

Jonah
Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5, 10; 4:1-11
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William J. Ingersoll
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Jonah is not exactly a model missionary. In Missionary Studies 101, Jonah doesn't stand at the head of the class. Reluctant, pouting, disobedient, stubborn. Never quite wanting to go to Nineveh. Throughout the Old Testament people are on the move; getting up and obeying God's call. Abraham and Sarah are given a promise and pull up roots, leaving their homeland behind. Young David heads off to face a giant, with only a slingshot in his hand. Isaiah can hardly wait, saying, "Here I am Lord, send me." But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with first class tickets, *bound* for Tarshish, in southern Spain. That is *away* from Nineveh as far as one could sail.

Throughout the *New* Testament people are on the move, getting up and following Jesus. One word from him and off they go. Before they even realize what they are getting into, fishermen are dropping their nets and tax collectors are forgetting their profits. A man named Paul travels the whole Mediterranean spreading the word. But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with his first class tickets to Tarshish ready to sail. (I'm indebted to Bill Carl for the gist/content of these two paragraphs.)

Jonah's on the move alright, but *not* to Nineveh. What exactly is Jonah's problem *with* Nineveh? Isn't it like any other place in the mission field?

Well, not hardly. Nineveh was a city on the east bank of the Tigris River. It was the capital of the Assyrian empire and Assyria was the most bloodthirsty

nation of the ancient world. It had not only trampled and conquered every small nation in the area of Palestine, but it had also plundered their civilian populations. The Assyrians systematically deported their conquered enemies to other regions, so that the ten northern tribes of Israel had literally disappeared into its jaws, never to be heard from again in human history. The Israel we know today is primarily related to the two southern tribes; not to the ten lost northern tribes. And yet it was to Nineveh that Jonah was sent to preach.

To put this in perspective: imagine a survivor of the 9/11 tragedy being asked to go preach to Al-Qaeda. Can you imagine? “Go to Nineveh,” God commands. And Jonah replies, “*Anywhere* but Nineveh, Lord, *anywhere* but Nineveh.” No wonder Jonah was angry with God; no wonder he stood on the dock with his first class tickets to Tarshish. I think I would too.

Yes, we can’t be too hard on Jonah. In him we see the complexity of human nature and the demands of the gospel. For we all have our enemies. We understand Jonah. For some, it’s blue states; for others, it’s red states. For some, it’s labor, for others it’s management. For Jonah, it’s Ninevites.

The late comedian Will Rogers, who said he never met a person he didn’t like, was out of step with the whole human race. Even Jesus had enemies. Certainly he said to love your enemies but I think the minister William Sloan Coffin was right when he said, “Love them as enemies. Let’s not be sentimental about this thing.”

Jonah, you see, is the man of gentle prejudice. He is not killing Ninevites. He is not discriminating against them. He just doesn’t want to *preach* to them.

Unfortunately, we were reminded last weekend, and numerous times before then, that hatred and prejudice are often not gentle, not gentle at all. They result in deadly consequences, needless tragedy, ending numerous lives and shattering countless other lives. Friends, in the name of God, the God of Jonah and us all, it needs to stop. This understanding is a religious and ethical plea rooted in the fifth commandment, which says, “You shall not kill, you shall not murder.” The commandment is stated negatively but positively, it calls for a profound respect for human life.

Might such a commandment mean seeking to limit what can be the tools of violent hate and prejudice. Yes, the tools for some. Understand, I’m not speaking about guns used responsibly for hunting, self- protection, or sport shooting. But how to limit their use as tools for violent hatred and prejudice. I for one am glad our Congress says it will take up the topic of universal background checks for firearm purchases when it returns from the summer recess. Of course, this has been said before but surely it will happen now.

Furthermore, while our armed services often need and our law enforcement officials sometimes need assault weapons, for the life of me I cannot imagine why the general population should have access to them. I am deeply aware that many of you wish things like this weren’t said from the pulpit and I respect your view. But I do not believe this is a political statement, rather it is a religious and ethical plea rooted in the fifth commandment. You see, later today Roberta and I are picking up our grandchildren at the airport and this commandment in its call to respect life, summons us to create as safe a world as we can for Austin and Hannah, not to

mention your grandchildren, children, and all our loved ones, all God's children. We can create a safer world by seeking to limit access to guns for people who would use them as tools of violent hatred and prejudice. And to limit those tools capable of wreaking the most destruction.

Then, of course, there's the root of the problem, hatred and prejudice itself, which bring us back to the story of Jonah himself. We do well to look more closely at his story. For what happens next in his story represents an insight for the Christian believer. "It is a pattern for the experience of any believer in the Judeo-Christian tradition down through the centuries," says the minister Bill Carl. "It is a [pattern] for Israel in its covenant-making, covenant-breaking relationship with God. It is the [pattern] of sin, forgiveness, and the *beginnings* of new life."

"Not new life itself, but only the beginnings of new life. Sin, forgiveness, and the beginnings of new life." You see, Jonah is a typical human being. Jonah is a classic model of the human species, for there is a serious flaw in his character. One that he cannot erase on his own. It is his desire to control his own destiny and to determine who should and should not be punished. This characteristic is the mark of humanity in general, including Israel.

Many Biblical commentators believe that Jonah stands for Israel. Jonah in Hebrew means "Dove." The dove was a symbol for Israel. Israel hadn't done what it was supposed to do. It had looked into itself too much. God had called Israel to worship and to be a light to the nations, but it had gotten off

the track. Jerusalem was sacked and its inhabitants carried off into exile. Many commentators believe that the sea monster, or fish, stands for Israel's conquerers. Down into the depths of despair went Israel and Jonah. Into exile. Something that has happened to the church down through the centuries when we forget our mission, our call to service."

"But like Israel, Jonah was delivered. Delivered from the mouth of the fish and brought up out of the water like an experience of new birth, new life. *And God tries again* with Jonah." Listen to the words: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, 'Arise, go to Nineveh.'" Yes, the word came to Jonah a second time. Yes, God never gives up on us. God never lets us down. Yes, there is still the possibility for a new life. Sin, forgiveness, the *beginning* of new life. Just the beginning. For just as it is in our *Christian* lives and our national life, this is no fairy tale. Jonah doesn't jump up and say, "Okay, Lord, I'm off to Nineveh. I can't wait." No, he goes to Nineveh, but drags his feet all the way. He goes reluctantly. There is a hint of thankfulness, but the *order* still looms large.

For example, the child is asked by the parents to go welcome the new kid in the neighborhood and be nice to her. The child says, "Do I have to, Mommy?" Yes, you do."

So off goes Jonah, half-heartedly, half hoping that no one in Nineveh will repent and God will level the city with God's mighty wrath. Jonah, the reluctant preacher, stumbled into town half hoping to get ignored or kicked out; and lo and behold, the whole town came forth singing, "Just as I am,

without one plea!” He didn’t know what to do with them all. Jonah wanted God to punish them,” He said. “I know I am the righteous one; *they* are the sinners.” Yes, Jonah never does grasp God’s great forgiveness. The repentance of the Ninevites stands in stark contrast to Jonah’s stubbornness, hatred, pride, and prejudice.

“You see,” points out the minister Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The interesting thing about the book of Jonah is that the prophet *himself* never does repent, and yet, throughout the book, he is the constant recipient of God’s mercy. Given the call to go to Nineveh, he sets out in exactly the opposite direction. Thrown overboard by the fearful sailors, Jonah nevertheless is saved by God through that fish. And then patiently, painstakingly, never in anger, God deals with his angry prophet, once again sending him to Nineveh – giving him success in his mission, overlooking his sulking, shading his head, working through worm and sun and explanation, to teach Jonah the marvels of God’s mercy and the unlimited nature of God’s love. Jonah does not repent, but God never gives up on him.”

Never. – Tells you something about God’s love, doesn’t it? It’s as certain for the people of Nineveh as it is for the people of Jerusalem. God is no respecter of nations or races or even religions. God loves *people* – rich and poor, young and old, and on and on, regardless of professions, religions, races, or nationalities. God is interested in people. Yes, “God so loved the *world*...” Not just you, not just me. “God so loved the *world*...”

And yes, God never gives up – on anyone. Thank God. Amen.

SOURCES

Elizabeth Achtemeier, Preaching as Theology and Art, “Tit for Tat.”

William J. Carl, Preaching Christian Doctrine, “Jonah.”

Phyllis Tribble, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume Seven, “Jonah.”