

“Jonah: A Whale of a Story”  
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

*<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them;*

Our lectionary reading for today gives us an excerpt from the middle of the book of Jonah. It’s a good excerpt, but it’s a small piece of a much larger story. A really good larger story. The kind of story where the lines between reality and imagination begin to blur and you’re enjoying the ride so much you are willing to suspend your normal skepticism. Think Star Wars. Or Wonder Woman.

A man was swallowed by a fish and lived there for three days? While, with God all things are possible (and in my 46 years I’ve learned not to doubt what God can do) but, the point of this story isn’t about whether or not God can command a big fish, it is about learning what it means to follow God and wrapping that lesson in a fun fish story.

To help detach us from our penchant for facts, the author makes it clear that nothing should be too clear about Jonah. It’s almost impossible to place Jonah within 800 years of history. There are recognizable geographic points in the text, but they are not accurate in size or stance. Without using the words “once upon a time” the author gives the hearer abundant clues from the very beginning that we are being transported to a different place to hear a different story.

It is the story of Jonah.<sup>1</sup> A man. A potential prophet. A man with a mission. God comes to Jonah and tells him, in no uncertain terms, that he is to go to Nineveh.

His name means “Dove son of Faithfulness.” And in the beginning, it seems as though this is an appropriate name. Unless you are paying close attention, it seems as though faithful is exactly

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Tribble. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Volume VII, page 463-529.

[http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article\\_134.pdf](http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_134.pdf)

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1015](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1015)

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3377](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3377)

Turner, Mary Donovan. 1998. "Jonah 3:10-4:11." Interpretation 52, no. 4: 411-414. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost

what Jonah is. God calls and commands. In the Hebrew, we're not told that Jonah runs away, we're told that he arises and goes.

But there is a twist. Jonah doesn't go where God wants him to go, he goes in exactly the opposite direction. He goes down to Joppa and boards a ship that is going down to Tarshish. And in the beginning, it seems as though his plan is working. He is so anxious to get away, that he pays the fare for the entire ship, and they set sail.

Cue the thunder. There is a storm. A fierce storm. A storm so fierce that the sailors are worried that the ship will break up. It is a reasonable fear. And where is Jonah? In the belly of the ship. Sleeping. Sleeping so soundly he's snoring. The captain wakes him up and commands him to pray. All those on the ship are all praying to their Gods, hoping that one of them will proclaim the proper prayer and the ship will be spared.

Now, in 2018, we know that sometimes a delay is just a delay. A good parking space is just a good parking space and not a sign of God's favor or displeasure. In Jonah's time, a storm was never just a storm. For the sailors, if their lives were at risk, one of them had to be the root cause. The Gods had to be mad at one of them. They all pray, and just to be safe they also try and lighten their cargo by throwing unnecessary items overboard. The storm does not cease, the boat is still in danger. The sailors re-focus their efforts. They cast lots, a method that was known to reveal divine intentions. The lots reveal Jonah as the cause. He's known he was the cause the whole time, but Jonah isn't one for confrontation. He isn't one for spectacle. He has stayed quiet. But now that at least part of his secret is revealed he figures he might as well reveal the other part. He tells them about his God. The One God. Of All people. All creation. All weather. He says the words, but his actions do not reveal deep belief, for here he is, trying to run from God on the sea he claims God created. Jonah's confession does not comfort the other sailors. Very correctly, they are now even more afraid. This is no longer superstition, they have the cause.

Jonah knows what he has to do. He tells the sailors to throw him overboard. It may seem like an act of generosity. Of faith. But Jonah is still not interested in following God's instructions. He is still running. If a ship won't do it, maybe the bottom of the ocean will. He does not pray, asking God for mercy, he will not promise to go to Nineveh. He will do anything but that. Jonah would rather die than do what God wants him to do.

The sailors aren't thrilled with the plan, but, quite frankly, they have no plan of their own, and when their last ditch effort to row back to shore fails, they humbly and prayerfully throw Jonah into the sea like another piece of unnecessary cargo. Jonah goes over, into the water, falling deeper. Into himself. Into the ocean. And then, into the belly of a fish.

Sometimes called a whale simply because of the proportions required, it is mythic in its arrival, leaping to swallow the defiant Jonah up. To take Jonah in for a serious three day time out.

And whatever it is about being in the belly of the fish, the smell, the sounds, the feelings, they do the trick. Jonah decides that, maybe, following God isn't such a bad idea after all. And to make it clear to God that he is ready to be released from this time out, he prays a powerful Psalm, a song to God.

Jonah chapter 2: "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God."<sup>2</sup>

Jonah may be speaking hopefully, metaphorically, rather than literally, but his hope and hunch pay off. God speaks to the fish and the fish spews Jonah out on dry land. Jonah has repented. Literally, he has turned.

Seizing the moment, God calls Jonah again, and again gives him his mission. Get up. Go. Tell. Get up. Go to Nineveh. When you get there, I'll tell you what to do.

Jonah sets out again, only this time he follows the path that has been laid before him. He goes to Nineveh. And when he gets there, this is what he tells them, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Is that what God told Jonah to tell them? Is Jonah testing God again by making something up? We have no idea. Should the people think that this is a message from God? Jonah certainly doesn't tell them that. There is no "This is the word of the Lord." In his message at all. Jonah doesn't tell them why or if there is anything they can do. The text tells us that Nineveh was such a large city that it was a three-day-walk-wide. Well, archeology has told us that this would only have been the case if you were a snail crossing the city, but maybe Jonah just takes his time and declares his message. Then he goes up on a hill to watch the destruction like some sort of firework show.

Only that's not what happens. While the words "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" may not seem like persuasive oratory to us, they do to the Ninevites. They hear these words, and it causes the scales to fall from their eyes. They drop to their knees. They beg for forgiveness. They don the clothes of forgiveness, sackcloth and ashes. And while we are supposed to chuckle at the thought of cows and chickens in sackcloth, the point is clear. The people of Nineveh are very sorry. And what does God do? What God always does. God rethinks the plan. He doesn't care what has happened, he's glad to have the Ninevites back in the family. All is forgiven.

Jonah is not as forgiving. He gets mad. He feels justified. And he lets God have it. "You know God. This is exactly what I knew would happen. I knew that you didn't have it in you to blow up this awful city. I was right to run, because look, you've done it again. They've repented and you've forgiven. You are a God of love. Come on! Give me a break! What difference does it

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<sup>2</sup> NRSV

Landes, George M. 1967. "Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: the contextual interpretation of the Jonah psalm." Interpretation 21, no. 1: 3-31. ATLASerials, Religion Collectio

make if I'm in Tarshish or here? Nineveh isn't going to be destroyed. God, just kill me now. There is no justice in this world. No justice at all.

Of course, what we know is that there isn't justice. And that Jonah is alive exactly because of the qualities he's now criticizing God for showing. God has chosen mercy over justice for Jonah more than anyone else in this story.

Jonah, unlike the Ninevites, is not ready to see the light. God, ever patient, tries again. It's hot on the hill where Jonah is, and so God nurtures a little vine, a bush, to grow and give Jonah shade. As Jonah sits and fumes, he finds himself in a little bit of shade, and it's enough to bring him joy. And so the next day, God sends a worm to snack on the bush. It dies. And the hot sun combined with a nasty wind from the east sends Jonah even deeper into his anger and vitriol. He lets God have it again for taking away his one joy.

Now God pounces (and I paraphrase). "Jonah. You're more upset about that one little plan that you were about the 120,000 and more people and animals you wanted me to destroy even though they repented. Put yourself in my shoes for a minute. Shouldn't I want them to be faithful? Shouldn't I care?" And that's where the story ends. Is this the story of the redemption of an entire culture or of one man? The city may be saved, but when the text ends, we're not told what happens to Jonah. Does he make peace with God and God where God wants him to go next or does he continue defiantly into the next chapter? Does Nineveh hold to its repentance or does it backslide? Does Jonah get over himself?

It is, a great story. A whale of a story. A wonderful, well-told story. The kind of story that leaves you wondering if it's really true, but enjoying it so much that you don't too much care.

My uncle was that kind of story-teller. My Uncle Ricky lived a life that could only be described as the high life. It was never something that we were invited to be a part of with him, but we would hear the stories. There were the meetings with royalty as he worked to develop the equestrian center that hosted the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. And legendary was the evening he was asked to escort a friend of a friend for an evening in New York City and the friend was none other than Jackie Onassis.

Or he could tell you about the time when he was working for the Rollins family managing their various estates, mainly in Atlanta and Jamaica. He was visiting with his friends, members of the Busch family- the Busch gardens family. They were talking about some of the animals at one of their parks and Uncle Ricky commented, probably late in the night and well into the festivities, that he had never owned a camel before. The next day, a delivery truck arrived, with, much to his surprise, was a camel for him to call his very own. The Rollins' had plenty of room and appropriate housing, so he kept it.

Were all of his stories true? I'm sure some were and some weren't. At some point, I stopped caring and just enjoyed them.

That's what we're supposed to do with Jonah. To let go of worrying about reality, veracity, and truth, and simply enjoy the ride.

Enjoy the story, and maybe not even notice that we're learning some important things.

We're learning that God doesn't just care about the people who proclaim themselves to be believers, God cares about all people, all creation. God cared about the Ninevites even when they did not know God's name.

We're learning, as Hebrew scholar, Elie Wiesel has written, that "Of all people, Jonah, a divine messenger, should know that geography has nothing to do with theology, and that, starting with Adam, humanity has never been able to escape from God; God is always swifter than humanity and arrives first everywhere, even when God leaves last."<sup>3</sup>

We're learning that God is not particularly interested in what we have planned or what we want. God is particularly interested in us finding ourselves through faithfulness, following, listening. That we need to let go of what we think we need to be happy and instead embrace the joy God **can only** give us when we open our arms.

We're learning that the life of faith is not about asking God to bless what we are doing, it is about being in the places and doing the things God is blessing.

We're learning that it is important to follow God's commands. The commands to love neighbor, welcome the stranger, rest and worship one day a week- every week- give away at least 10% of all that we receive. It's important to follow God's commands, when we understand those commands and even when we don't, because that is how God teaches us. It is the way in with God brings us into living the lives we were created to live, lives that welcome God's kingdom of justice, mercy, peace, and love.

And finally, we're being reminded that while it may be easy to find the mistakes and sins in other people, other communities, other nations, the prayer that should be first out of **our** lips can only be truthful if we begin with great thanksgiving for the mercy that is our sustenance even more than daily bread.

And hopefully, we'll learn this without having to spend three days in the belly of a big fish. Which is what the storyteller has in mind. Let us pray.

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<sup>3</sup> I found this quote in an old sermon and cannot find the original source... I hope that I am not misquoting!