

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

JONAH 3:10 – 4:11 | PSALM 145:1-8 | PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30 | MATTHEW 20:1-16

The story of Jonah is a vacation Bible school classic. You can understand why. The big whale makes for a fun prop. It's fun to come up with skits and songs about Jonah in the belly of the big whale. It's an easy story for kids to grab on to.

But before Jonah gets spat up on the beach, it's usually snack time. We're in the kitchen before we make it to Nineveh, and the belly of the whale turns into ants on a log. And so we rarely get around to telling kids about the ending. Which is too bad. Because it's about something kids get intuitively, which is fairness.

I feel like I say this every time we read Jonah, but I'll say it again today. Jonah will become more meaningful to you if you can make it less literal. Jonah is a kind of satire. It's not about an underdog prophet who brings a word of God to a skeptical people but gets vindicated in the end. It's a story about a prophet who, let's be honest, is kind of a jerk.

Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh. But Nineveh wasn't a place any prophet wanted to go. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrians, the ruthless empire that would go on to conquer the Israelites and send them into Jerusalem. The people in Nineveh didn't just suffer occasional lapses in judgement (God knows the Israelites did, too), they were seen by the Israelites as actually categorically bad. God even says that the people who live there are wicked.

Everybody has a Nineveh. It's usually not a city, though it might be. It tends to be a person or a group of people. Maybe it's someone who has wronged us. Someone who let us down. Someone who is responsible for everything bad that's ever happened to us. Or maybe it's a group of people. These people are causing all of our problems. But here's the more important part. Not only are they bad. They also aren't capable of change. They are so stuck, so insular, so backwards that they, unlike you, are irredeemable. The job of a prophet is to call people to turn back to relationship with God. But people like Ninevites can't turn at all. Why is God even bothering with them?¹

That's Jonah's world view. He's bought into this idea that Ninevites aren't worth your time. So he goes back to God and says, "You know what? These Ninevites are really bad people. And I can go there and proclaim the word of God, but they're not going to do anything. And that's going to be a real waste of my time and my abilities."

But Jonah ends up going and telling the city to repent. Somewhat begrudgingly. And right when you get to the climax of the story, when word gets to the king and you think that the king is going to kick Jonah out of town because, remember, he is Bad, the king says, "Oh, god. Yes, everyone has to repent." And the whole city repents. The king sits in ashes. The city starts a fast. It's such a devoted fast that even the animals fast. And God decides not to punish them for their wickedness. The Hebrew actually says that God changed God's mind.

This should be a cause for celebration. Jonah has pulled off the impossible. Jonah will go down in history as the prophet who went to Nineveh, the place no one wanted to go, and got them to change their ways. But does Jonah celebrate? No. Jonah is furious.

Why is that? It's because Jonah's whole identity was built around the idea that he was an insider. He was someone who understood God. He was someone who God valued. And that's still true. But now the Ninevites are getting treated just like the Israelites are. And if the Ninevites get to be insiders, too, then what's even the point of being an insider? Being an insider isn't so fun when you realize everyone is an insider. Being loved isn't

¹ If you want to see an example of this dynamic in real life, watch cable news sometime. The danger of cable news is not that it skews too conservative or too liberal or too centrist or too whatever. It's that it so often relies on the premise that you're one of the people who get it. You're an insider. You're like us. You don't need to know more, you just need to know why you're right. The reason cable news is so seductive isn't because it gives you information. (It repeats itself after five minutes and turns your brain into jelly after ten.) It's seductive because it activates an identity. It tells us that we're right, and we're one of the insiders.

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so fun when you realize that everyone is loved. And the motivation to invest more in following God's call on your life starts to wilt when you realize it won't get you any more out of it.

To put it in more theological language, Jonah is furious because he knows all about God, but he doesn't know about grace. And grace isn't fair. In Jonah's mind, God rewards the righteous. If you put in the work, if you put in the time, if you put in the effort, you get rewarded. These Ninevites lived in wickedness for years and now they just get to change their ways and get treated the same as everybody else? That's not the way this is supposed to work. When Jonah says that God is "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing," he doesn't mean it as a compliment. He means that what you put in, what you give to God, won't determine what you get out. What's the point of that?

One of the things people find difficult about communities of faith is that, at least in theory, we don't operate on that same kind of exchange. No matter how much you give, no matter how long you've been here, no matter how important you think you are, you get treated like everyone else. We don't have a special funeral service for people who've been here ten years. We don't have special communion for people who give ten percent of their income. We don't have special baptismal rites for people who serve on leadership. We have one classification: member. If you fill out a piece of paper, and you give the church a penny in an envelope with your name on it (and I'll give you the penny!), you are on the exact same level as everybody else. And our community functions that way not because we believe it's efficient (it's not) or it makes people happy (it doesn't). We organize our community that way because we believe God values the long-suffering Jonah just as much as the eleventh-hour Ninevite.

But that idea is hard for a lot of people, too. That idea was certainly hard for Jonah. Jonah, with the help of God, has just pulled off nothing short of a miracle. And where is he? Not celebrating with the Ninevites. Not thanking God for their repentance. No, he's up on the hill looking over the city cursing God, angry enough to die. For Jonah, it's better to be right than to be faithful.

This moment of Jonah on the hill is my favorite depiction of what hell must be like. Not as a place you go after death if you live a regrettable life. But what life is like when it becomes so turned inwards on itself and its merits and achievements and sense of superiority that when it sees grace entering the world, it sees only cause for grievance.² There's no need for hell because such a life is punishment enough.

But there's a question here for us, too. I mentioned earlier that Jonah has a satirical edge to it. And you could leave this and think that the message was *Jonah was a jerk. Don't be like Jonah. Thanks be to God. Amen.* Is there anything good news in this story? Is there any gospel in this story?

I think there is. You notice in this story that everyone almost everyone changes. The Ninevites change. Very dramatically. God changes. God changes God's mind. But who doesn't change? Jonah. All this time Jonah was so concerned about whether the Ninevites would repent and change their ways that he missed the most important person who needed to be transformed by the love of God. Himself.

When we follow God's call on our lives we should expect to be changed, too. We don't need to constrain grace to our own horizons. We don't need to limit mercy to our own vision. And we don't need to get closer to God by putting down others. For as the hymn we just sang puts it, the "love of God is broader than the measures of our mind." What a gift.

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² Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 136.