

JOHN KNOX, JONAH, and PAUL
Jonah 3;10-4:5; Romans 6: 3-11

Have you heard of the rule of threes in storytelling? In the story of the Three Little Pigs, one built his house out of straw. The big bad wolf, shouted out to the first pig, that built his house out of straw: “Little pig, little pig, let me come in!” And the pig called back “Not by the hair of your chinny-chin-chin!” And the wolf roared back, “Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow the house down!” And he did. The second pig built his house out of sticks. The wolf called out in the same way, and the pig called back in the same way. The wolf huffed and puffed and blew down the house of sticks. The third little pig (and here the rule of thirds alerts us that this one will have a different outcome) had built his house of bricks. The wolf huffed and puffed, and could not blow down the house made of bricks. Our family used to live in Malvern, Arkansas, known as the brick capital of the world. They LOVED that story! In the story of Goldilocks and the three bears, Goldilocks went for a walk through the woods (Who DOES that??) She knocked on the door of a house, and when no one answered *she walked right in!* (Who does THAT?) In the kitchen she found three bowls of porridge. She tasted the first bowl “This porridge is too hot!” she called out to no one in particular. She tasted from the second bowl. “This porridge is too cold!” she said loudly. She tasted from the last bowl, saying, “Ahh, this porridge is just right!” In turn she went into the living room find three chairs and, of course, one was too big, one was too small, and one was just right! Then this young intruder went upstairs *to sleep in this strangers’ bed!* There were three of course. One was too hard, one was too soft, and one was just right. The owners of the house—three bears of course—came home to discover what Goldilocks had done! And Goldilocks ran away into the forest. That’s a *children’s* story?

A minister, priest, and a rabbi Well, we'd better leave that one until the end! First we will look at a man who tangled with a sovereign—no not THE sovereign God, but a Queen called Sovereign. Mary Queen of Scots. John Knox was famous for his fiery challenges. In his book about Knox, the late Clyde Fant from Stetson University, and William Pinson described him this way: “The fiery Reformer of Scotland combined preaching and political revolution in such an effective way that Scotland underwent the most thorough reformation of any nation in Europe. His success came in spite of the combined forces of a Roman Catholic queen, a corrupt court, and a greedy nobility.” [*20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Volume 2*, Clyde E. Fant, Jr, and William M. Pinson, Jr. editors. Waco: Word Books 1971, p. 185] He is one of our three characters for today. He challenged a human being—the queen—and he eventually prevailed, preaching from the pulpit of St. Giles Parish Church in Edinburgh. He was a true firebrand, trained in what he said was the finest Christian school in the world: in Geneva, Switzerland by the teacher, John Calvin. But Calvin was a methodical preacher; John Knox would roar. Still, he believed his Lord had grace toward not just the elect, but also hope for others. He wrote this about Jesus: [After] “he comforted the sorrowful hearts of his Disciples, he [gave] comfort to the whole Church affirming, ‘That he did not pray only for those that were present with him, but also for those that should after believe, by their preaching, in him.’” [*John Knox*, Dr. Harry R. Sefton, Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1993, p. 42] So today we have one man, called by God, who pointed to Christ in his life and in his sermons. Knox plainly declared himself to be a preacher, first and foremost. His work changed the character and allegiances in Scotland. All the Kirks in that rugged country are part of the Church of Scotland, which are Presbyterian congregations. When we visited Edinburgh, a Scottish guide informed us that when the current sovereign-Queen Elizabeth-comes to Scotland, which she used to do with delight quite often,

she becomes a Presbyterian while she is present in that land. How comforting it is now to have such an embracing Queen of Great Britain.

On the other hand, a different character in the Bible was strong-willed too, but in a different way. This man was supposed to be a prophet of God, but instead of speaking for God, in one glaring instance he argued with God and ran from God: Jonah. “Oh, Jonah” as one of our children’s musicals here was called. Jonah was a recalcitrant prophet. The whole book of the Bible can be easily read in one sitting. God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh—a place and people he despises—and tell them to repent. Many Bibles have heading with descriptive titles in the book like these: *Jonah tries to run away from God; a large fish swallows Jonah and then spews him on dry land; Jonah finally decides to tell the Ninevites about God; when he did—to his disgust—the King announced all in the land would repent and bow down to this God; Jonah was NOT happy about that conversion!* God questioned Jonah in our passage today, asking: “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah went to the edge of the city to wait and see their conversion would stick. He hoped in his prejudiced heart that it would fail, so he sat, and he stewed in his anger. God—trying to demonstrate the care that our Lord showed others, had a plant shade Jonah. And the story ends with God challenging Jonah about his attitude. A bad attitude is one of the worst enemies of faithful living.

So we heard about a faithful firebrand, and now a pitiful prophet. It is time to turn to the biblical hero of our story—Paul the Apostle. A humble man who made tents to sustain the work he believed Jesus asked him to do. Paul made four missionary journeys over land and sea. He, almost singlehandedly, was responsible for the spread of Christianity. The spark of the Gospel might not have spread as far as it did without Paul. Peter, Silas, and Timothy were important, but Paul dismissed the idea

that people could only be baptized into Christ through Judaism, and circumcision. As a circumcised Jew turned Christian, he at first encouraged Timothy to be circumcised to be more acceptable to the audiences he would encounter. He found Jews welcomed him as a circumcised man, and he was able to talk with them about Christ. On the other hand, he encountered many Gentiles too for which circumcision held no sway. Finally in Galatians 2:3, Paul stood up for Titus—a Greek gentile—not to be circumcised first to be a Christian. Paul grew in his understandings but always preached a passionate gospel! He reached Jews and made many Christian; he reached people some called heathen and invited them to follow Christ! His actions in the book of Acts show a man on the move—unless he was jailed for preaching the gospel or casting out demons! His letters give a passionate message. His letter to the Romans is perhaps his masterpiece: In one part of the letter, he wrote this masterpiece of theology:

⁵For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

We owe a great debt to John Knox; few owe a great debt to Jonah; and the Christian Church owes the Apostle Paul a great debt for not letting the flames of the gospel to die out. John Newton, the author of our last hymn today—amazing grace—wrote it based on his sermon from 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, preached on January 1, 1773, about David's terrible sin being called out by the prophet Nathan. John Newton acknowledged his own sinfulness, and then experienced the amazing grace of God. May you experience that today and always too.

As I close, we heard about John Knox, Jonah, and Paul. Now here is the story of a minister, a priest, and a rabbi:

A dying man, not wishing to leave anything to chance, invited a minister, a priest, and a rabbi to his bedside and handed each of them an envelope containing \$25,000 in cash. He made them each promise that after his death and during his repose, they would place envelopes in his coffin so that he could perform charitable deeds in the afterlife. A week later that man died. At the funeral, the minister, priest, and rabbi each concealed an envelope in the coffin and bid the man farewell. By chance, these three met [up with each other after some time went by.] [The minister confessed that he had only left \$10,000 in the envelope, the rest he gave to Christian missions. The others scolded him for his dishonesty. He asked for the forgiveness of God and the others. The priest, also moved to confess, said he too had kept some money out but it was for charity; the envelope he placed in the coffin only had \$8,000 in cash instead of the original \$25,000. The others scolded him too for his dishonesty. The rabbi was incensed by what he had heard. He railed at both of the others, saying “I can’t believe it! I am the only one who kept the promise to the dying man! The envelope I placed in the coffin contained my *personal check* for \$25,000!

{Adapted from *A Minister, Priest, and a Rabbi*, Al Tapper and Peter Press; Kansas City, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002, p, 2-3. }

Let us pray:

O God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; O God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; we find both power—and occasionally delight—in you, the three in one. Help our lives to reflect thanksgiving, tradition, love, and laughter, as we seek to follow Jesus as Savior. Amen.

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