

## **Jonah: You Can't Outrun God** Sunday, 8/29/21

To understand the odd story of Jonah, it's crucial we place him in his geographical and political context. Jonah lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, at time when there were kings over Israel and God called prophets to announce his Word to them and their people. At this time, the kingdom was divided in two by civil war, with the northern Kingdom of Israel and their capital city of Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah and their capital city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the red dot is on this map. Jonah was called to speak God's word to the people of Israel in the north, and there's a single reference to him in 2Kings 14:25: "Jeroboam II recovered the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had promised through Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher."<sup>1</sup>

All you need to know about the King of Israel at that time is contained in the previous verse: "He did what was evil in the LORD's sight. He refused to turn from the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had led Israel to commit."<sup>2</sup> So Jonah's job was to rebuke his wayward king on behalf of God. It wasn't an enviable job, especially with the original 12 tribes divided by civil war.

But there were other political pressures that Jonah faced by virtue of geography. Israel and Judah were located on the only natural land bridge between Africa and Asia. That meant that the political powerhouses of the day, Assyria, and Babylonia, had to cross through their territory in order to prosecute their wars with Egypt. So Judah and Israel were constantly under foreign occupation, a political reality that persists to this day.

Jonah was a man called to deliver unpopular messages of repentance to evil kings, rebellious brothers and sisters, and invading foreign powers. And you think your job is tough!

I hope that background helps you to have at least a little empathy for poor Jonah in making his foolish attempt to flee from God. On this map, at the red-letter A, you'll find the two Kingdoms, Israel and Judah, Jonah's home town of Gath-hepher, and Joppa, the largely Gentile port town that Jonah travelled to board a ship. Gentile, you'll remember, refers to

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<sup>1</sup> 2Kings 14:25. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>2</sup> 2Kings 14:24. Ibid.

anyone who didn't belong to one of the original twelve tribes of Israel.

The red-letter B locates Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire, from which armies would soon issue forth to carry the population of Israel into captivity. There couldn't possibly been a more difficult location for God to send Jonah to. All the way on the left side of the map, in the opposite direction at the red-letter C, you'll find the gentile city of Tarshish, the most distant trading port known by Mediterranean traders of the day.

This is the back story behind the first three verses of Jonah, and it at least partially explains why Jonah might attempt such a treacherous and long sea voyage, perhaps not so much to flee God as to flee the unbearable thought of offering God's mercy to Israel's mortal enemies.

It's also helpful to understand the kind of ship that Jonah boarded out of Joppa. It was most likely something like this, carrying a crew of less than a dozen and only travelling as fast as two to four knots. A round-trip trading journey from Joppa to Tarshish would have lasted three years!<sup>3</sup> Jonah very clearly had no intention of changing his mind about going to Nineveh any time soon, and he probably assumed it was a safe bet that God would do the expedient thing of calling one of his many other prophets to get the job done. He couldn't have been more wrong! Let's rejoin Jonah now as God's storm tosses the ship about on the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. I'm continuing with Jonah 1:7 in the New Living Translation. **{Read Jonah 1: 7-17, NLT}**

You may have heard about the real-life Jonah last spring. Fifty-one-year-old Rainer Schimpf was snorkeling near Port Elizabeth, South Africa, when he was swallowed by a Whale. In his own words, "The next moment it got dark, and I felt pressure on my hip. And once I felt pressure, instantly I knew a whale had grabbed me."<sup>4</sup> Whales can't eat people- we're much too large- and he was eventually spit out again, not too much worse for the wear.

It might have been a whale that swallowed Jonah, we're not sure and it doesn't really matter. The Hebrew translates as "large fish." Either way, can you imagine how frightening that might be, not just for a few moments, but for a few days? It wouldn't be difficult to

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<sup>3</sup> Walton, Matthews, Chavalas. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament (pp. 777-778).

<sup>4</sup> <https://wgntv.com/news/real-life-jonah-escapes-after-nearly-being-swallowed-by-whale/>

misconstrue this as a particularly cruel punishment handed out by God to his rebellious prophet, slowly digested alive inside a fish rather than a quick death by drowning. But that would be a terrible misunderstanding of what happened.

The big fish wasn't a punishment, but a reprieve, a second chance. Instead of the watery tomb that Jonah was expecting for his disobedience, he was given a time out, a chance to reflect and pray. We don't get to hear what transpired between Jonah and God during those three days and nights, except for the prayer of thanksgiving offered in chapter 2. It reads like a praise psalm, and it concludes in much the same way, with Jonah proclaiming, "Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the LORD alone."<sup>5</sup> That's quite an about face from a man who just days earlier turned his back on God's call and fled in the opposite direction. But I'm afraid it says more about God's relentless mercy than it does about Jonah's character. As we'll see next week, Jonah's declaration of joyful praise quickly turned sour when God's mercies were extended to the people of Nineveh.

Apparently, God was satisfied with Jonah's contrition, because immediately after Jonah's prayer, we read "Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach." That's an unceremonious departure, isn't it? No walking on water or ascending to the clouds for Jonah, just spit out on a beach. I imagine he was soaked from head to toe in salt water, smelled like the inside of a fish, sleep deprived, hungry, more than a little sick to his stomach, and most likely terrified. Honestly, it might have been difficult for me to feel especially grateful about that situation had I been in Jonah's place. How about you? Has God's mercy ever left you less than grateful, focused on what remains wrong in your life instead of the beauty of God's mercy?

Here are a few things to consider from Jonah's ordeal. The first is that rebellion against God has consequences. Even when God's mercy rains down on us, we may wind up stinking and shivering on the beach for a while. When that happens, the best thing for us to do is to stand up and start again, doing our best to get back on the right path with God.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonah 2:8-9. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

A second thing we can learn is that when we try to run from God, others often share in paying the price of our disobedience. We never learn the fate of the crew who rode out the storm with Jonah, but we do know that at the very least, they took a huge financial hit when they were forced to throw their cargo overboard when the storm turned violent.<sup>6</sup> Sin is very seldom a truly private matter. It's always relational, with consequences for our relationship with God and with other people.

A third thing we can learn is that prayer and gratitude offered to God is always appropriate, and it doesn't have to wait until we notice the hand of God's deliverance. I can't help but wonder if Jonah's watery ordeal might have been avoided if he had been more mindful of God's blessings before God sent him to Nineveh. Prayer and gratitude keep us grounded in the heart of God, something that's essential to a healthy response to God's calling.

It's easy to read Jonah and think it doesn't apply to you, because Jonah was an Old Testament prophet. Think again. God does still call people to do and be things. It's probably not going to involve preaching repentance to an enemy nation, but it almost certainly will involve taking you out of your comfort zone.

As United Methodists, we believe in God's general call on all Christians, which is essentially, Love God and love your neighbors. But we also believe that there are times in our lives when God's Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts and calls us, as individuals, and communities, to become involved in situations. That might be a vocation, like teaching. It might be relational, like parenthood. It might be a matter of mercy, like providing school supplies to kids who don't have them. It might be situational, like speaking truth to power in the moment that's ripe for change, like the Me Too movement and the recent national dialogs on racism and climate change.

What's your understanding of God's call on your life, your family, our church? We can turn and run from God, but God's Spirit always goes with us, calling us back to the Lord. We can rebel against God's will, but that always brings consequences, for ourselves and the others we share this world with. The good news is that God's mercy is endless. The

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<sup>6</sup> Jonah 1:5. Ibid.

question is, can you stay centered in the heart of God so that that you're ready to respond to God's call?

Please take some time now to reflect on reflect on what God might be calling you to do or be, especially those things you'd rather not!



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