

Jonah Swallows a Shark

A sermon on the book of Jonah by Nathan Nettleton, 21 January 2024

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Message

The story of Jonah challenges us whenever we start thinking that we have special rights as God's people.

Sermon

Back in November, when a reading from the book of Joshua came up in our Sunday readings, I took the opportunity to focus a sermon on not just that short reading, but on the whole of the book of Joshua and, most specifically, how that book has influenced things like Israel's present approach to their war in Gaza.

I want to do a similar thing tonight with our reading from the prophet Jonah. This is the only reading from Jonah in the whole three year cycle of readings, and it's not even the bit that nearly everybody knows from the children's book versions of Jonah and the whale. So instead of focussing carefully on the short reading we heard, as I more often try to do, I'm going to use it as an excuse to consider the whole story, and the role it plays in the Bible's internal debates.

The reason I hark back to the Joshua sermon is not just because I'm again looking at the whole book, but because the books of Joshua and Jonah are in opposite corners of a major debate within the pages of the Bible. If the book of Joshua helped us to understand the religious mindset that leads to the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, the book of Jonah might contribute more to the Israeli peace movement and its religious critique of the war.

Let's begin with some background and a recap of the story.

The book of Jonah was not written by the prophet Jonah. There is nothing controversial about that statement. The book of Jonah is a story named not after its author, but after its main character. It is not written in the first person, so it makes no claim to have been written by Jonah. It just features him. It was also written about 300 years after Jonah lived.

The actual prophet Jonah lived around 750 years before the time of Jesus, and he is mentioned briefly in one verse in the second book of Kings (14:25). That's all we have about him apart from his appearance in the story that bears his name. The story makes no claim to be historical. You don't have to try to explain how someone could survive three days in the digestive system of a giant fish anymore than you have to explain how Pinocchio came to life and had a nose that grew when he told lies. The story does not pretend to be history. It is literature with a message. It is a satirical send-up of a religious attitude that was prevalent in Israel at the time.

There are two place names that feature in the story, and they are significant for the story. The first is the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria in the last few decades of the Assyrian empire, and the Assyrian empire had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people off into exile. So for the average Israelite like Jonah, the name Nineveh would have sounded a lot like the name Moscow sounds to the average Ukrainian today. Those Ninevites, they're the ones who have destroyed our country and killed our people.

The other place name is Tarshish, the place Jonah tries to run away to. The significance of Tarshish was simply that it was at far outer edge of the known world for most Israelites, and so it was the name people used to speak of going as far away as imaginable. Today's children's story books have people going to Timbuktu to get to the far end of the world, but in ancient Israelite story books, they went to Tarshish.

So, enough background. Let's recap the story.

The story begins with God saying to Jonah, "Get up and go immediately to Nineveh and preach against it, for their wickedness has come to my attention." Now reading that wording of "preach against it", you might think that Jonah would like nothing better, since he hates Nineveh as the current enemy of Israel. "Sure I'll preach against it!" But as is made clear later in the story, Jonah knows well that the point of preaching against a city for its wickedness is so that they can repent and be blessed by God, and Jonah has zero desire to see Nineveh blessed by God. Jonah wants to see Nineveh destroyed by God in revenge for what Nineveh has done to Israel.

So instead of cooperating with God's desire to save Nineveh, Jonah cuts and runs, booking the first ticket he can get to Timbuktu – sorry, Tarshish – to get away from God and from the mission God was trying to give him.

Then comes the bit that most people know from the children's story version. While onboard the boat to Tarshish, there is a terrible storm that threatens to shipwreck the boat, and as was common in those days, the sailors assume that such a severe storm must mean that the gods are angry with someone on board their boat, so they draw straws to identify the culprit. Jonah is identified as the guilty party and confesses that he is trying to run away from the God of Israel. So Jonah is thrown overboard to appease the God of Israel, and sure enough, the storm drops immediately.

The sailors are so astonished by this immediate response, that they apparently convert on the spot, and begin worshipping the God of Israel instead of the angry gods they had previously worshipped. It's a pretty successful bit of evangelism on Jonah's part, even if it was entirely accidental and involved getting himself thrown overboard and left to drown.

But he doesn't drown, because this is a story, so anything is possible. Instead he is swallowed by a giant fish, or a whale, and he spends three days and nights in the belly of the fish. Take note, Jonah, you can't escape from God in Tarshish or even in the depths of the sea. Jesus riffs on this story years later to suggest that something similar is happening when he spends three days and nights in the belly of the earth, the tomb, before being resurrected. Sure enough, Jonah is resurrected when after three days the whale vomits him up on the shore.

So there's Jonah, after three days in underwater solitary confinement, sitting on a random beach covered in whale vomit, when the bit we heard read tonight comes. God says to him, "By the way, Jonah, you're not off the hook (pun definitely intended). I still want you to go to Nineveh and preach to them so that they can repent and I can bless them." Jonah is not happy, but he has learned that trying to run away from God and God's mission does not go well for him, so with no appetite for more whale vomit, off he goes to Nineveh.

The story hints that Jonah was still pretty half-hearted about it. It tells us that Nineveh is so big it takes three days to walk across it, and then tells us that Jonah only went a day's walk. Probably he was muttering God's message under his breath instead of yelling it out with full volume and conviction too. But Jonah's half-heartedness just serves to underline the miraculous response. The people of Nineveh immediately repent and get on their knees, fasting and dressed in sackcloth, and cry out for mercy. Even the king of Nineveh is on his knees in sackcloth and ashes, and issues a royal decree that the whole city is to do likewise. As a result, the story tells us, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

And Jonah is mightily pissed off! The story ends with this intentionally funny, but put pointed, scene in which Jonah sits outside the city and throws an absolute tantrum at God, saying, "See! I knew that this would happen. That is why I fled to Timbuktu 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. I can't stand it! I'd rather die right here!"

It is funny because throughout the Hebrew scriptures and especially the prophets, that very line – God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love – is used as one of the most common expressions of praise and joy. So it is quite the comic parody to see Jonah spitting it out as an angry protest.

Jonah take shelter from the sun under a bush, but the bush withers and dies in the sun, and the story ends with Jonah still angry and God reprimanding him for have more compassion for the fate of the bush than he does for the fate of the hundred and twenty thousand innocent civilians of Nineveh, along with all their innocent animals. Long before Jonah was swallowed by a whale, Jonah had himself swallowed the shark of self-righteous hostility to all but his own people.

Now perhaps you are already catching on to the political and religious message of this story, but let me spell it out just in case. The biggest argument in the Hebrew scriptures is about the extent of God's love, mercy and care. Is God the God of Israel who cares about other nations and peoples only when they are a threat or a benefit to God's people Israel? Or is God the God of whole universe who loves all peoples equally and wants the best for them all?

One off the things that so exciting and illuminating about the Bible is that doesn't teach us by presenting only one view and excluding the alternative voice. Instead it presents us with the competing voices and asks us to enter into the story, following Jesus in search of the answers. It is a much more effective way of teaching us, because if you have only ever heard one view, then suddenly encountering another one can completely befuddle you, but if you are used to hearing the competing voices, you will understand each of them better because you can see and understand the opposite, and you are better equipped to understand how Jesus positions himself in those debates.

So as we saw back in November, the book of Joshua is very strongly on the side of God being the God only of Israel. Anyone else is simply an obstacle to Israel's destiny, and can be slaughtered or enslaved and their lands invaded and colonised. That perspective has always been around, and is particularly popular with the hard right wing of Israeli politics and religion today, and can be seen clearly in some of the Israeli justifications for the ferocity of their bombardment of Gaza since October 7th, particularly some of the more hardline fringe

voices. And there are many Christians who have tragically supported that view, despite the fact that the book of Joshua is one book that Jesus never ever quotes or endorses.

But even within the Hebrew scriptures, let alone the Jesus-influenced New Testament writings, there are strong voices of protest against such views, and this story of Jonah is one of them. In the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion and destruction of Israel, evoking the name of Nineveh would sound almost exactly the same as evoking the name of Gaza in the immediate aftermath of the horrific October 7th terrorist attacks on Israel.

If the story were being written for the first time today, God would probably be saying to Jonah, “Get up and go immediately to Gaza and preach there, for their terrorism has come to my attention, but rather than punishing them I’d like you to help them to repent so I can bless them, because I am a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for everyone, including Palestinians, and even Hamas terrorists. You are concerned about this withered tree. Should I not be concerned about the two million innocent civilians in Gaza?”

Although Jesus never ever quotes or endorses the book of Joshua, he does evoke the message of the book of Jonah, and relate it directly to his own death and resurrection – the most dramatic demonstration of how gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love God is, even in the face of horrific evil and violence.

Now, it is one thing for us to identify what Jonah’s message to modern Israel might be, but if we only ask what it says to “them” and not to “us”, we would probably be falling into the same religious error as Jonah himself. Even in relation to Gaza, if we allow our horror at the bombardment to blind us to God’s love and compassion for the Israeli people, we’d just be taking sides and producing a mirror image of the first mistake.

But what about our own nation, and our own personal networks of relationships? Who are the people whose lives and welfare we tend to forget or discount in the interests of preserving our own shade-trees of privilege and wellbeing? Who are the people who get kicked around like political or religious footballs to bolster our own sense of identity and righteousness? How has our nation treated its indigenous people, the refugees arriving on its shores, its trans-kids? Why have our churches defined LGBT+ people as other and forged its unity in shared hostility towards them?

The story of Jonah warns us that, even in situations like the violent invasion by the Assyrian empire or the violent invasion by Hamas terrorists, we should not get sucked into any narrative that says that God no longer loves those people and we can imagine ourselves to be the righteous armies of God wreaking God’s vengeance upon them.

The God who was revealed to Jonah, and who was made known to us in Jesus, is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, for everyone, no exceptions. The God who was revealed to Jonah, and who was made known to us in Jesus, is intent on seeking reconciliation across every boundary or hostility that might divide us.

And if you try to run away from that in order to hold on to your vengeful anger towards some other group, you can expect the God of Jonah and Jesus to call you to cooperate with God in bringing love and mercy and new life to that group. And if you don’t sort it out before

arriving at the gates of God's kingdom, you can expect to be invited to the banquet of life and offered a seat right alongside those you are not yet reconciled to. Your seat at the table will depend on your willingness to also celebrate God's love and welcome for these others. And while in such a moment, that probably won't feel like good news at all, it is ultimately extraordinarily good news, because it is only because God's love and grace can reach all the way to them that it can reach all the way to us.

So let's not swallow the shark with Jonah, thrashing around in ferocious hostility to all who we do not identify as "one of us". Let us instead be swallowed up in the deep mysterious love and grace of God, and be raised with Jesus to resurrection life in the wide open spaces of God's all-inclusive love and compassion.