

Jonah 1:1-3, 11-17, 2:10-3:5 (NRSV)

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

[After Jonah runs away from God, he boards a boat. Before long, God sends a storm to threaten the boat and all its occupants. The sailors cast lots to see who has offended the gods and the lot falls on Jonah, who confesses that he has brought the storm on them all.]

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[Trapped in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays to God for his rescue.]

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

How far do you have to run to escape from God? How fast must your feet fly? In this strange and humorous story, we again see God working through and even rescuing a disobedient and angry man.

Imagine that God called on you one day and told you to do something crazy, like building an ark or preaching the Good News in the central square of Pyongyang. What would it take for you to believe it was God? What would it take for you to actually do as God says? God has told us much about how we ought to live, yet we manage to ignore most of it. Why would it be any different if it was a really, really, big command?

I’d like to think that I’d respond in the manner of Noah. God simply laid it all out for him and then, “Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him” (Genesis 7:5). However, I fear that I’d be more like Jonah . . . God calls and Jonah runs. God says head east to Nineveh and Jonah heads west to the Mediterranean hoping to catch a slow boat to, well, anywhere but

Nineveh

Nineveh was one of the oldest and greatest cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Sometimes known as the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia is the region bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, lying across a great desert to the east and north of Israel. In Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden is placed in this region. Abraham’s family is from Ur, an ancient city in southern Mesopotamia. During the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (920BC to 587BC), Mesopotamia was dominated by Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire at its height and also its fall in 612BC. Thus, the city was a symbol of Assyria’s power and its collapse. The book of Nahum (one of the short books of the prophets at the end of your Old Testament) is concerned solely with the coming destruction of Nineveh. For the Israelites, Nineveh was a potent symbol of those who sought Israel’s destruction, making Jonah’s story of Nineveh’s repentance that much more striking and puzzling.

Nineveh. God wants him to carry a word of warning to Israel's enemies, but Jonah will have none of it.

The obvious question is why? Why does Jonah run? Is he afraid of the Assyrians? Does he fear his own inadequacies? Fortunately, we don't have to speculate as to his motives. In 4:2, Jonah reveals his reason for running; he runs because he knows that God is compassionate! Jonah knows God's character but simply doesn't much like it. As Douglas Stuart puts it, "Regardless of any other religious or political notions Jonah may have had, it is evident that he hated the fact that Yahweh was truly consistent in being merciful and patient—that is, consistent *among* the nations as well as *within* Israel. . . [God] is a God of grace of whom it is hopeless -- indeed, hypocritical -- to expect a display of grace only to his own people. It was God's grace that Jonah resented so violently; except, of course, when he was the recipient."¹

Repentance

Repentance is an often misunderstood term. We tend to think of repentance as being sorry for something we did. But it is a much larger idea.

To repent is to turn around, to turn 180° from the direction we are heading and, instead, head toward God. To repent is to abandon our own agendas and embrace God's agenda. In their repentance, the Ninevites "turn from their evil ways and the violence that is in their hands" (4:8). For the Israelites, to repent is to turn back toward their covenant life with God. For the Ninevites, to repent is to turn toward lives of justice and mercy, toward what they know is right even though they have not been given God's law.

Repentance is a deliberate, conscious choice to begin walking in God's way. It is a long-term sustained resolve to be obedient to God's teachings as revealed to us and as written in our hearts. Jesus' invitation at the very beginning of his ministry is an invitation to "repent and believe in the Good News" (Mark 1:15). It is a call to turn back to God, to return to the covenant with God, truly loving God and neighbor.

The scandal of grace

Jonah may have given up on God, but God was relentless in his faithfulness. No matter how far or how fast Jonah ran, he couldn't escape God's outpouring of grace. When Jonah is tossed into the sea, a whale² swallows him so he doesn't drown. Rather than making lunch of Jonah, the whale holds him for three days and then coughs him up – so God could set Jonah back on the path to Nineveh.

Jonah does go to the great city, preaches God's message and then witnesses the entire city repent of its sin,³ thus averting the calamity seemingly promised by God (see the p. 3 textbox).

You'd think that after being rescued from the belly of the whale, a single word would characterize Jonah from that day forward: grateful. Instead, he is angry with God for sparing the Ninevites. He is angered by this outpouring of repentance and forgiveness. Jonah seems blind to the grace poured out on him, and without which he'd either be lying at the bottom of the ocean or of a whale's belly.

By the end of the story, we are left to conclude that Jonah is pretty much unteachable. God gives him yet another chance to embrace grace, but he doesn't.

Yet . . . yet . . . Jonah is God's prophet, chosen by God to carry God's message to one of the most powerful cities in the world.

Like Jonah, we too can be tempted to think that we have a monopoly on God's grace. We are too quick to put others (insert the name of whomever you think represents the worst of humankind) outside the circle of grace, to imagine that God hears only the prayers of believers, to resent so-called "deathbed" conversions, to divide God's world into "us" and "them." My own experience is that there is something of Jonah in us all.

Nonetheless, as God rescued Jonah, God rescues us. As God stuck with Jonah, God sticks with us. Samson was a mess. Jonah was a mess. I too am a mess. Yet, in spite of myself, God loves me and won't let go, no matter how hard I squirm or fight. The Bible is filled with comeback stories because God is not merely a God of the second chance, he is a God of countless chances. The faster we use them, the faster they come. Praise be to God.

¹from Stuart's commentary on Jonah in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (1998).

²Yes, I know that Scripture says it is a great fish. But I'd bet that the ancients figured that a whale was just that – a very large fish. Our taxonomic systems differed from theirs. A whale is a whale by any name.

³I've always thought was a much more astounding event than Jonah surviving three days in a whale.

The Joy of Ambiguity

Reading Scripture is an art and often we have to be open to surprises and uncertainties about the meaning of a passage. For example, in 3:4, Jonah cries out, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (in the NRSV), which we take to mean that if Nineveh doesn't repent, then it will be destroyed. Jonah is carrying God's word in this (3:3) and certainly Nineveh's destruction is on Jonah's mind . . . but is it what God has in mind? The Hebrew word translated "overthrown" in the NRSV is *hapak*, which has several meanings. It can be used to mean destruction (as in overthrown) but it is also used in the OT to refer to turning bad into good, such as mourning into joy. *Hapak* can mean "overturned" and "inverted," in addition to "overthrown." Thus, the word of God that Jonah brings to Nineveh can be read "Nineveh shall be overthrown" *or, just as easily, "Nineveh shall have a change of heart."* I prefer to hear this as God's surprising word of Nineveh's coming repentance. Nineveh will be turned upside down by the grace of God. Since Jonah doesn't seem to have an ear that hears "Amazing Grace," perhaps he only hears a promised destruction of Israel's enemies.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There are a lot of angles in the very short story of Jonah. As you look back over his story, which part strikes closest to your heart right now. Jonah's fear of what God has asked him to do? God's choice of "Jonah-the-mess" in the first place? Perhaps it is God's unyielding faithfulness to Jonah? Maybe God's outpouring of grace on the Ninevites? You might share some reflections on how this story speaks to you now.

What themes in Jonah's story are also found in Samson's story? Why do you think that these stories were preserved and then told as we have them? What do they tell us about comebacks?

2. One of the glories of Scripture is its inexhaustibility. I've been to the book of Jonah many times, yet each visit yields some fresh insight or new challenge. I guess this shouldn't surprise me. The Bible is far more than a collection of ancient writings; we Christians proclaim that it is Scripture. As Scripture, the Bible is the product of the community of God's people and we read it as a believing community. We affirm that God's Holy Spirit guides and illuminates our reading and understanding. How is your reading of the book of Jonah different from the reading of a non-believer, even if that non-believer is an Old Testament scholar? What might a non-believing scholar learn from you about this story? What might you learn from that same scholar?

Reading The Good Book Better

A new *Something Else* series continues this week

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world. In this series, we are looking at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

This week: "I am the tortilla of life: The alphabet soup of translations"

Next week: "Mother of eight shoots hole in one: Explaining a text"

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JUNE 8 – JUNE 14

Next week, we'll be looking at the prophet Elijah and his comeback after winning a great victory. Can winning bring agony?

Monday, 1 Kings 16:29 – 17:5 Ahab takes the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel (874BC) and is confronted by Elijah.

Tuesday, 1 Kings 17:4-24 A widow comes to Elijah's rescue and him to hers.

Wednesday, 1 Kings 18:1-15 Elijah meets Obadiah (not the prophet of the OT book).

Thursday, 1 Kings 18:16-46 Elijah confronts the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

Friday, 1 Kings 19:1-9a Elijah has to flee the wrath of Queen Jezebel and loses heart.

Saturday, 1 Kings 19:9b The Lord appears to Elijah – quietly.