

21 August 2016

**Jonah**  
Excerpts from the Book of Jonah

His name was Jonah ben Amittai, and if you'd been alive in the Kingdom of Israel during the long and prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II, you would have known that name. He was an advisor to the king, or at any rate a spokesman for God that the king listened to, and was listed as such in the official court chronicles. His name even makes it into our Bible in the book of 2 Kings. But here's a story that was less widely known back in Jeroboam's time. It goes like this ...

The Lord spoke to Jonah and said, "Go to the great city of Ninevah, and cry out against their sin, because their wickedness offends me." Now this may be why the story didn't get told much until hundreds of years after Jonah, because the very first line of the story was offensive. You see, Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria, and Assyria was the Evil Empire of the day, the one that was just on the verge of a campaign of conquest that would turn all the Middle East into the "Assyrian Empire." It isn't that the Israelites would have had any problem with the idea that Ninevah was wicked. They *knew* Ninevah was wicked, and they were all for God wiping it off the face of the map in punishment for that wickedness. But here's the thing that would have been offensive to them: that God was sending one of their own prophets to preach to *those people*. You see, that implied that God cared whether they were wicked, which in turn implied that God cared about *them*. That's not how we like to think about the people who frighten us. To be honest, we want God to hate them.

Anyway, Jonah heard God's command, but ... well, what would you do? What if God told you to go to Pyongyang in North Korea and preach to *those* people that they were wicked in the eyes of God? Or to Moscow, or to Juba in South Sudan, or Aleppo? Now the story doesn't tell us how Jonah felt about God's command. Maybe he was simply afraid, as I would have been. Maybe he hated the Assyrians so much he refused to go anywhere near them. Whatever he was thinking, though, here's what he did: he ran away. He went down to the Israelite port called Joppa, and got on the first ship he could find that was going as far from Ninevah as possible.

Let's pray.

Our Lord, you have been good to us.

You have granted us a good place to live and grow and thrive and worship you freely.

You have set our feet on stable ground, given us an open space in which we can breathe.

You have set our lines in pleasant places.

Even as our land, our nation, and our state all face challenges,

even as our culture changes in ways we don't understand,

we are still comfortable, wealthy by nearly any standard, and safe.

And we thank you.

But, God, if you should send us out somewhere less comfortable, less safe,  
give us the grace to hear that call.

If you should want us to change our direction,

and try something that feels foreign to us,

or extend a hand of love to *someone* who feels foreign to us,

open our ears to your voice,  
and strengthen our will so that we may answer.  
Because, God, every day feels more foreign. Our world is not the world we grew up in, not a world we know, not at all what we're used to.  
Speak to us, God, whisper to us through the cracks in our own defenses  
and, God, give us the courage not to run away. Amen.

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Now we come to the part of Jonah's story we all know best, because it's the part we heard as children. So Jonah was running away from God, and he got on a boat. So what do you think about running away from God? Is it a good idea? Why not? Maybe he thought, as most did at that time, that his God was a local God, who lived in Israel and didn't get out much. It's kind of like how some people seem to think that God only lives in the United States, or lives in church buildings and not in their homes. At any rate, as soon as Jonah got on the ship, he felt safe enough that he went downstairs and took a nap while the ship set out on the sea.

A storm came up. The storms on the Mediterranean are famous, but this was evidently the worst these sailors had ever seen. They were terrified. They screamed and started throwing their cargo overboard to make their ship lighter, and then as a last resort they even began to pray. Now sailors at that time were not famous for being religious, and none of these sailors were Israelites, so I'm guessing their prayers were a little rough. Basically, I picture them putting together prayers from scraps of oaths they used to swear, naming any God they could remember ever hearing about. They were praying to Baal and Dagon and Tiammat and Marduk, and if anyone knew any other gods, they were open to suggestions. Someone found Jonah asleep and dragged him up, too, because they needed every prayer they could get, but Jonah kept his mouth shut. He couldn't pray to his God, you see. He didn't want his God to know where he was.

Finally, the sailors decided that whatever god was behind this, it must be because *someone* on that ship had made that god angry. So they threw dice to see whose fault it was – as one does – and Jonah's number came up. The sailors gathered around him and said, "So who are you, and what have you done?"

Jonah said, "I am Jonah, from Israel, and I serve the God who made the heavens and the earth, except that I'm not serving him right now. He told me to do something I didn't want to do, so I ran away." The terrified sailors looked at each other and said, "Oh. What do we do now?"

Jonah said, "If you pick me up and throw me into the sea, God will calm the waves, and you'll be saved." And here's a funny thing in the story. These sailors weren't Israelites. They weren't worshipers of Israel's God. They didn't know about the Ten Commandments and "Thou shalt not kill," but they said: "We don't want to do that. We don't want to kill you."

But after they had tried to save the ship themselves for a while longer, they realized they had no choice. They threw Jonah over the side of the ship, and the water became calm at once. Then these foreign sailors who had never worshiped God before, maybe had never heard of this God before, sank to their knees and bowed their heads and gave thanks to the God of Israel.

And Jonah? Well, he didn't drown. God sent a great fish, who swallowed Jonah whole, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish, alive, for three days and three nights.

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Now we need to finish the story of Jonah. We've heard the part that everyone knows, the bit about being swallowed by the great fish, but that's actually just Act 2 of the play.

In the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed. Oddly enough the prayer that he prayed was not, "God, I'm sorry, and if you get me out of this fish belly I'll be very good." That's what I would have prayed, I think. No, he just prayed, "As my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, O Lord." And the thing about prayer, any prayer, is that once we start it, that opens up a channel for God to speak to us and act for us. God sent the fish to swim to the shore, where it vomited Jonah out upon a beach. Then God said, "Now, go to the great city of Ninevah, and cry out against their sin, because their wickedness offends me." And this time Jonah went.

For all his obedience, though, Jonah was no more happy about it. He still had no desire to preach to *those people* in Ninevah. So when he got there, he did as little as he could get away with. He went a sixth of the way into the city, declared "Because of her evil, Ninevah will be destroyed in forty days!" and left. He went back outside the city walls and found himself a spot in the hills to watch.

Now I need to point one thing out here. God had given Jonah the message to declare to Ninevah. In fact, God had given Jonah the message twice, using identical words, but neither time did God say anything about destroying Ninevah in forty days. That was Jonah's own addition. It's funny how often we find that in the Bible – that God's messengers are much more vindictive than God. Anyway, that's what Jonah said, and he evidently believed his own words, because he went out to watch the coming destruction.

But a funny thing happened. The people of Ninevah, the hated Assyrians, listened to Jonah's message. They repented of their sins. Everyone from the king on down put on sackcloth and ashes to show their sorrow at the evil they had done. It's disconcerting, really. It was bad enough when those coarse, vulgar sailors bowed down to worship the Jewish God – even though he wasn't *their* God! – but now the hated Assyrians were doing it. And God saw their repentance, and he was moved to forgive them.

Meanwhile, Jonah was up on the hill waiting for fire to rain from heaven. The sun grew hot on his head, so God allowed a fast-growing plant to grow up and give him shade. And Jonah loved his shade plant. Still he waited. The deadline passed, and Jonah said to God, "*This* is why I didn't want to come preach to them, God. I *knew* this would happen. All it takes is one little show of repentance, and you have to go and forgive. And I don't *want* these people to be forgiven. They're the enemy, don't you understand?"

And God sent a worm to eat a hole through Jonah's shade plant. The plant withered, putting Jonah back in the full glare of the sun. So he cried out in complaint. "God, how could you kill this plant? I loved it! I might as well just curl up die now!"

Then God spoke again. "Jonah, why is it that you care more for a plant that provided you a little bit of shade than for twenty thousand people in Ninevah? You do know that I made them, don't you? Even if they *are* your enemies. Why should I not save their lives, as I saved yours?"

Like I said, this story evidently wasn't told in Jonah's own time. The Book of Jonah in our Bible comes from a much later time in the life of Israel. But to be honest, I can't imagine any time that this story would have been popular. It *appears* to say that God actually cares as much for people we don't like as for us. It *appears* to say that it might even be our task to reach out a hand and present Christ to those people we don't like. It *appears* to say that we aren't all that special, that God doesn't love us because we're any better than anyone else. God just loves us. Just as God loves the people we think of as our enemies.