that wicked city? There's hope for you, too. The king heard the word and proclaimed a fast. He knew that if you're going to turn your life around, first you have to slow down. There's nothing fast about fasting. Declaring a fast means gearing down so you can make the turn around safely. It means stopping what you're doing so you can do something different. Putting on sackcloth is simply going public with your new perspective. The king removed his robe, the symbol of his

power, and put on sackcloth, a symbol of penance. And everyone noticed.

Let me tell you: when you take your life in a new direction, people will notice. When you show up at a party and no longer belly up to the bar. When you go to your book club and forego the bon bons. When give up the remote control and put on your running shoes. When you stop shopping for entertainment and start serving at the soup kitchen. When you give up the SUV or forgive that SOB. When you quit talk radio and talk to God instead. When you no longer complain to your friends about your boss or your ex. You won't need to wear sackcloth. We'll all know you are fasting, and God will know it, too. Who knows? God may even change her mind about you. At any rate, you can't imagine what great things God has in store for you. Just turn around. Grace is looking at you.