

ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE (Jonah 3:1-5,10; Mark 1:14-20)

If I say the word “Bible,” what’s the first word that comes to mind? It probably isn’t “funny” or “humor” or “satire” or anything like that. The Bible is serious stuff. It deals with serious questions. It comes in a somber black binding and you won’t find many laughs in between its covers.

But there is humor in the Bible – quite a bit, in fact, sprinkled here and there. Unfortunately, a lot of it’s in the form of puns and double entendres, and the humor gets lost in translation.

You don’t have to know Hebrew or Greek, though, to get the humor in the book of Jonah. Don’t get me wrong. Jonah has a serious point to make, but it makes its point through satire. Jonah is a farce with serious intent.

Take Jonah himself. Jonah is a caricature of a Hebrew prophet. A lot of the prophets resisted God’s call. But Jonah is more than reluctant. He tries to run away. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh in the east, but Jonah heads west. We all know what God did to get Jonah’s attention. When Jonah finally reaches Nineveh he preaches the shortest and probably the worst sermon on record –no illustrations, no poems, just “In forty days Nineveh will be smashed.” In Hebrew his sermon is just five words. Don’t you wish....

But surprise! It works. The people of Nineveh from the king on down, they all repent, they start fasting, they put on sackcloth. Even the dogs and cats and cattle repent. And Jonah is outraged. “I knew this would happen!” he pouts. “That’s why I ran away. I knew you were a big softie who would let the Ninevites off the hook. I’m better off dead. So if you’re not going to kill them, go ahead and kill me.”

That’s a strange reaction to a successful sermon. Most preachers would puff out their chests and strut around and take credit for converting an entire city, and a wicked city, at that. But not old Jonah. He’d much rather sulk and be mad at God.

At first glance, there’s no humor in today’s gospel lesson. Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee and calls his first four disciples. As far as we can tell, they’re just chosen at random. He doesn’t know anything about them. They’re just the first people he happens to see. And they turn out to be the opposite of Jonah. Instead of running away, they drop everything and follow Jesus.

But think about it for a minute. Jesus comes to Galilee with a message from God: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Believe and repent.” His message is pretty much the same as Jonah’s sermon to the city of Nineveh and just about as short. Don’t you think Jesus would have recruited some better assistants to help him get that message out? Wouldn’t he have wanted the best preachers in all of Galilee? He’s got important news. Why take chances with a bunch of illiterate fishermen?

Okay, maybe that's not laugh-out-loud funny. But it sure is strange and unexpected. And it shows that maybe God has a sense of humor and gets a kick out of tipping over our apple carts.

When I was in seminary, I and a lot of my friends wondered what we were doing there. Very few of us had dreamed of becoming ministers. We thought we know where we were going with our lives, but it turns out God had other plans. We didn't exactly see the humor in it at the time. When it came down to how eager we were to accept God's call, we were somewhere between Jonah and Jesus' disciples – not running away, but not too eager, either.

God's sense of humor shows up in all the ways God spoils our plans and upsets our comfortable expectations. We shouldn't be surprised. A long time ago the prophet Isaiah warned us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways (Is. 55:8). But despite Isaiah's warning, we like to think we've got it all figured out and know who's in and who's out with God – kind of like Jonah thought he had it figured out and knew that the Ninevites deserved anything they got – anything, that is, except mercy.

In this season of Epiphany we remember that one of the titles for Jesus is *Emmanuel*, which means "God with us." Now we usually think of that in universal terms: God has taken human form to dwell among human beings. But down through the centuries, those words – and especially "us" – have been interpreted much more narrowly. The battle cry of the late Roman empire and the Byzantine empire was *Nobiscum deus*, which if you don't know Latin, means "God with us." In the Thirty Years War of the 17th century, the army of Gustavus Adolphus used *Gott mit uns* as a password. If you don't know German, *Gott mit uns* means, you guessed it, "God with us." In World War I German soldiers wore that slogan on their helmets and in World War II they wore it on their belt buckles.

Those were not universal slogans. They were nationalistic, chauvinistic, jingoistic claims that God took sides and favored one nation over all the rest.

We added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance at the height of the Cold War in 1954 to set our country apart from the godless Soviet Union. And since 9/11 *God Bless America* has become almost a secondary national anthem. We like to think that God is on our side and favors us in some special way.

Of course that kind of thinking – that sense that America has a special role in God's plans – goes all the way back to the very beginnings of New England. The Puritans believed they had been sent by God on an "errand into the wilderness" where God was going to "create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together." They were to be "a city set on a hill" and believed that the final act of God's work of redemption would begin in America.

Today the usual label for that kind of thinking is "American exceptionalism." Ironically, it was Joseph Stalin who first used that term to criticize American communists who thought America was qualitatively different from other countries.

Nationalistic slogans make me nervous, partly because we have the example of ancient Israel to remind us what it might mean to be a "nation under God" or a nation that God is with in some special sense. It's not necessarily a

blessing. Israel's status came with some strings attached. Israel was expected to live up to God's standards. Israel wasn't merely a nation under God, it was a nation under God's judgment. And it paid the price when it fell short. The Israelites' special status was as much of a burden as it was a blessing.

The joke in Jonah is on Jonah and on Israel and ultimately on us if we think we can own or control God, if we imagine that God is with us and not with them, whoever "them" may be. The joke is on us if we don't understand that our God might work the other side of the street, that **our** God might be **their** God, too.

The Israelites forgot that once in a while. But deep down they knew it. Their basic statement of faith said it all: *The Lord our God, the Lord is one*. Not one God for us and another God for them. Our God is their God, too, whether we like it or not.

Jonah reminded the Israelites that its God was also the God of its enemy Nineveh, that if they were God's people, so were the hated Ninevites. That made Jonah angry and resentful. What about us?

When we sing *God Bless America*, can we add "and God bless Iraq and North Korea and Cuba and Syria"? If we can't, it doesn't say anything about God. But does it say something about us?