

## Jonah Is True

*Jonah 1:1-12, 17; 2:10; 3:1-5, 10; 4:1-3*

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Jonah, that Old Testament icon, is both a famous and infamous prophet because his story is associated with a certain big fish. Without the big fish, the whale, Jonah would be in the same obscure league as, say, minor prophets Nahum and Habakkuk. But because Jonah will forever be linked with the Moby Dick of the Mediterranean, we know his name. And we have known it since we were kids.

The story is fascinating and a comic tragedy. I mean we have to smile, even laugh out loud with the image of...

- A man being swallowed by a whale,
- That man sitting inside the whale's belly, thinking and pondering,
- And then the visual of Jonah being spit out on a sandy beach.

It was one of my favorites as a kid. And, when my own children were small, we would read a Bible story at the family breakfast table. One morning it was the story of Jonah and the whale. As we got to the part where Jonah was spit out on the beach, one of my girls, about four-years-old at the time, let out a loud "thuuaaa!" adding important sound effects to the story.

Some ask if this whale of a tale is true. And my answer is, "Is the parable of the Good Samaritan true...where we learn who our neighbor is? Or is the story of the Prodigal Son true where we see that love forgives and grace of the father? Is that true about God?"

Nothing could be truer than what those two stories say about human beings and what they say about God. And as you will see, the story of Jonah is so very true.

Is the story of Jonah and the whale factual or historical? Most scholars say the story of Jonah is an Old Testament parable. However, Jonah was a real man and a real prophet who lived in Israel in seventh century BC; which is to say circumstances around his story are certainly historical.

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Nineveh was an ancient city in the mighty Assyrian Empire, located in what is now modern day Iraq. In fact, the ancient ruins of Nineveh are just across the river from Mosul — the Mosul that has been in the news so many times since 2003. It is a city about one hundred miles north of Baghdad.

Nineveh was an important city on the legendary Silk Road connecting the Middle East with India and China. And Assyria, stretching from present day Iraq to Egypt, was greatly feared because its people were believed to be more vicious and more ruthless than most and this in a day when viciousness and ruthlessness was status quo. They were also huge enemies of Israel.

So, I have been trying to empathize with Jonah, this prophet of God. I have been trying to understand what was going on in him when the Word of the Lord reached him with the message to go to Nineveh and cry out against it.

So how do we put ourselves in Jonah's shoes? Maybe this: Let's imagine who our great enemies are, the people who scare us with their brutality and violence. So maybe it would be like you and me receiving the Word of the Lord to go to the hills of the Afghan-Pakistan border with instructions from God to cry out to Isis or the Taliban and their brutal leaders. God says to Jonah... "Their wickedness has come up before me."

So, are we ready to go by ourselves? I mean, this is the Word of the Lord we are hearing. God wants us to make our way among people we know are ruthless and vicious and who stand against everything we are for; who for us are terrorist and barbarians, who have taken a religion, and warped it and co-opted it for political purposes, who have no regard for life...men, women or children.

What does Jonah do? He goes down to Joppa, this beautiful seaport town on the Mediterranean and he sets sail for Spain, in the opposite direction. We can imagine his mumbling. "You want me to confront Isis and their vicious fighters who kill innocent men, women and children at bus stops, in the marketplaces, at weddings and Friday prayers?"

Jonah sails directly west when Nineveh is due east. He is heading as far away as he can from the Ninevites, people he fears and people he hates.

But of course the drama of the story finds the waves in tumult and the sailors scared and asking questions. Jonah fesses up that he is the reason God is making the sea angry and so they reluctantly throw him overboard. Of course, this is where God sends the big mammal to save Jonah from drowning and to give him time to ponder what has taken place.

After three days in the whale, Jonah is thrown up, literally, on the beach. And the Word of the Lord comes and tells Jonah, again, to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's message. Jonah, with no exits, sets out for Nineveh on foot and when he arrives, he gives the shortest and most effective prophetic sermon ever recorded. This sermon contained no introduction, no points, no illustrations and no closing. In Hebrew, the sermon was five words; translated into English it has eight. This is what he said: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

That's it — short and to the point.

You wish that my sermons were that short! I wish you listened as well as the Ninevites!

Apparently the Ninevites heard it and got it! ...For the king and the people had a change of heart. The story says: "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth."

Sackcloth is a rough garment made of camel's hair and was symbolic of repentance. But I told you this story was part comedy. You did not hear this in the scripture reading, but after the king believed, he gave a decree for all the people and the animals to fast and put on sackcloth.

Now, just about as humorous as the image of a whale gulping and spitting out Jonah is the image of animals in sackcloth! Can you see it — the cows, the dogs, pigs and camels, dressed in sackcloth as a sign of their repentance?

The king says: "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind."

That is exactly what God does ... and is the point of the story: When God saw that the king, the people and animals had put on sackcloth, God changed his mind about the coming calamity.

And then a part of the story that we often don't hear about or emphasize — is Jonah's reaction. He was bitter and angry at God for what God had done. "God, this is why I fled in the beginning," says Jonah. "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger; and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

So Jonah pouts and whines. He is so distraught and depressed that he wants to die. I mean, how could God be such a compassionate, bleeding heart liberal God and let these hardhearted, ruthless Isis-acting people off the hook with their all-too-quick and probably phony repentance? "Where is the justice in this God?" Is it true? Nothing could be truer about us and about God.

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What Jonah suffered from was his tribalism and what we might call his malicious joy.

God knows that tribalism is just another form of prejudice where our hearts pre-judge those who are not like us. Remember last week, and the ethnocentric remark, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We are dealing with a form of that when we talk about tribalism. Or we see in Washington recently the crude and disgraceful remarks that disparage other nations and people.

So here in this story, we can just feel Jonah's exclusive view of the world, which he interprets theologically. God is the God of Israel, only, and if you are not one of us, then we are against you and God is against you.

As a Christian, I know that how we see others is a theological issue.

Jonah is the poster child for our tribalism and the prejudice that tribalism produces. And it is so easy for us to be prejudiced toward those who are not like us. Right?

So I remember a story that came out of South Africa's tense struggle over racial equality, during days of Apartheid similar to our Jim Crow era.

*On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, a white South African woman found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the flight attendant over to complain.*

*The attendant asked what was wrong.*

*"Can't you see?" she said. "You've seated me next to this man. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat."*

*The stewardess replied, "The flight is very full today but I'll go see if we have a seat available elsewhere."*

*All the other passengers were horrified at the lady's rudeness. A few minutes later the stewardess returned saying, "I have good news. We do have one seat in first class."*

*Then she turned to the black man and said, "Sir, if you'd like to get your things, you can follow me to your new seat in first class," at which point the passengers cheered.*

Jonah exposes our tribalism and reveals God's inclusive nature whether our tribalism is race, religion, class, economics, politics or nationalism.

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Finally, Jonah is also the poster child for what we might call malicious joy. Do you know about malicious joy? Malicious joy is when we experience delight at the expense of someone else's misfortune.

Jonah doesn't like these Ninevites and eagerly anticipates their punishment. He is heartsick when they go unpunished. Do you know about malicious joy?

It is when we feel some kind of delicious pleasure when the boss we didn't particularly like is suddenly fired with an hour to clean out his/her desk.

Or when we have this inner satisfaction when a politician extolling family values is photographed in a hot tub with a woman who is not his wife.

Do you know about this malicious joy that is short on compassion, shorter on empathy and majors in getting even?

Such is Jonah which is why this comedy becomes a tragedy. The tragedy is Jonah's attitude, Jonah's heart —that he cannot rejoice in the repentance of the Assyrians. So it turns out that Jonah's heart is in need of repentance, just like the Assyrians'. The tragedy is that he can't see it because he is blinded by his tribalism.

How true is the story of Jonah? Oh, it is so true.

And it is especially true in its portrayal of God – this is God of second chances, this God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent.

Is Jonah True? Jonah is so true.