

The Dumbest People in the Bible

4. Jonah

Jonah 1:1-2:10

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on August 21, 2016]

I

It's an old joke and you've probably heard it,
but it's still a good way to begin a sermon on the Book of Jonah.

A little boy sat in Sunday school listening to the teacher tell the story of Jonah.

At the end of the lesson the teacher said,
"Now what do we learn from the story of Jonah?"

The little boy was quick to answer:
"People make whales sick."

II

What are we to make of the story of Jonah?

For one thing, it is a difficult story to take literally.

Some fantastic explanations have been advanced to explain how it might be possible for Jonah to survive inside a fish for three days and nights.

Fundamentalist organizations like the Institute for Creation Research and Answers in Genesis (the people behind the Creation Museum and the new Noah's Ark attraction in Northern Kentucky), insist that Jonah has to be historical and also the universe was created in six literal days and is only 6000 years old.

Such groups like to recount the 1891 story of a sailor named James Bartley who supposedly survived being swallowed by a whale for 36 hours.

Scholars have investigated that story and others like it and found them to be, shall we say, "fish stories."

The details about the city of Nineveh are also difficult.

The Book of Jonah says it took three days to walk across.

We know from archaeology that Nineveh was a large city for that time,
but was it that big?

Nor do we have any collaborating account of the "conversion" of Nineveh.

Not elsewhere in the Bible.

Not in the historical records of the Assyrian archives.

In fact, Nineveh was completely destroyed by the Babylonian army in 612 B.C.,
an event the Book of Nahum views as nothing less than the judgment of
God on a wickedly violent city.

Furthermore, the Book of Jonah is not placed with the other "historical books" of
the Old Testament.

So we should be careful of classifying Jonah as literal history.

A clue to how we can understand Jonah is the fact that it is found among the
prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

But Jonah is a most "unprophetic prophet."

The prophetic books (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos) do not usually tell the story
of the prophet himself.

Rather, these books relate a historical, political, or social situation,
and then announce the Word of God to that situation.

But the Book of Jonah contains no prophecies or preaching, except for one brief
pronouncement—

only 5 words in Hebrew:

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown."

It is a prediction that does not come to pass.

The prophets always address their message to Israel.

Jonah spoke to foreigners.

The prophets generally are called and their qualifications are noted.

Jonah is never shown to be a qualified prophet.

When God calls prophets, they are supposed to answer, like Isaiah:

"Here am I, send me." (Isaiah 6:8)

When God calls Jonah, guess what he does:

the dumbest thing possible—

runs as fast as he can in the opposite direction.

The Hebrew prophets spoke God's word of judgment with fear and trembling because they feared the people would reject God's message.

Jonah's fear is that the Ninevites will believe God's message, repent, and be saved.

III

So what are we to make of this strange story?

Can we take it seriously?

Yes, we can...if we understand it as satire...comic satire.

A satire is a story that uses humor, irony, and wit to expose some human foible, foolishness, or weakness.

Old Testament scholar Steven Tuell writes,

“Indeed, only by reading Jonah as a comedy do we take seriously the book’s most obvious feature: the persistent, deliberate, exaggeration that makes the book *funny*. ” (Parental Guidance Advised, Adult Preaching From the Old Testament, p. 6)

If we could read the story in Hebrew, we would catch on to the humor in the very

first sentence.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai saying..."

As innocent as those words sound, in Hebrew they contain two plays-on-words.

First, the name Jonah means "dove" in Hebrew.

As a metaphor, "dove" is sometimes used for the children of Israel.

In the story of Noah and the flood, the dove is a symbol of hope.

In Psalm 55:6, the dove is associated with escape from troubles and evil.

In the Song of Solomon the dove is a symbol of love.

Yet when God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh,
he is not a dove, **but a hawk!**

He has no love for these foreigners...
he offers no hope for them...
he tries to escape God's call.

The other pun is in the phrase "son of Amittai."

In Hebrew "Amittai" means "faithfulness."

Yet the *son of faithfulness* is anything but.

Having introduced the main character
(who, by the way, is not Jonah, but God—
God is mentioned 39 times in just 44 verses),
the storyteller loses no time.

God tells Jonah, "Get up and go to Nineveh and pronounce judgment on the city."

Instead Jonah "got up to flee" in the exact opposite direction.

Jonah does not stop until he comes to Joppa,

the seaport that is now a part of modern-day Tel Aviv.

There he books passage on a ship to Tarshish (probably present-day Spain, the farthest point west that Hebrews like Jonah would know of).

Twice in the first three verses we are told that Jonah is fleeing from "the presence of the Lord."

In all of scripture only one other person is said to flee from the presence of the Lord—Cain, after he murdered his brother Abel, in Genesis 4.

Notice that Jonah does not reject his faith in God.

He doesn't deny God.

He just refuses to obey God.

This is the dumbest thing Jonah could possibly have done.

Didn't Jonah know the opening words of Psalm 24...?

*"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
The world and those that dwell therein."*

Couldn't he recall the familiar words of Psalm 139, verses 7 and 8...?

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

To believe that God is everywhere—
and yet to run away.

To believe that God is all powerful—
and yet to refuse God's command.

How dumb can a person get!

And yet, when you get right down to it,
 isn't that the essential dumbness of our lives.

To hear the word of God with our ears...
 to think it in our minds...
 to believe it in our hearts...
 and yet to say to God,
"Not now, God, it's just not convenient."

Why are we so casual about obeying God in our everyday lives?

IV

Well...the ship is out at sea and a terrible storm blows up.

Waves crash over the bow as the little wooden boat creaks and groans.

The sailors begin throwing cargo overboard in order to lighten the load.

Meanwhile, verse 5 tells us Jonah is down in the ship's hold and is fast asleep.

In fact, one early Greek translation says Jonah was sleeping "and snoring."

Here the pagan sailors are hard at work trying to save lives,
 while the man of God is "sawing logs."

Not only are the sailors hard at work,
 but they are praying—
 each to his own god.

Their piety illustrates the old sailor's maxim:
 "Let him who knows how to pray go to sea."

Or, as a plaque in our house advises:
"Pray to God, but row toward shore."

The sailors are busy praying and rowing,
 while the prophet of Yahweh is in a stupor of sleep.

Jonah has a faith that appears only word deep.

He can talk about God, but, unlike the sailors,
he appears unable to talk to God.

In verse 6 the captain says to him:

*"What are you doing asleep? Get up and pray to your god for help.
Maybe your God will feel sorry for you and spare our lives."*

Now the comic devices are coming faster than a Robin Williams routine.

The pagan captain tells the prophet to wake up.

(How often does the world have to "wake up" the people of God!)

The pagan captain tells the prophet to pray.

(Now Jonah is getting the message from both God and the captain).

The pagan captain tells the prophet about the mercy of God.

(Can you imagine that?!)

This old captain believes that God can save lives.

Jonah is afraid that God will save lives.

And later in the story when the people of Nineveh repent and God saves them...
well, let me read the first three verses of chapter 4:

*Jonah was very unhappy about this and became angry. So he prayed,
'Lord, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do?
That's why I did my best to run away...! I knew that you are a loving and
merciful God, always ready to change your mind and not punish.'" (4:1-3)*

How hard-headed and cold-hearted religious people can be!

V

Jonah goes up on deck with the captain.

Jonah won't follow God, but he will obey the pagan captain and follow him!

On deck they discover that the storm has been reclassified as a tropical storm.

Their lives are in danger and everyone is getting desperate.

So the sailors get out their dice and start up a game of chance—casting lots.

In the ancient world this was a common practice in attempting to solve a problem or seeking divine direction.

The sailors determine that Jonah is the cause of the problem—
this terrible storm is somehow his fault.

So Jonah comes clean to them.

"I am a Hebrew," he says, "and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made land and sea." (verse 9)

Jonah can prattle about theology,
but he does not pray.

He can offer theological observations,
but he does not obey.

Jonah is a runaway from his religion.

"Let me get this straight," says a crusty old sailor. "This God you're talking about is the God of heaven?"

"That's right," says Jonah.

"And this God made the dry land?"

"Right again," says Jonah.

"And this same God made the sea?"

"Uh-huh," says Jonah.

"And you're running away from a God like that?"

I'd like to have heard Jonah's answer to that question,
 but we don't get to...
 because the tropical storm has been upgraded to a hurricane.

The sailors,
 fully aware that Jonah is the cause of the hurricane,
 ask him what they should do.

Jonah suggests that they throw him overboard.

Reluctantly, they agree,
 so into the whitecaps goes Jonah.

And every child who has ever been to Sunday school knows what happens next:

At the Lord's command a large fish swallows Jonah.

He spends three days and nights inside the belly of the fish.

That reminds me of the story of the female Salvation Army officer who was preaching on the street corner. A heckler said to her, "Do you really believe that Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a whale?"

She responded, "I don't know, but I'll ask him when I get to heaven."

The heckler said, "What if he's not there?"

Quickly she replied, "Then you can ask him!"

VI

There is an interesting movement throughout the story of Jonah:
 an up and down...
 a rising and falling.

When God first called Jonah, God said, "Arise, and go to Nineveh."

But Jonah went down to Joppa.

Once onboard the ship, Jonah went down into the hold of the ship,
and laid down and went to sleep.

Then when the sailors determine who is at fault,
the verdict comes down on Jonah.

Rather than repent, Jonah asks the sailors to throw him overboard.

Down into the waters he goes,
and just when Jonah thinks he can't sink any lower,
God sends this huge fish,
and Jonah goes down into its gullet.

Rather than "arise" and go to Nineveh,
Jonah has refused and literally gone...
down...down...down...down...down...down.

And finally, at the point when he can sink no lower,
Jonah finally "gets down" on his knees and prays.

Jonah's prayer comprises the entire second chapter.

It is a prayer that repeats the theme of descent.

*"Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the floods surrounded me;
the waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me."*

In other words, in his disobedience Jonah has dropped to the bottom like a rock with a hole in it.

Jonah's prayer sounds quite pious,

suggesting that Jonah has undergone a dramatic conversion.

But I hesitate to accept that.

This is a prayer made in desperate circumstances—
remember that Jonah is literally marinating in the digestive juices of a fish!

In a time like these...pious phrases,
 ...grand promises,
 ...solemn vows,
 ...literally gush forth from a person.

Why is it that so many of us only pray to God in times of crisis?

The last line of Jonah's prayer is, "Deliverance comes from the Lord!"

And that's when Jonah's prayer is answered.

Aldus Huxley captured the irony of the scene in a poem:

*Seated on the convex mound,
of one vast kidney Jonah prays
and sings his canticles and hymns.
Making the hollow vault resound
God's goodness and mysterious ways
Til
the great fish spouts music as it swims.*

The fish vomits him up unto the beach.

Jonah's long downward spiral is reversed.

He literally comes up from the depths of the sea--
and is thrown up by a fish.

D. R. Benson in his delightful little book Biblical Limericks views the scene this way:

When Jonah once more saw the sun

*And stood up on dry land, everyone
 Asked, "How's travel by whale?"
 He replied, looking pale,
 "Cabin class would be rather more fun.*

Jonah is saved, and now (at last) he goes to preach at Ninevah.

And maybe the lesson you and I can finally take from the Book of Jonah is that we can hear the voice of God,
 obey that voice,
 and arise and go forth and go up.

Or we can be dumb like Jonah and ignore that voice and find ourselves going down...down...down...down.

VII

But I can't conclude this sermon without making one more comment about our friend the fish.

Humorist Robert Benchley told about the time when, as a student at Harvard, he was confronted with this question on an exam.

Discuss the dispute between the United States and Great Britain over fishing rights in international waters from the point of view of each country.

Benchley began his essay this way:

I know nothing about the point of view of Great Britain and nothing about the point of view of the United States. Therefore, I shall discuss the question from the point of view of the fish!

The fish, you remember, swallowed Jonah at God's command.

The fish obeyed God without hesitation (which is more than we can say for Jonah).

And for this remarkable act of obedience,
 what reward did the fish receive?

A severe attack of acid indigestion.

It's not hard to see why—
Jonah had a disposition that would curdle milk.

For three days and three nights, it is certainly a toss-up as to who prayed with greater fervor—

Jonah to be set free from the fish...
or the fish to be rid of Jonah.

Regardless, there on the beach the prayers of each were answered.

And I can't help but think that Jonah's relief at being delivered from the fish could hardly have been any greater than the fish's relief at being delivered of Jonah.

And I'll bet both of them mumbled the same prayer of gratitude—

**Thank you, Lord, for answering my prayer...
but why did it take three days?**

Amen.

Sources:

Sermons by William Watley and Charles W. Julian,

Steven Tuell, Parental Guidance Advised, Adult Preaching From the Old Testament, ed. by Alyce M. McKenzie and Charles L. Aaron, Chalice Press, 2016, 6-7.