

## Jonah the Prophet

### The Book of Jonah

Jonah is probably the best known of the Minor Prophets. The story of Jonah and the great fish is a standard story for Sunday school or other children's activities. It captures our imagination. But it seems unbelievable. It seems impossible that it happened. We usually think of Jonah's time in the big fish as the most unbelievable part of the story of Jonah. But that's not the most unbelievable part.

Jonah's story begins with a standard introduction; the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. It quickly takes a turn, as that word of God comes to Jonah and sends him to Nineveh. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, when the word of God comes to a prophet, he's sent to the people of God. They may talk about other nations, they may give warnings to other nations, but they're not sent to other nations. Especially not Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a large, ruthless military machine. The atrocities their military committed still don't make for easy reading. Nineveh, as the capital, was so disliked and despised that, when the Assyrian Empire fell, it was so totally destroyed that it remained buried under the desert sands for over 2500 years. No one liked Nineveh, least of all citizens of Israel who were forced to pay outrageous tribute or face the wrath of the Assyrian armies.

Then comes the next unbelievable part of the story; that a prophet, someone called by God, would run away from God. Jonah rises and goes, but not where he's supposed to go. He heads in the opposite direction. Nineveh is east, so he heads west. The road to Nineveh is overland, so Jonah heads out to sea. Instead of following God's call to preach to that city, those people, Jonah ran from his call. Jonah

didn't just run; he headed in the opposite direction, as far away in the known world as he could go.

Why? Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. It's as if someone from the previous generation in the US were sent to Hanoi or Moscow; or to Berlin or Tokyo during the build-up before WWII. Jonah doesn't want to go, and even if he did, he knows the odds he gets out of it alive would be slim to none. And so Jonah gets on a ship heading west instead of on a road going east. And then we find yet another unbelievable part. The unbelieving sailors have more faith and trust in God than Jonah does. God doesn't give up that easily. God sends a great storm at the ship that Jonah is riding on. The sailors notice this storm is strange, unusual, supernatural. They figure out it has something to do with Jonah, the one who is trying to run away from the God who made the sea. In order to save the ship, Jonah is thrown into the sea, either in a self-sacrificing moment that changes his outlook, or a final attempt to avoid doing what God had called him to do. Jonah spends a few days in the belly of a great fish sent by God, where he finds the time to compose a poetic prayer that is a sort –of apology, sort of confession.

When Jonah gets spit up onto shore, we come to chapter three. "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time." God calls Jonah again, and gives him the same mission. This time, Jonah goes to Nineveh, where he preaches the shortest sermon on record. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Only five words in Hebrew!)

The response to this short, smelly, bitter message is that Jonah gets the whole city to repent. We see that the whole city, even down

to the animals, puts on sackcloth and ashes, in an act of communal repentance. The message worked! God's word was spoken and heard, and everyone repented. Yet another unbelievable occurrence.

That, too, isn't the end of the story. It seems like it would be a good place to end. God's mission has been accomplished. Nineveh repents and is spared God's wrath. Everything is as it should be. Just say they lived happily ever after, roll the credits, and that's that.

But that's not the end of the story. While there is much rejoicing by God at the change in Nineveh, Jonah is not doing any rejoicing. After preaching that short sermon and seeing the response it received, Jonah tells God "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:2-3).

Jonah wasn't a reluctant prophet because he was afraid of God's wrath, or afraid he would fail in his mission. He was reluctant, he ran because he knew what God would do if the people did repent, and that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to watch fire and brimstone. He wanted to see God's wrath rain down on these people he so hated, on his enemies. He wanted judgment. But he doesn't get it.

Jonah then goes up to a hillside to watch God send in the fire and brimstone. Instead, the only thing he sees die is the plant that was giving him shade. God uses that as an object lesson. Jonah cared more about the plant than about his fellow humans. The God who knows when a hair falls or a bird dies cares even about the people who were actively trying to subjugate

and eliminate God's chosen people. That's how much God cares. That's who God cares about.

In Jesus, God again brings a call to repentance and a message of salvation not just to the people of Israel, but to those of surrounding areas, and even to some who worked for or even were the occupying Romans. Jesus pointed back to the sign of Jonah, saying that "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:39). Jesus was then called by God to go to the cross, where he would die for the sins of the whole world. But where Jonah ran, Jesus went willingly. Jesus even prayed for his enemies. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Then Jesus spent three days in the tomb before rising that first Easter to show us that the stink of sin and death had been defeated. He sent his apostles out to share that message of forgiveness with the whole world, even those that wanted to kill them. And they did. They shared the message of a merciful God with people of all nations.

What does this mean for us? It reminds us that racial and differences don't matter to God as much as we sometimes make them matter for us. Both the sailors and the people of Nineveh aren't followers of God by any stretch beforehand, but they at least come to some repentance and knowledge of God by the end. People don't always remain enemies, and the nature of their relationships can change. It's like how there are Lutheran missionaries, churches, and schools in Vietnam, which would have been unimaginable for people 50 years ago. It's like how missionaries in Germany need to know Farsi, because of the growing number of converts from Iranian immigrants.

It reminds us of the unbelievable grace and mercy of God. The mercy of a God who lets

Abraham bargain him down to sparing Sodom for the sake of 10 righteous men, though not even that many are found. The mercy of a God who continues to call his people to repentance. The mercy of a God who delays judgment so that all may come to knowledge of the truth.

Jonah was a prophet but he never really got it. Jonah's hate for the people of Nineveh was great. Yet God's love for them, and for Jonah, was even greater. God loved Jonah so much that he used a big fish and storm to give Jonah a second chance. God loved the people of Nineveh so much he used even a reluctant prophet to call them to repentance. And then he loved them all so much he came into the world in Jesus. What an unbelievable story. What a wonderful story.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,  
Ames, Iowa  
July 2, 2023