

## Schadenfreude

### Jonah (selected verses) and Mark 1:14-20

Very few Christians would dispute Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker; what with a resume of healing sick people, calming storms, and turning water into wine to his credit. I would argue though, that two of his most remarkable miracles are the ones he performed in this morning's Gospel reading. You might scratch your head and wonder—what miracles? There's nothing miraculous in this passage, you might say. No blind receiving their sight. No multiplication of loaves and fishes. No Lazarus being raised from the dead. Ah, but the most amazing miracles are not always the ones where the laws of nature are defied. Sometimes, the most impressive miracles are the ones where human nature is transformed.

Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, paused by a couple of fishermen named Simon and Andrew who were casting their nets and said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. They didn't ask, "Where we goin'?" "How long will we be gone?" or "What will we get paid?"

A little farther down the beach, Jesus made the same offer to two other brothers, James and John. And they dropped what they were doing and left their father in the boat with the hired hands. There was something about Jesus, about his message that God's Kingdom was at hand and that Jesus had a role for them to play in its arrival, that made responding to his call something urgent and irresistible.

At the extreme opposite end of the spectrum of willingness to respond to a call from God is where you would find Jonah. God spoke to Jonah, saying "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Jonah would have agreed with the part about Nineveh being wicked. The Ninevites certainly were no friends of the Israelites. He would have relished the thought of God giving them what they deserved. What Jonah didn't want any part of was being the one to go there and warn the Ninevites to change their ways before it was too late. Where Nineveh was concerned, Jonah had a severe case of Schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude is a German word that translates as something like "satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune." The Japanese have a saying that communicates the same sentiment as Schadenfreude: "The misfortune of others tastes like honey." The French speak of *joie maligne*, a diabolical delight in other people's suffering. There is a plethora of languages with words which I won't even try to pronounce that mean basically the same thing as Schadenfreude. Which proves that it is a universal human emotion. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "To see others suffer does one good. This is a hard saying, but an all-too-human principle."

Schadenfreude is what Red Sox and Yankees fan bases feel for each other whenever their rivals hit a losing streak. Schadenfreude describes the diabolically delicious feeling Patriots fans felt

about the dashed hopes of Atlanta Falcons followers in Super Bowl 51, as they endured watching their team blow a 25-point lead and lose to New England.

Schadenfreude is what inspired Jonah to book a berth on a boat to Tarshish, instead of going to Nineveh, like God told him to do. Now, to get to Nineveh from the city of Joppa, where Jonah was, you would travel about 600 miles northeast. To go to Tarshish, entailed a sea voyage of approximately 3000 miles due west. In other words, Jonah's case of schadenfreude literally drove him to go as far as humanly possible in the opposite direction of where God sent him. All to avoid even the slightest possibility that by following God's directions his warning might spare the Ninevites from obliteration.

But it was more than distance between himself and having anything to do with Nineveh's salvation that Jonah was seeking. It was distance between himself and God that he was after. It says that, "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord." What we can take from this, is that whenever we indulge in schadenfreude, we too are turning away from God's presence.

Schadenfreude might seem harmless in the context of sports rivalries. But, when we take pleasure in bad things that happen to other people that we dislike, then we like Jonah, are steering in the opposite direction of Jesus' command to love our neighbor no less than we love ourselves. Jesus taught that even if someone is doing wrong, his followers' response should not be to wish evil upon them. It is to pray for God to move their heart to see the error of their ways and change their behavior.

Despite all his schemes for clinging to his case of schadenfreude rather than listening to God, Jonah does finally end up at Nineveh after he is swallowed by a large fish and deposited on land. Although his heart isn't really in it, he does preach to the Ninevites that they need to repent of their ways if they want to avoid God's wrath. Even though his heart isn't in it. And, wouldn't you know it, those heathen Ninevites get the message! From the lowest peasant to the King himself, they repent of their ways and dress in sackcloth and ashes. When God sees that they have had a change of heart, God changes His plan to wipe them out.

Jonah throws a hissy fit. He spouts off at God. "See! This is why I went to Tarshish and away from your presence instead of coming here to warn the Ninevites of the disaster you had planned for them. "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." Which sounds like some strange reasons to be angry at God, don't you think?

What really irked Jonah though was not that God was gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. What ticked Jonah off was that God was that way to a people that Jonah judged to be not worthy of the same grace that God demonstrated to Jonah's people. The same grace that God tried to show Jonah himself when Jonah stormed out of Nineveh and threw himself on the ground in the shade of a bush.

The next morning, God causes the bush to shrivel up and die. That was the last straw, according to Jonah. “Just kill me, why don’t you,” he cried out to God. But rather than grant Jonah that wish, God instead tried to help him have a change of heart. The Lord said, “You are concerned about one bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

The story ends there. With God trying to reason with Jonah. Trying to help him comprehend how wishing for God to be selective about who receives good things from God’s hand and who doesn’t is not how people of God ought to be. And that is where Jonah’s story ends.

We don’t get to know if Jonah understood the lesson God was teaching him or spent the rest of his life sulking. But, when the Bible leaves us open-ended tales like this one, it is up to us to write our own ending with what we take away from it, and what difference it makes for us. Perhaps an ending like the one described in these stanzas from Amanda Gorman’s poem, “The Hill We Climb”:

*And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.*

*We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.*

*We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.*

*We seek harm to none and harmony for all.*

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Preached FCCW, January 24, 2021