

There's a wonderful scene in the classic comedy, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. King Arthur and his knights are trying to cross the Gorge of Eternal Peril. There is a bridge, along with a bridge-keeper who tells the knights, "Who would cross the Bridge of Death must answer me these questions three, ere the other side he see."

The brave Sir Lancelot steps up first, and answers the three questions:

Q. What... is your name?

A. Sir Lancelot of Camelot.

Q. What... is your quest?

A. To seek the Holy Grail.

Q. What... is your favourite colour?

A. Blue.

And with that, the brave Sir Lancelot is allowed to cross the bridge. Seeing how easy the questions are the usually cowardly Sir Robin steps up next to answer the three questions:

Q. What... is your name?

A. Sir Robin of Camelot.

Q. What... is your quest?

A. To seek the Holy Grail.

Q. What... is the capital of Assyria?

Well, Sir Robin has no clue about the capital of Assyria, and so he is cast into the Gorge.

If only Sir Robin had paid attention to our Old Testament lesson today. The question has always struck me as an easy one. Maybe not quite as easy as your favorite color. But it's right there in Jonah. What's the capital of Assyria? The city of Nineveh.

Today, we read the middle of the story, when the Prophet Jonah travels to Nineveh.

At the beginning of the book of Jonah, the prophet is commanded by God to go to Nineveh. Jonah has been jokingly called the first Episcopalian evangelist. God tells him to travel to Nineveh, and call the Ninevites to repentance. Jonah resists the call so much that he hops the first boat going the other direction.

Nineveh is in what we call Iraq. But Jonah gets on a boat in what we call Tel Aviv in Israel and heads for what we call Spain. Jonah is really trying to escape his calling.

But Jonah can't escape God. God sends a storm. Jonah is thrown overboard. God sends a fish to swallow him up, and a few days later God has the fish spit him up. And Jonah ends up on the beach, back where he started from, covered in fish saliva.

Now, why would Jonah run from God? Why go to all that trouble?

The answer is, Nineveh. What is Nineveh? At that time, it was probably the largest city in the world. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the Assyrian Empire. And the Assyrians were one of the most brutal, repressive empires in the history of the world.

The Assyrians destroyed Israel, the northern Jewish kingdom. They subjugated the southern Jewish kingdom for a century, keeping it as a vassal state. And the Assyrians knew how to keep subjugated people in line. Fear. They treated their prisoners and their vassals brutally. The Assyrians specialized in impaling prisoners on long spikes, with some of their victims enduring agony for days. They also would nail prisoners of war to their city walls until they experienced an agonizing death.

So when Jonah is called to go to Nineveh, he's called to go to a brutal, dangerous place.

And he's given a dangerous message. God says, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."

What a message. Go to that dangerous, wicked, brutal city and tell them to change their evil ways. Doing so would probably mean death for Jonah. It's impossible to imagine any successful outcome.

Actually there's a perfect modern parallel, and it's in exactly the same geographic location. Today the city of Nineveh has a different name: Mosul, in northern Iraq. And it's currently under the control of another brutal regime, known variously as ISIL or ISIS or the Islamic state.

Imagine God saying today, 'Go to Mosul, go to ISIL and tell them to change their wicked ways.'

That might be a call you'd avoid, just like Jonah. It's an impossible task.

But one storm and three days-in-a-fish later, Jonah is back where he started. And that's where our OT lesson picks up today:

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."

God's not giving up. He's persistent in his call. And so Jonah reluctantly goes to Nineveh.

Jonah walks into the city and grudgingly calls out one sentence: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 'Forty days from now, Nineveh will be destroyed.'

That's it. That's the message. One can hardly expect those few words to make any difference. It's impossible to expect that he could convert an enemy capital, especially one so brutal.

And yet, something happens that happens to no other prophet anywhere in the Bible. Jonah gets 100% response. Upon hearing that one sentence, everyone repents.

Every other prophet is always butting his head against a wall. The prophets preach, but the people resist. But not this time. Everybody in the city of Nineveh, from the king on his throne on down to beggars in the street, repents. They fast and put on sackcloth and ashes. 100% of them. They even make their animals fast as a sign of the whole city's repentance.

Impossible to survive preaching in Nineveh? No Jonah survives.
An impossible task to convert an enemy capital? No, everyone repents.

It turns out, with God, all things are possible.

It turns out there was only one impossibility in Jonah. It's impossible to get away from God's presence and God's power.

God gives Jonah the command. God gives Jonah the words he is supposed to say. And Jonah, eventually, does what God has ordered.

He is initially reluctant in the face of an impossible task. But eventually, he is faithful in proclaiming God's message.

He is God's chosen messenger.
He conveys God's chosen message.

He goes where God wants him to go.
He says what God wants him to say.

In the face of a seemingly impossible task, Jonah responds to God with faithful obedience.

Faithful obedience.

Now I don't think God is calling any of us to risk our lives to go preach in Nineveh or Mosul for that matter. But God does call us to do seemingly impossible things.

To proclaim his love in the midst of an unloving world.
To care for others in a world of looking out for #1.
To be people of faith and trust in a world that is defined by skepticism and fear.

These are daunting tasks. God may not be asking us to give up our lives in the face of grave danger.

But God does ask us to give of our lives, to sacrifice, to give of our time, our talent, our treasure to do his work in the world.

Christianity is declining in America. The Episcopal Church is shrinking. We at St. Paul's are no strangers to these trends.

What's our response? To throw up our hands and say that reversing these trends is impossible? To give up because things are too frightening or too difficult?

No.

God has called us. To be his people in this time. To be his church in this place.

What's our calling?

Worshipping God in the beauty of holiness.
Welcoming and growing in faith and fellowship.
Serving our neighbors in Jesus' name.

That's our mission. That's what we've discerned that God is calling us to do.

Worship? Welcoming? Serving? Those all take time and effort. Those all make demands on our resources and talents.

So should we give up?
Is it impossible?

We might think so.
But with God, all things are possible.
All things ARE possible.