Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My Sunday class will be the second week of a new series, *Biblical Women You Want to Know, but Probably Don’t*. It will be on [my new Facebook page: “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour) at 11am CDT Sunday.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

How could we leave Jonah out of a series on comeback stories?

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

**Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” But 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.]

**Then 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. He 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.” Nevertheless 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. Then 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.” So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.**

**But 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.]

**Then 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, “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.**

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” (Genesis7:5). 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. 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.”

*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 whale 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 (see below for more on Ninevah).

Jonah does go to the great city, preaches God’s message and then witnesses the entire city repent of its sin, thus averting the calamity seemingly promised by God.

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 dismayed 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 squander them, the faster they come. Praise be to God.

*More on 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.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott