

A Fishy Story

Texts: Jonah 1: 1-17, 2: 1, 10; Jonah 3; Jonah 4
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I imagine the opening dialogue between God and Jonah going something like this:

God says: "O, hey, hi, Jonah, good to see you this morning, hope you're okay, I've got a mission for you. I need you to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent of all that crap they're doing or I'm going to destroy their city. Okay. Great, thanks, off you go."

Jonah is like, "Oh hell no, I ain't gonna do that."

Already, we're like, Yes, this is someone I understand. God's asking him to do something crazy, and Jonah's response is, "Oh, hell no!"

As kids we learn the story of Jonah all covered in sanitizer and wipes, so it's clean and clear: it's a story about God's faithfulness in keeping Jonah alive in the belly of a whale. Yay, God!

But it's not that story at all, once we strip it of the Bible-ese that covers it. It's the story of someone who is hell bent on **not** doing what God has asked of them.

What's the first thing Jonah does when God asks him to go to New York? He gets on a bus for L.A.! Not only is he not going to do what God asks, he's going to go in the opposite direction.

"Get me outta here! What you're asking is nuts! I am absolutely not going to go into the middle of freaking Nineveh, the capital of the biggest enemy Israel's got, and stand there and tell them they're all going to hell if they don't repent. I'm not doing it. I'm just not."

You see, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the superpower of the time, and a huge problem for Israel. Israel had to pay tribute to Assyria, and eventually would be destroyed by the Assyrians. There was no love lost between Israel and the Assyrians. People hated Assyria in general, and Nineveh in particular, with a passion and with good reason. The Assyrians were the bullies of the whole Middle East back then.

Jonah's like, "I hate those guys. I'm not going to lift a finger to save them. If I go, they might repent, and that would totally suck. I'm not going."

He hops on a ship from Palestine to the other end of the Mediterranean, totally in the other direction from Nineveh, just to make sure. Sweet.

Jonah thinks that's the end of it, but God has other plans. God's not taking no for an answer. God sends a great storm to stop Jonah. Before God can get the Ninevites to change their minds, God has to get Jonah to change his mind.

The storm is huge, the waves are tossing the ship, everything is going over the side from the cargo to the sailors' lunches, and everyone on board is praying to whatever god they might know to PLEASE STOP THE STORM.

Everyone except for Jonah. He's too busy sleeping down below in the hold of the ship. What a guy, right? Everyone is pleading for their lives, and he's taking a nap. His concern for others is touching.

The captain finds Jonah and drags him on deck, and Jonah confesses that, "Yeah, well, it's probably my fault, this storm, I am fleeing from the god of land and sea."

Jonah is so determined not to go to Nineveh that, instead of telling the crew to turn the ship around, he tells them to throw him into the sea! If he's *dead*, he certainly won't have to go talk to anyone.

But from a boat going west, God puts Jonah in a fish going east. God is just as determined as Jonah is.

It takes three days to get back, and to while away the time, Jonah composes a Psalm about God delivering him, which is actually hilarious, because God is literally delivering him like a letter carrier delivering a package that had originally gone to the wrong address.

The fish vomits Jonah out onto land again, like throwing up to relieve a bad case of indigestion.

The same dialogue we had at the beginning repeats itself:

God says: "O, hey, hi, Jonah, good to see you this morning, hope you're okay, I've got a mission for you. I need you to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent of all that crap they're doing or I'm going to destroy their city. Okay. Great, thanks, off you go."

This time, Jonah is like, "Yeah, okay."

Jonah goes into the city and half-heartedly says, “Forty days and Nineveh will be turned upside down. Okay, there, I did it. Can I go home now?” One sentence. It’s totally lame.

But when the king of Nineveh hears about Jonah’s one sentence, he orders that all the people should fast and wear sackcloth – sackcloth was a sign of mourning and repentance – and he also orders that the cows and sheep to fast and wear sackcloth – because you never know what mischief the animals have been up to, and better to be on the safe side.

The Ninevites totally listen to God and do what God asks, immediately, fully, and to a ridiculous extent. They are the opposite of Jonah!

When God how the Ninevites have changed their minds about what they’re doing, God changes God’s own mind about destroying them. This pisses Jonah off no end.

“Just kill me now, God. I don’t want to end up being a hero to these people, ‘The prophet who saved us.’ I don’t want to save them, I’ve never wanted to save them, I’m really mad that I have saved them.

“This is just what I thought would happen, because I know how you like to give people a second chance. I said to myself back in Israel, ‘If I go, God is just going to relent and not destroy them, so I’m not going.’ But you made me go, and here I am, and it’s just what I thought would happen. I’m going up on this hill overlooking the city and I’m going to wait out the clock for forty days, and if you don’t destroy them, God, I’ll never forgive you.”

God tries to teach Jonah a little bit about grace by having a plant grow up to give him shade, and then taking it away. Jonah is happy to get something *he* doesn’t deserve, and furious when he loses it, but still has no sympathy for the people of Nineveh.

At the end of the story, God explains God’s own great concern for Nineveh – with a joke! God says, “How can I destroy that great city? Why, there are a hundred and twenty thousand people in that city who don’t even know their right hands from their left! What rubes! How can they be held responsible for anything!”

Not only that, says God, I can’t destroy the city – because, besides the 120, 000 people, there are also many animals there, and it wouldn’t be fair to destroy them!

I don’t know about you, but I certainly understand where Jonah is coming from. God asks us to do all kinds of things for people that we don’t know, and think we might not

like. God asks us to go when we would rather stay, to volunteer when we would rather keep our heads down, to stand up when standing up might draw unwanted attention to us.

We may not hop the bus to L.A., but we aren't exactly going into downtown Cleveland to make things better for the people who live there, or to highlight their plight, or to show solidarity with them, or to offer some sort of good news.

Right now, of course, we can't. It's like we're trapped in the belly of the great fish, unable to move, not able to go forward, not able to go backward, just stuck.

But we can use the time to write our own Psalms, that is, to figure out who God is, and where God wants us to go when we get vomited back into real life when this is all over. We can take a minute to take stock and see where we have been reluctant prophets, servants of the God who is 'gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,' as Jonah describes God.

What is the mission that God is sending us on? Where are we heading in the wrong direction, personally and as a church? And where have we failed to put into practice what we know about God's love because we are afraid of what the consequences might be, for us and for others?

The hilarious story of Jonah invites us to join in the fun and find ourselves in the midst of the tall tale of the runaway prophet.

It encourages us to believe that the people we are so scared to talk to about God might actually be far more willing to hear the message, no matter how poorly or half-heartedly delivered, than we are to give it.

God is the God who doesn't give up, not on Jonah, not on Nineveh, not on our world, and not on us!

Jonah is a prophet I get, because I know there are parts of me that are so like him. Maybe you can see him in yourself as well, in the reluctance you feel to do something you know in your heart is the right thing to do, to move the work of God forward.

Now, as we wait in our homes as if we were in the belly of a great fish, now is the time to figure out where we are going when at last we get out. But unlike Jonah, we don't have to do it alone. And unlike Jonah, we can be people who rejoice in telling the story of God's mercy and grace to us in the risen Christ.

May God fill your heart with laughter and fun as we think about our future together.

Amen