

**Who God Is—The Book of Jonah<sup>✦</sup>**  
*(January 21, 2018-3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)*

The story of Jonah is one of the best known stories in the Bible because it is one of the most absurd. It's a fantastical story that has plagued those who take the bible literally forever. The problem is that this is such a silly story full of serious truth. I guess the fear is if you don't believe the story is true, you won't believe that the message is true. I've come to understand that the stories we read in the Bible are not in there necessarily because they happened, plenty of things happened in history that never made it into the Bible. The stories we read have been written down and collected into the bible because they are stories of meaning. This wild little story of Jonah and his antics is full of meaning.

The opening scene sets the tone. In the first words of the book, God says, "Hey, Jonah, I've got a job for you. Go to that great city of Nineveh and cry out against that wicked and nasty people." Jonah responds by getting out a map and finding the farthest place from where God wanted him to be, Tarshish, and bought a one way ticket. Where is Tarshish? Scholars don't know and it doesn't really matter. In the story world of Jonah, Tarshish is the place farthest away from Nineveh.

The next scene in the story is the part we all know best from Sunday school. Jonah is on board a ship and a big storm comes up. The ship begins to roll and toss, the timbers creaking, the mainsail torn, the rudder useless in the waves. The sailors on board superstitiously cast lots that point to Jonah as the cause. Jonah is awakened from sleep and he feels guilty for running away from God. So he volunteers to be thrown into the sea to appease God and calm the storm.

Jonah is floundering in the water and this is where the great fish, and by the way it's a fish not a whale, enters the story. The fish rescues Jonah from the depths of the sea and chucks him up onto the dry land safe and sound, not too much the worse for wear. This gives Jonah another chance with God.

So for a second time Jonah is called by God to: "Get up and go to Nineveh and preach to them what I tell you to preach." This time Jonah does what he's told, but with a notable lack of enthusiasm. Here's how American preacher Will Willimon describes it: "Jonah preaches a short sermon with a bad attitude. He gives the benediction and plans to make a beeline back to the sea and head for home. Scarcely has he given the benediction than all these people rush up to him, telling him they are going to change their ways...The Bible says that everybody in town repented, even the cattle repented! You ever see a cow repent?" Willimon says. "You preach in such a way to provoke bovine repentance, now that's impressive."

Well not only did the whole city of Nineveh repent, so did God. God repented. The storyteller reports, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said that he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." Jonah gets very upset and angry with God.

The situation brings to mind the tale of the church that fired their minister because every week he stood behind the pulpit and told them they were all going to hell. So they got rid of him and got another preacher. One of the church members was telling a friend about him. "He's great. Nothing like the other guy who told us we were all going to

hell; you should come here him.” So his friend goes to hear him. After the service the friend says, “I don’t get it. You fired the other guy because he told you were going to hell. But this guy said you’re going to hell.” The church member replied, “Yeah, I know, but this guy seems genuinely sorry about it.”

Jonah was like the first guy. He wasn’t sorry about it. He didn’t like that the people of Nineveh got off the hook so easily. Forget that they repented, here he had gone and preached doom and gloom to these people just as God asked, and now God had decided to show them unimagined grace— instead of following through with the threat of their destruction. Jonah had been looking forward to seeing those Ninevites getting it right between the eyes. It reminds of that quote by the writer Anne Lamott, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”<sup>1</sup> Jonah lets God know exactly how he feels: “OK God, that’s why I didn’t want to come here in the first place. I had a suspicion that you’d go soft in the end. That’s the kind of God you are, ‘all gracious and merciful, and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing—you make me sick, I’m outta here.’”

Right after delivering his message, Jonah leaves and stalks away from town until he finds a bluff overlooking Nineveh. Jonah sits there staring down at the city resenting the surprising turn of events. The day is hot and muggy. And God places a bush beside his wayward prophet to give him some shade. Jonah is glad for the bush. At least he was glad until God appointed a worm to attack the bush so that it withers and dies. Then God turns the temperature up a few notches and the sun burns down on Jonah’s head. Jonah, feeling sorry for himself, is sitting there under the withered bush and he says to God, “All things considered, I would rather die.” That’s when God preaches his own short sermon. God says, “Jonah, how can you be so concerned about this bush, which you did not plant or water, which just appeared one hot day and then perished in the night? Just the demise of this plant gets you that upset? Well then why shouldn’t I be concerned about Nineveh?”

This old story bears the name of Jonah. But it is not about Jonah. It’s not about the Ninevites. And it is certainly not about that fish. The story is about God. It is about God’s grace that has far less to do with who we are, than who God is. The storyteller wrote this book to speak out against the religious intolerance and arrogance of his time, reminding his people that God’s ways are not our ways. Why is Jonah so angry? The short answer? Jonah is angry because God loves too many people. Which begs the question, “Who are the Ninevites in our lives and in our world?” Who are the people whom we feel God cannot possibly love? Perhaps there are names or faces or headlines going through your mind right now.

How do we deal with this as people of faith? The story doesn’t really give us any clear direction at the end. The story ends with a question, a question that acts as a mirror to our souls, the conclusion is left in our laps. God says to Jonah “this is who I am Jonah, I can’t help it, who will you be?” The choice is Jonah’s and it is ours.

Jonah doesn’t want to be a part of God’s club if it includes Ninevites, too many riff-raff. It’s self-exclusion, it seems that’s the only way out of God’s club, to love too

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<sup>1</sup> From her book *Travelling Mercies*.

little and judge too much, to not recognize the humanity of others in ourselves. We have a choice, the Jonah path or the Jesus path—the way of judgement or the way of a compassionate curiosity that seeks to understand and empathize, the way of self-righteousness and separation or the way of invitation, hospitality and community.

Who are the Ninevites for us and what does it mean to love them? There is no one answer, every circumstance is different, but the asking of the question puts us on the faithful path. The asking of the question is itself important because it steers us away from judgement and fear. We stop running and let grace catch up to us. Where are we going to hide anyway? What a wild story, what deep grace. Thanks be for this wisdom.

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✧ This sermon is an adaptation and compilation of various sermons. The main body is by Benjamin R. Bishop, "Humor and Grace" found at [http://www.kuc.org/sermons/2006/July\\_30\\_2006.pdf](http://www.kuc.org/sermons/2006/July_30_2006.pdf) with materials borrowed from Rev. Sarah Buteux, "Jonah after the Whale" found at [http://www.swedenborgchapel.org/read\\_sa\\_sb2003\\_3.html](http://www.swedenborgchapel.org/read_sa_sb2003_3.html), Pastor Chuck Queen, "The Danger of Not Being a Missionary", found at <http://www.ibcfrankfort.com/sermons/072306.pdf>, Rev. William Carter, "When God Repented" found at <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=246>