

## ***“A One-Way Ticket to Tarshish, Please”***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Mark 1:14-20

The Book of Jonah is one of my favorite stories – Jonah and the whale, or as it is now more politically correct, Jonah and the big fish. Because as one of the children at a previous church told me, at the end of the children’s conversation, very somberly and quietly – I think so I wouldn’t be publicly embarrassed by being so wrong, “It couldn’t have been a whale. Whales don’t eat meat.”

Anyway, it’s a wonderful story in the Biblical tradition of short stories. Hebrew scholar Norman Gottwald says that Biblical short story typically combines fairy tale, legend, heroic or mythic elements with a history-like orientation to daily affairs. The purposes of the short story include entertainment, moral instruction and formation, inspiration, even theologizing that stresses the work of God in the mundane activities of human beings. We are meant to be confronted with questions about our own relationship with God, to wonder how we might respond in a similar situation, and, in this case, to wrestle with Jonah’s disobedience and God’s persistence, and to compare Jonah’s actions with our own.

It’s hard to jump into the Book of Jonah halfway through, like we did this morning. After all, it’s one of the shortest books in the Bible, only four chapters long. Most of us would have trouble finding it in the Old Testament. Here’s a hint: it comes right after Obadiah – which is even shorter, one chapter, so if you miss Obadiah while you’re flipping through the pages, you’ll probably miss Jonah. It’s unique among the prophetic books, because instead of a prophet who answers God’s call willingly and obediently, we get a prophet who runs the other way and then sulks when his hearers repent.

If you know the story, and most of us know at least the first part about the big fish, you know that right off the bat, first verse, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, “Go at once to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”

Jonah got up allright, and he headed for the city of Joppa, where he marched right down to the dock and bought a one-way ticket on the first boat to Tarshish somewhere around the Rock of Gibraltar – which was in the opposite direction from Ninevah, and completely away from God’s call.

When a fierce storm came up, Jonah was sound asleep down below in the hold, while everybody else on board was up top throwing cargo overboard and praying to whatever gods they thought might save them. The captain found Jonah and said, “What are you doing down here sound asleep, get up on deck and pray with all the rest of us!” When the sailors cast lots to find out why the storm had come upon them, the lot fell on Jonah and he had to ‘fess up about his conversation with God, and told them to just throw him overboard so that the sea would calm down. And even though the crew tried mightily to save the ship from breaking apart and not sacrifice Jonah, they ended up doing as he suggested and threw him into the sea, and, guess what, the storm stopped.

Meanwhile, God sent the rescue boat for Jonah in the form of a whale, or a big fish, to swallow him up, turn him around, and spit him out in the right direction. Jonah sat in the belly of the big fish for three days and three nights, which would indeed have given a person time to think about whether he might have responded differently the first time God called. Not having much to do, and apparently no deck of cards for solitaire, Jonah prayed – not a prayer for help as we might imagine, but a prayer of thanksgiving, which must have done the trick because God spoke to the fish and it coughed Jonah up and spit him out on dry land, right back where he started.

And then the God of second chances said, “Get up and go to Ninevah and tell them that they’ve got forty days to clean up their act.”

Now we need to cut Jonah a little slack here. One commentator noted that asking Jonah, an Israelite, to go to Ninevah and give them the bad news, would be like asking one of us to stroll into Osama bin Laden’s campground and say, “okay, forty days and you’re toast. God just asked me to pass that along.” Ninevah, a city on the east bank of the Tigris River was the capital of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah in slavery for almost a hundred years. Assyria was more than the enemy; it was a cruel and brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel’s fortunes. And Jonah was being asked to preach to the enemy with the very real possibility of being killed the minute he walked into town. So we can’t blame Jonah for essentially saying, “Anywhere, Lord, anywhere but Ninevah.”

But three days in a fish can be pretty persuasive, so off he went. You might imagine that having just spent three days in the belly of a fish, Jonah probably didn’t have much trouble catching people’s attention, still wet, bedraggled, probably with a little seaweed still wrapped around his head. But what happened next really caught everybody by surprise. Jonah had barely walked a day into a city that was three days’ walk across; the words were hardly out of his mouth, “Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!” before the whole place repented. One writer put it this way: “the whole town came forward singing, ‘just as I am without one plea.’” It was like one big altar call and Jonah didn’t know what to do with them all. Great and small, from the king down to the cows, everybody put on sackcloth and ashes, believing that God’s mind might be changed by their repentance.

And it was. That’s the good news. But apparently not for Jonah. Remember that Jonah wanted God to blow the whole place sky high, and for God to make a U-turn after all that God had put him through seemed terribly unfair, to put it mildly. Mad as a wet hen, Jonah said, “Great. I knew you would do that. I knew you were a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. I said I didn’t want to go, but you made me go anyway. I came all this way with bad news, and now there isn’t even going to be an apocalyptic showdown? You might as well kill me.”

Why was Jonah so angry? The short answer is because God loves too many people. Jonah would rather die than live in a world where Ninevites are forgiven and loved. He wanted the Ninevites to get what they deserved, and would have been only too happy to tell God what that was. Jonah never quite got the fact that there is a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea, certainly wider than any of us can imagine.

Like Jonah, we expect God to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing. That’s just not always how we want God to be toward others. But that’s how it is, and we need to get it straight. The love of God is for all people. The mercy of God forgives every sin and everybody gets “do-overs.” One writer reminds us that, “The difficulty is not in telling ourselves this is true. The difficulty is believing it’s true for everybody else.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Carter, “When God Repented,” [www.Day1.net](http://www.Day1.net)

Like those Ninevites, for example. We can't imagine a God merciful enough to forgive everybody, especially those who, in our estimation, need punishment, not forgiveness. "Jonah is a perfect example of that well-developed sense of justice we all seem to be born with" until we realize that God's love is not dependant on any understanding of justice. Preaching this text, one pastor said, "One of the most wonderful aspects of our faith is that we know that, no matter what, we have only to ask God and we will be forgiven. And where is that justice in that plan?" She goes on to respond, saying, "Honestly, it is absent, for forgiveness is never a matter of justice. It is never deserved. Forgiveness is an act of love that overlooks wrongs in order to bring us back to what is right. And, in its own way, this kind of love goes against our rational ideas of right and wrong."<sup>2</sup>

We've all been there. We've all been in need of forgiveness, and we've all needed to forgive. Even the Ninevites in our lives, and those in the lives of those we love, who have walked all over us, treated us badly, made fun of us, let us down, and hurt us deeply. Even the Ninevites who have played fast and loose with our savings and our investments, our jobs and our homes. Even those Ninevites.

Beth Tanner, an Old Testament professor at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, notes that, "the Book of Jonah is read in the Jewish calendar on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when Jews confess their sins against God and neighbor," that "offering Jonah to the congregation yields the same type of contemplation on God's attributes that we too depend on for salvation." She writes, "Salvation is pure gift and grace and Jonah's story reminds us that we do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish. God will be forgiving because that is the very heart of God."<sup>3</sup> And we might add, thank goodness for that.

Then there's that whole thing about letting God be God, letting God love the Ninevites as much as God loves Jonah, as much as God loves us. One commentator posed this question: "How many people can God love" And he cautions us by saying, "Before you answer too quickly, let me remind you the church has struggled with this question from the beginning." He goes on, "After Jesus was dead and risen, along came another preacher. His name was Simon bar-Jonah, that is, Simon, son of Jonah. One day he was sitting on a roof top in the seaside city of Joppa. . . minding his own business, saying a few prayers. Suddenly God broke through and said, 'I want you to preach my judgment and mercy to some people outside your little circle.' Simon bar-Jonah, or as we call him, Simon Peter, did not want to do it. 'Too late,' said the Holy Spirit, 'downstairs some Italians are knocking on your door.'

"All of this happens in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. By the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter the church is having its first major disagreement. All the preachers are called in from the frontier. Everybody is squabbling over one issue, namely, how many outsiders are we going to allow in God's church? The problem, it seems, is that God keeps inviting everybody. It just goes to show the church doesn't tell a lot of new stories, rather we keep telling the same story of a God who loves everybody, who is merciful to everybody, who is kind to everybody, but who is stuck with some reluctant messengers."<sup>4</sup>

Amazingly, we're still squabbling over the same issue – among others, of course – but basically the same issue. God keeps inviting everybody; and, being the reluctant messengers that we are, we can't imagine a God big enough to love that many people. So we struggle with who's in and who's out, who's good enough or not good enough, who acts like us and who doesn't, who looks like us and who doesn't. I can't think of a single church, especially among Presbyterian

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Buteux, "Jonah After the Whale," [www.swedenborgchapel.org](http://www.swedenborgchapel.org), 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Beth Tanner, commentary, Preaching This Week

<sup>4</sup> Carter

churches, that doesn't have "open to all" as part of their mission statement. It is, after all, what we believe God wants and expects us to be – open to all.

Of course, we all define "openness" differently. Some of us are open and affirming, hinting that we are open to the possibility of ordaining and installing gay and lesbian ministers, elders and deacons, but not quite at the point of actually doing so, or even wrestling with that issue civilly and openly and possibly making the decision to become part of the More Light Presbyterians or to support the Covenant Network – or not.

Others of us will say that we're open to a wide diversity of race, nationality, language, theology and politics. But open doesn't necessarily mean welcoming. I hope you will take part in the February Forum presentations and discussions this year, as we explore our own biases and talk about who our neighbors are. And then let's talk about how we can welcome our neighbors right here in Bloomington, the neighbors who don't look like us, or sound like us or don't have the same educational or economic advantages that so many of us have. We have come so far, but there is still work to be done.

It wouldn't do to preach a sermon on this particular Sunday without mentioning the extraordinary events of the past week. We inaugurated the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, an African-American, whose name admittedly doesn't roll off our tongues as easily as "George Washington." But a person who understands that the world is not the same, will never be the same again; who understands that it doesn't matter who's in or who's out, who's good enough or not, it doesn't matter that we don't all look alike or act alike or speak alike. In his inaugural address, President Obama gave us these words: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth. And because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself. . ."<sup>5</sup>

And because of our common humanity, we cannot help but believe that God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, from generation to generation and forevermore. Because of our common humanity, we cannot help but believe that God deeply and truly loves all of us. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.