

## **“Look Up, Look Around”**

Psalm 62:5-12; Jonah 3:1-5, 10 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 21, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might look up and around, in learning and in loving. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I really wanted to give you a meaningful short-term farewell sermon today, since I won't be seeing you for a while. And honestly, I had a really good idea for one earlier this week. At least, I think it was a good idea. I didn't write it down though, and in the flurry of Finishing All The Things before I leave, I completely forgot what it was. It's possible it was only a mediocre idea. At any rate, it's gone, as are all the other things that didn't get written down and some of the ones that did.

So instead, I turned to the lectionary to see what it was offering us. And if you were with us for our Minor Prophets class in 2022, you know that I can't resist Jonah. We call Jonah a prophet, and he is, I suppose, but really, the Book of Jonah makes more sense if you think of it as a cartoon. I'm not actually going to preach about that today though, so please go home this afternoon and read the whole book, picturing it as a cartoon, and you'll see what I mean.

We don't need the humor of the book right now, because today the joke is the lectionary itself. There is a reason I asked you not to follow along when I read the Second Reading today. And it's because of this joke the lectionary is giving us.

Because the book of Jonah is full of drama and thick with humanity, but if you were

to only hear the six verses we read this morning, you would have no idea. For some reason, the designers of the lectionary decided to pull out the precise combination of verses that make the book of Jonah sound like it's a straightforward tale of a prophet warning a city to repent and the city doing so. If that feels off to you, good for you! Because that's not at all what the book of Jonah is about. If you want to pull out those red Bibles now and look, you'll be confirmed in your memory of the drama of Jonah refusing God's initial call to go to Ninevah, endangering the lives of a whole crew on a boat, ending up inside a big fish, and after it's all over, throwing a tantrum because God is just as merciful as Jonah knew God would be.

So seeing the lectionary designers pull out these six verses that give an entirely different representation of the story is a bit odd. But it offers us an important lesson. And as I reflected on being away for six weeks, it occurred to me that one of the things a pastor longs for is to know that certain core truths and practices we've emphasized throughout our ministries will be remembered. If you want to give me a good-bye present, you could tear off a piece of your bulletin and write down the answer to "What does your pastor always say?" and drop it in the offering plate for me. But if nothing else I've said to you has stuck, please pay attention now, because the lesson this lectionary oddity offers us is a vital rule of thumb, not just for biblical interpretation but for faith as a whole. The rule is "Look up; look around." You knew there were going to be two parts, right? Jesus wasn't satisfied with just one greatest commandment, so why should I be?

To be clear, the first part of this rule needs an asterisk. Because when I say “look up,” I mean look for God. But I’m not actually saying God is up. God is everywhere, which includes under and behind and beside and pretty much every other preposition you can come up with. But for the purposes of this rule, we’re using grammatical shorthand and saying “up.” Look for God. In the scriptures and in life. If we read the book of Jonah focused on how God shows up, we discover that it’s not just a funny story about human stubbornness and prejudice, it’s a beautiful tale of the deeply merciful nature of God. That’s important. It might, in fact, be the most important thing. And it’s a practice that our faith calls us to apply to life as well as to reading the Bible. Look for God. Find the signs of God, the places where mercy and compassion and gentle patience and steadfast love are breaking through and changing the situation. Keep your soul grounded there, and faithfulness is easier.

But don’t just look up. Again, if we were to read just these six verses from Jonah, we could see a pretty clear portrayal of God’s mercy, but not one that has a particularly big impact. And we would not be getting an accurate sense of the actual story of Jonah. We can’t just focus on the thing right in front of us, the portion that someone else has offered us. We have to look around. In the context of our reading today, this means we have to look at the rest of the book. It means not underestimating the word “second” in that first verse of chapter three. “The word of the LORD came to Jonah a **second** time,” it says, which is a clue that there was more to the story that came beforehand, so we should probably look into that. By contrast,

the psalmist says “once God has spoken; twice I have heard.” This is the model of faithfulness that Jonah is failing to live up to. Instead of obeying double-time, he is resisting God’s call, rejecting the command to extend God’s mercy to his enemies, making God repeat Godself. If we didn’t look around at the surrounding verses of this lectionary passage, we would have no idea of the depth of God’s compassion that this story is trying to convey.

And again, beyond interpreting scripture, looking around is essential for the practice of faith as well. Following Jesus requires more than keeping our eyes on God (though that alone is hard enough!). Jesus didn’t stop at naming just the First Commandment. He reminded us of a second: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The very nature of Christianity requires that we practice it together, that we serve one another, even that, yes, we love our enemies. Look up, but also look around, whether you’re reading the Bible or living your life. A life lived only unto one’s self, even if it were filled with “songs of loudest praise” for God would not be a Christian life.

Context matters. We cannot approach the Bible or faith or life in general with blinders on, only looking at what is right in front of us. We need to look around. We need to determine what happened before and what’s coming next, if possible. We need to explore why people do what they do and test our assumptions and theirs. In Disciples Class right now, we’ve begun a new round of reading the gospels. But this time we’re doing it with translations and commentaries from perspectives we haven’t heard before, like the “First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New

Testament.” If we don’t look to and listen to our neighbors, how can we expect to honor a God who created and loves all people? If we don’t invite their perspectives to shape our understanding of the context in which we’re living out our faith, our faithfulness will be stunted and ineffectual.

So as I prepare to step away for a while, I do want to leave you with some important lessons. First of all, the Bible can be hilarious. Please go home and read the whole book of Jonah this afternoon, so you see that. But more importantly, look up and look around.

Look up. Keep your eyes open for signs of God’s mercy and compassion. Keep your soul grounded in who your heart knows God to be. Do not let anyone convince you that God is wrathful and punishing or focused on destroying you or the people you don’t like. When you’re reading the Bible, when you’re reading the news, when you’re at work or at the grocery store, look up; look for God.

But also look around. Really and truly see your neighbors, even the ones the world calls your enemies. See the context that complicates the story. A complicated story is almost always a better story anyway. And definitely a more honest one. If you remember nothing else, remember to look up and look around.

Hallelujah and Amen.