

Running from the One We Can't Escape

4th Sunday after Pentecost – June 27, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Jonah 1:1-3

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.

Jonah 3:1-5

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.

Jonah 4:1-5

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? 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. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

This is the fourth week in our series, “Kids’ Stories All Grown up.” Today, we take a grown-up look at the story of Jonah, the whale . . . and the Ninevites.

There are few Bible stories better known than Jonah – or at least the image of Jonah sitting in the belly of the whale for three days. Sometimes, discussion of the story focuses almost exclusively on whether and how such a thing could happen. But the book of Jonah is a rich theological and literary gem that deserves a close reading. Today, we’ll take a look at a few features and perspectives from the story that are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancient Israelites.

Running from God

When the story opens, God commands Jonah to carry a message of warning to Nineveh, the potent symbol of Israel’s opponents. But rather than obeying God, Jonah runs away in a vain attempt to escape God’s demands. 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,

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, 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 (1000BC to 600BC), 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.

“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

An exclusive claim on God?

Jonah wanted to believe that the Israelites had some sort of exclusive claim on the LORD God. He wanted to put boundaries around God’s grace. He wanted to believe that God could never be merciful to the hated Ninevites, but Jonah knew better, so he ran. Christians can be tempted in the same way. The question is sometimes asked this way: “Does God hear the prayers of non-Christians?” Though he didn’t like it, Jonah knew that God’s mercy and love have no boundaries.

<p style="text-align: center;">Repentance</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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God will hear the prayers he chooses to hear. God will have mercy and compassion on whomever he wishes. In chapter 3, there is no hint that the Ninevites became worshipers of Yahweh; God is referred to only by the generic Hebrew term for “god,” *elohim*. The focus is on the Ninevites’ repentance (see the text box), not upon any acknowledgement that Yahweh is the LORD God. Jonah is a cautionary tale for those of us who might want to put limits on God’s grace.

A world turned upside-down

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.

Reading for repentance

Jonah runs from God, resisting every step of the way. He doesn’t want to hear about God’s mercy being extended to

the hated Ninevites. Jonah needs a change of heart every bit as much as the Ninevites. When we read the story of Jonah, we need to read with a heart open to our own repentance, allowing God to work on our hearts through the pages of Scripture. The New Testament speaks of repentance as a “change of mind” so that the same mind might be in us that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5), so that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). Learning to read Scripture is learning to read with an openness to repentance.²

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

²from Ellen Davis’ essay, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Ed. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, Eerdmans, 2003.

Daily Bible Readings

(the book of Jonah)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Jonah 1:1-17 Jonah runs from Yahweh</p>	<p>Day 2 Jonah 2:1-10 Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving</p>
<p>Day 3 Jonah 3:1-10 Jonah's preaching and Nineveh's repentance</p>	<p>Day 4 Jonah 4:1-11 Jonah's anger at Yahweh's compassion</p>
<p>Day 5 Nahum 3 The imminent ruin of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. It isn't hard to see why Jonah might think that God's mercy could never be extended to the Ninevites!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

The third “Fruit of the Spirit” evening lecture, *Kindness*, will be this Tuesday, June 29, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Scott Engle.

What does a disciple of Jesus look like? How can you spot those who live in God’s way and walk by his Spirit? Surely this has nothing to do with our physical appearance or where we live. In a letter to the house churches in Galatia, the apostle Paul offered them a list of nine virtues that characterize the activities and attitudes of those who are led by God’s Spirit. God produces such fruit in all God’s people; not overnight but over time as God works within us and with us.

Please join us for these evenings (or at least as many as you can!) as we learn more about each fruit and its meaning for our lives and discipleship. There will be many surprises along the way. The biblical understandings of these fruit often differs a good bit from the secular world in which we live and work.

St. Andrew Bible Academy audio courses are now in-stock in the bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

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?

In past trips to the book of Jonah, I’ve focused on Jonah’s vain efforts to escape from God, seeing in it the fruitlessness of our own efforts to run from God. But this time, it was Jonah’s motive for running that drew my attention. Jonah wanted limits on God’s grace. He feared that God’s compassion and mercy would be extended to the hated Ninevites, so he ran from God’s command to take God’s word to the great city. The obvious question for us from this is “How do we try to limit God’s grace?” Are there people or peoples that we think are beyond the reach of grace? (Remember, God’s grace is God’s ‘unmerited favor.’ If you deserve it, it is not grace!) What do you make of the fact that God extends his mercies to the Ninevites despite there being no indication that they became worshipers of Yahweh? How might this affect our relationship with people of other faiths?