

E3B 2024 Jonah

We only read a snippet of it today, but Jonah is one of the best, funniest books of the Bible that gets far too little attention after we graduate from VBS. You can see why we love it for kids: God tells Jonah to do his chores; Jonah doesn't want to so he runs away; God sends a great fish to swallow him; and after a time-out when he learns to be sorry for his disobedience, Jonah relents and finishes his chores, albeit grudgingly like a petulant toddler. It's a whale of a cautionary tale, but between the main character spending three days in a giant fish and supernatural storms and magic trees, we rational, modern adults can be a bit dismissive of this fairytale, while instead watching eight seasons of *Game of Thrones*. In fact, the book of Jonah is a shrewd satire on the prophecy and a perceptive, if uncomfortable, commentary on human nature.

Although Jonah is counted among the prophets, in many ways, he is the *anti*-prophet. Whereas for example Jeremiah protests his call with self-effacing reluctance—*oh Lord, I don't know how to speak; I'm only a kid*—Jonah flat out runs in the other direction. And it's hard to blame him, because while all the other prophets are called to speak God's word to Israel, God tells Jonah to prophecy to Nineveh—the capital city of Assyria, Israel's enemy. The other prophets generally address those in positions of power—the king and court, the religious leaders—because their message is usually an indictment of the rich and powerful neglecting or exploiting the poor, the weak, the widows, orphans, and aliens. But if Nineveh—a three days walk across—is built as capital cities typically were, with the palaces, temples, and the seats of power at the very center, then Jonah, who ventures only one day's walk into the city, never speaks to the leaders who hold power and authority.

Although the Old Testament includes 12 short prophetic books, none are as brief as Jonah's one sentence sermon: *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* But the most remarkable difference between Jonah and the other prophets is that his warning actually works. When the prophets speak to Israel, the leaders shoot the messenger, or find false prophets to tell them what they want to hear, or make ill-advised treaties to try to save themselves, but never do they repent of their wrongdoing. However, the people of Nineveh—who again are not part of Israel or worshippers of Israel's God—the people of Nineveh believe God's message. Led by the king himself, everyone, even the animals, fast *and* turn from their evil ways. So while destruction is inevitable when the prophets speak to Israel, God changes his mind and spares Nineveh.

You would think that would be a happy ending to the story—Jonah completes his prophetic task, Nineveh repents, God spares them—but Jonah is not happy. Jonah whines unto the Lord: *Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.* Jonah didn't want to prophecy to Nineveh because he didn't want Nineveh to repent. He didn't want Nineveh to repent because he didn't want God to spare them. He wanted

God to smite them because they were his enemies. If that isn't a brutally honest commentary on human nature, I don't know what is.

We talk more about the Babylonian captivity, but the Assyrians conquered Israel first. They are truly Jonah's enemies. But whereas Jonah wants God to simply annihilate them, God has a different solution—a solution that doesn't involve killing 120,000 people plus all their animals. Two things to keep in mind: first, if God is God of all, then God is also the creator of the people of Nineveh—whether they worship God according to Israel's customs or not. So God should care about what happens to them, because even if they are Jonah's enemies, they are still God's children. And second, repentance is not just apologizing or expressing remorse—though the Ninevites do that when they fast and put on sackcloth and ashes. True repentance means turning from sin and living differently—which we read that Nineveh did. Nineveh had treated Israel with brutality and injustice, but now Nineveh and Israel can see a way forward together, a way of restitution, reconciliation, and peaceful co-habitation. Through Jonah, God succeeds in turning Nineveh from enemy to neighbor, which should be reason to rejoice. God wants healing and wholeness—and Nineveh responds—yet Jonah still wants revenge. So God's rhetorical question echoes unanswered: *Is it right for you to be angry?*

It's a gross exaggeration to say our society has never been so divided; we had an actual Civil War in this country, and some of you were alive when there were still segregated water fountains. But we do live in a very partisan age, where 24 hour cable networks sensationalize division for ratings and profit. And it's an election year, so however bad we might think it is right now, it's going to get worse. I'm not saying that we're not facing polarizing issues, or that it's all relative, or that our civic responsibilities aren't important: they are, because those issues affect real people. But so much of the contemporary conversation idealizes Jonah's attitude—*Those people are enemies; let's just get rid of them*—forgetting that Jonah is not the hero of this story; his stubborn grudge isn't the example we are called to follow. It's not Jonah's desire for revenge but God's vision of restoration to which we are called. God doesn't excuse evil or harm, but God does care just as much for the one whom we call "enemy"...however angry that may make us.

The good news Jesus proclaims includes repenting *and* believing that God's way is a better way than our baser instincts. Jesus invites disciples to follow him and be fishers of people—not drowners of people. If we strive for understanding, forgiveness, mercy, peacemaking, and reconciliation, and it works, will we rejoice, or will we throw a tantrum like Jonah because we'd rather fight enemies than welcome neighbors? What might our world look like if we remembered that the hero of the story is the God who loves us...and who loves others just as much?