

## Jonah 3:1-10: **Flexible, Steadfast God**

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C. Nolan Huizenga

Jonah. When I say his name, do you involuntarily think “whale”? The prophet Jonah’s story comes to us in a small and magnificent Old Testament book. In just four chapters the writer brings us to repeated laughter, makes us reconsider how the people of God should relate to “outsiders,” and offers us fresh and provocative good news about God’s own nature.

Since Jonah rarely shows up in our Sunday readings, we’ll hear chapter 3 but I’ll also remind you of what happens before and after that part.

First the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. God tells Jonah to go to the big Assyrian city of Nineveh and “cry out against it” because of their evil. Jonah gets these clear instructions from God and he...hops the fastest ship going the opposite direction. Nineveh is east of Israel, and Jonah immediately heads west. God sends a major storm that threatens to destroy the ship. The terrified sailors learn that Jonah’s running away from his God. Jonah says that if they throw him overboard, the storm will calm. They reluctantly toss him into the sea. When the storm relents, the amazed Gentile sailors start to worship Israel’s God.

Meanwhile, God sends a huge fish (*not* identified as a whale) to rescue Jonah by swallowing him. Jonah survives inside the fish for three days — slimy and dark conditions, at best. Jonah spends his time, not surprisingly, fervently praying. The fish spits Jonah out on land, and that’s where we’ll pick up reading. With a wink, the author tells us that God is going to give Jonah a second chance.

Listen for God’s word to us from Jonah, chapter 3 (NRSV).

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” 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; and he did not do it.

This marvelous story teaches us good theology as powerfully as Jesus' parables do. Part of this power lies in unexpected plot turns:

The Lord's chosen prophet runs away to hide.

Sailors who worship their tribal gods end up making sacrifices and vows to Israel's God Yahweh.

Jonah gets saved from drowning by — of all things — a giant sea creature.

And Nineveh does the wildly unexpected.

Nineveh was a major city of the Assyrian Empire, a civilization centered on domination and violence. Around 750 BCE Assyria had scattered into exile the northern tribes of Israel. Here in Jonah we hear about Ninevites — Israel's enemies, their oppressors — turning to God and repenting of their violent ways.

God commissions Jonah to preach bad news to Nineveh, which he does with only eight English words: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" In the original Hebrew Jonah speaks a mere five words. And the people of the city believed God.

Prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos all preached long, detailed sermons against injustice and violence and apostasy. But none of those prophets got the instant repentance that the people of Nineveh offered. I'd sign right up for any preaching workshop taught by Jonah.

Jonah preaches five words and everyone in that huge city, from the king down to the farm animals, goes into mourning. They believe the word that their city, their culture, is headed for destruction. They take off their normal clothes and wear the garb of grief. The king declares a mass fast and proclaims that everyone must refrain from their violent practices. He tells the people to "cry mightily to God." The Ninevites live out repentance.

To repent means to turn around, to change your life and to go in a new direction. The city of Nineveh turns around, turns toward God. It's a serious response, and it's also written to make the reader smile. Picture even those farm animals dressed in sackcloth, walking around mournfully. You know, like Eeyore. Also, "One of the favorite jokes of the scriptures is the unexpected faithfulness of the outsider, the other, the enemy."<sup>1</sup> Think of Rahab, Ruth, and the good Samaritan.

So don't miss the astounding declaration of faith on the king's part. Jonah has said only that the city will be overthrown. But the king, using theological imagination and hope, won't take doom as the last word. He says, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

Then we get the most important turn in the whole story. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and God did not do it."

God changed God's mind. God flexed. God repented — that's what the Hebrew word means. God turned from planning calamity, and God went in a new direction. This is the best good news in Jonah. For some people this idea can be hard to accept. Can God

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<sup>1</sup> Boyce, Richard. "Jonah 3:1-5, 10: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. p. 267.

change? If we set aside presuppositions about what God is like, and we take this particular biblical text seriously, what does it reveal about God?

Notice that God's threat of destruction for Nineveh was not retaliatory. God is not interested in vengeance, nor in a sort of karmic balance (you do something bad, and bad will be done to you). That's a humanly tempting form of justice. *God* pursues rehabilitative justice, based in the mighty mystery of mercy. God lives in perfect freedom and is never locked into anything. So God's vivid threat to Nineveh, voiced by Jonah, is *truthful* but it's not static or final. Instead that bad news turns out to be *transformative*.

Sometimes it takes bad news to save someone, right?

If you don't change your eating habits, you're headed for a heart attack.

If you don't get help for your anger problem, it will tear your family apart.

If a nation allows the gap between the poor and the wealthy to keep widening, fear on all sides may erupt out of control.

God's judgment on Nineveh is that kind of bad news: Keep up your evil and violence, they're told, and you're going down hard. The people of Nineveh take the threat of overthrow seriously, and they start acting differently. God's judgment here proves to be creative and salvific.

God speaks judgment through Jonah.

The people of Nineveh react with repentance.

And God responds to them with mercy.

You know what I've just described, right? Relationship! At each of those steps someone makes a choice that changes the relationship. God chooses to be in relationship with the people and the world that God created. Divine love means that God chooses to be affected by what people do. You can't be in a loving relationship and be unresponsive, unchangeable. You can try it, but that relationship won't last. ☺

So it's not God's decision-making that's unchangeable. But God's decisions are always propelled by God's utterly reliable steadfast love. If you read a few verses into chapter 4, Jonah himself proclaims that God's mercy is unstoppable. Jonah's a fine theologian. He *knows* that God's nature abounds in steadfast love.

Which brings another big surprise. Jonah, arguably the most successful prophet in all of Hebrew scripture, resents his own success, and that's what the final chapter is all about. Jonah, whose name means "dove," really is a hawk. God's mercy seems outrageous to Jonah, who wants divine punishment to rain down as promised. Jonah gets bitterly angry when God instead responds to Nineveh creatively, graciously, surprisingly. Right after God has a change of heart, Jonah spits out, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Maybe Jonah felt foolish for proclaiming a doom that didn't arrive. For whatever reason, Jonah resents God's freedom and doesn't like the new plan that saves Nineveh. "The

indignant prophet would prefer that God were flat, unchanging, and predictable."<sup>2</sup> Would we too? The rest of the book shows God patiently, playfully working with Jonah to enlighten him. As my dad would have said, Jonah was coming by freight.

Jonah is slow to learn that *God is not the enemy of our enemies*. God is for us, yes. *And God is also for them*. Which so irritated Jonah. "No Jew would have wanted to lift a finger for the Ninevites."<sup>3</sup> In this story it's enemy Ninevites and the pagan sailors who welcome God's transformative grace. It's the insider prophet who keeps resisting it. Which means he's a little too sure he's right. One scholar says, "The book of Jonah appears to be a cautionary challenge to standard theological formulations."<sup>4</sup> In other words, God will not be locked into anything, including human assumptions about what is or is not possible with God.

So "if God really intends salvation for all the peoples, then...we must at least talk to our enemies."<sup>5</sup> Are we ready to do that? Can we catch the vision of worldwide transformation that God offers in this book? Can we embrace change, gracious change initiated by God? Are we ready to be both forgiven and forgiving? During this election year, what would it take to reach out to your political "enemies" with love?

That was the vision embraced by a more recent American prophet. This past Monday our nation rightly celebrated the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. King's vision of a renewed, more righteous nation was always inclusive even of his enemies. King recognized Jesus Christ as an "extremist for love,"<sup>6</sup> and he shaped his civil rights protests with loving, inclusive extremism. One of MLK's colleagues recalls such a tactic:

When the Ku Klux Klan marched into Montgomery and we knew they were coming, Dr. King and I sat down and thought it over. And we said, "Ah! Tell everybody to put on their Sunday clothes, stand on their steps, and when the Ku Kluxers come, applaud 'em." Well, they came, marched three blocks, and unharrassed, they left. They could not comprehend the new thing. They were no longer able to engender fear.<sup>7</sup>

Beautiful. Unlike MLK, Jonah is not so ready to extend grace. At the end of the book Jonah sits sulking in the blazing desert. God — still faithfully in relationship with the angry prophet — shelters him with a fast-growing plant. Jonah loves the cool shade. Then God sends a worm to kill the plant, and Jonah gets furious again, angry enough to die. (Jonah's got anger management problems.)

God notes Jonah's great concern over a plant Jonah did nothing to create. And God speaks the book's concluding question, a question that should awaken our hearts, too: "And

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter et al. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993. p. 117

<sup>3</sup> Wood, Lawrence. "Jonah 3:1-5, 10: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Birch, Bruce C. et al. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999. p. 439.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Bayard Rustin quoted in Shriver, Donald W. *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

I always remember my favorite lines from a short story by Isak Dinesen. (She's also the one who wrote *Out of Africa*.) After several characters share an evening of storytelling, one of them says

I have been trying for a long time to understand God. Now I have made friends with him. To love [God] truly you must love change, and you must love a joke, these being the true inclinations of [God's] own heart.<sup>8</sup>

I wonder if the author had been pondering the book of Jonah when she wrote that. Change and laughter, forever spilling into our world from God's steadfast loving heart.

In the name of God who so loved the world,  
Jesus Christ who fully reveals God,  
and the Holy Spirit who quickens our laughter.

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<sup>8</sup> Dinesen, Isak. "The Roads Round Pisa." *Seven Gothic Tales*. New York: Modern Library, 1980.