



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

**“Us and Them”
The Story of Jonah
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
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Introduction to Scripture Reading

The Book of Jonah is unlike other books of the Bible. It contains no history, no actual persons, no documented events. It is literary satire. The characters, and practically everything in the story, are larger than life; exaggerated in order to drive home a point.

People who take the Bible literally do not understand this, so they go to great lengths to explain large fish swallowing people and how someone could live inside a whale for three days. They talk about vast ancient cities that repented thanks to the perfect words of a prophet, and going through all these contortions in order to make the story an actual historical occurrence, they generally miss the point of the story.

Hear this whale of a tale about a prophet named Jonah.

Sermon

If the story of Jonah does not prick your conscience, you are either a saint or you were not paying attention. If we are entirely honest, I believe we all have a bit of Jonah in us.

Now, this may be hard for some of you because we are here in worship on a Sunday morning and attempting to think beatific Christ-like thoughts. However, for a moment, I want you to *get real* and honestly ponder this question: Who would you like to see God skewer? Think of an enemy you would like to see receive its due. I suspect North Korea tops many people’s list along with ISIS and the Taliban. They are nothing like *us* and we are nothing like *them*.

It seems to come naturally for human beings to think in terms of polarities. We define ourselves not only by describing who we are, but also who we are not.

These days, Republicans and Democrats square off like opposing armies. It is “Us” against “Them.” Racism refuses to die in our country because for many the “Us” and “Them” mindset is drawn along racial lines. For others it falls along religious lines.

On a personal level, most of us probably can name someone who makes our life miserable and we would feel a bit of satisfaction in seeing our nemesis suffer. That would be justice, right?

The story of Jonah is only 48 verses long, but this pint-sized book delivers a clout. Its author was clearly not a Calvinist. He did not believe in predestination. God does not ordain what is to happen. We have the freedom to act as we choose.

The story begins with God calling on Jonah to go to Nineveh, the main city of Assyria, the Israelites' archenemy. Jonah is instructed to cry out against the people because of their wickedness, but Jonah wants no part of it. He would love to sit around with his drinking buddies and malign those scoundrels, but he does not want to go to Assyria and prophecy doom.

Why? Does he fear them? No. It is because he does not want to risk the possibility – no matter how remote – that the people might repent. Because if they repent, he knows that God will forgive them and that is the worst possible scenario he can imagine. Not unlike the way some of us think of our enemies, Jonah yearns for God to give them a taste of what they have been dishing out to others. So, when God summons Jonah to go to Nineveh, the prophet asserts his free will and catches a ship sailing in the opposite direction.

No doubt Jonah knows that he cannot actually run away from God, but perhaps he thinks that if he is a long distance from Nineveh, God might pass the duties to someone closer by. Whatever the case, it is a flawed strategy, because God does not give up easily. God has a particular mission in mind for Jonah so God continues to pursue him.

The story paints a delightful scene of God whipping up gale force winds that threaten to sink the ship. Jonah knows he is the reason for the raging storm, but he tries to ignore it. He climbs down into the lower section of the ship's hull and goes to sleep. I'm sure none of us have ever employed the same strategy – going to bed when we are in a crisis.

Burying his head under the covers is a useless game plan. The storm grows in intensity and the ship is in danger of capsizing. Jonah confesses that he is the cause of their disaster, so he instructs the sailors to toss him into the choppy sea. Jonah is still dead-set on not doing what God wants him to do.

Jonah is thrown into the ferocious waves where he will presumably drown, but instead is swallowed by a great fish. While he is entombed in darkness for three days, he prays for God to deliver him. But when the fish spews him onto the shore, he is not back home. He is where God wanted him to be – in Nineveh.

Perhaps you can remember a time in your life when you kept slamming doors on what God envisioned for you, and you remained in darkness. Yet over time, you finally took the path God wanted you to take. Perhaps it was giving up a destructive behavior or becoming a better parent or freeing yourself from an unhealthy relationship.

Despite the fact that we have freedom to choose, part of the message of Jonah is “Do not try to run away from God. The “Hound of Heaven” as poet Francis Thompson names God, will pursue you wherever you attempt to hide. And the best path is the one God wants you to take.

Even after his dark ordeal ends, Jonah is not a completely changed person. He is, at best, a reluctant prophet. He does not want God to be merciful to the people of Nineveh so he does the bare minimum. His pronouncement to the people is merely one sentence because he still hopes God will unleash divine wrath. However, Jonah's worst nightmare is realized. The people repent and God forgives them.

Jonah is incensed because he thinks God is too soft on sin, too quick to forgive. Does God not understand how terrible these people are?

As one commentator puts it: “Whereas some prophets complained about the wrath of God, Jonah protests the love of God.”¹

The story of Jonah was written to overturn a mentality that envisioned God strictly on the side of the Hebrew people and opposed to any adversary of the Israelites. Like practically every army in history, the Hebrew people claimed, “God is on our side!” to justify their defeat of any and all enemies. However, this holy war theology not only claimed that God was on their side, this doctrine was also employed to justify their heinous treatment of the people they conquered.

For instance, after the Hebrew people were liberated from Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, they finally reached the Jordan River. Moses died and Joshua took over as commander. After crossing the Jordan River, Joshua led them in conquering the people of Jericho.

When I was a child, I was taught the rousing song, “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down.” Our teacher had all of us march in a circle as we sang, as if we were God’s conquering army. What the song failed to note and the teacher declined to tell us was what happened after the walls came tumbling down. The sixth chapter of the Book of Joshua informs us.

The Hebrew people killed everyone in the city, “both men and women, old and young, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”²

Later in the history of the Hebrew people a similar slaughter occurs when Saul led the army against the Amalekites. Samuel states that these are the words of the Lord: “Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”³

In both cases, the writers claim that God sanctioned the massacre of every man, woman and child, and even the innocent animals, because they were enemies of the Hebrew people. Being an enemy justified butchery.

Of course, this was not limited to the ancient Hebrew people. When Europeans first came to the shores of the Americas, the indigenous people were branded “Savages” and received similar treatment.

The story of Jonah is an emphatic counter-voice. It declares “that the boundaries between “us” and “them” can be broken down through repentance and forgiveness, even for the worst enemies.”⁴ Of course, Jonah is not the only such voice in Scripture. The prophet Isaiah says that God envisions the day when two staunch enemies of the Hebrew people will become their allies. God says, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands.”⁵

Most of the prophets have a firm belief that God is the Creator of all that is, and all people are created in God’s image. Thus, rather than routinely excusing the behavior of the Hebrew people because they are God’s pet, the prophets threaten doom on the people because the “us” is not caring for the “them.”

Consider the manner in which the Allied forces treated the Germans after WWI and how we treated them after WWII. After WWI, we punished them for making war. We crippled them to teach them a lesson. That laid the ground for their resentment and their desire to get even. And in 25 years, we were back at war again.

But after WWII, even though they had attempted to exterminate certain groups of people, we helped them rebuild their cities and economy. And now they are our friends.

The story of Jonah was not written simply for would-be prophets who cannot stomach the merciful message God insists they deliver. It is a story for everyone who has ever hoped that an adversary received his/her comeuppance and dismissed them as beyond redemption – which I assume encompasses all of us.

Jonah does not give a free pass to terrorists or imply that God turns a blind eye to cruelty and injustice. It reminds us of the pitfalls of thinking that God is always on our side and loathes the same people we loathe. Whenever we find ourselves thinking in terms of “us” and “them” and pass judgment too swiftly, remember Jonah. Everyone is a child of God, and no one is beyond God’s forgiveness.

NOTES

1. Phyllis Trible, “The Book of Jonah” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume VII*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.481.
2. Joshua 6:21
3. 1 Samuel 15:3
4. Frances Flannery, “The Challenge of Jonah: Countering Radicalization through Radical Inclusion,” Day1.org, December 12, 2015.
5. Isaiah 19:25

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Loving God —

You call us ... You call in a voice that startles from slumber, and in gentle whispers we must strain to hear; with striking gestures that demand our attention, and with subtle invitations that stir our souls. You call us to expressions of faith that flow freely from our hearts, and to acts of faithfulness that stretch us to imagine a world we never dreamed possible. You call us to hold fast to your hope, to embrace your truth, and to open wide our arms and receive your love. Call to us now, O God; we yearn to hear your voice ...

Some of us come before you with hearts that are burdened with grief or weighed down by fear. We worry for family and friends, for our community and our country, for neighbors in need throughout the world. We remember those for whom nothing is certain — neither food, nor shelter, nor security — and pray that you would fill them with persistent hope. We remember those who are imprisoned by illness or addiction, and pray for your healing in body, mind, and spirit. We remember those who are anxious or grieving, and pray that you would surround them with peace. Whatever concerns we carry in our hearts this day, we lift them to you now in silence ...

Ever-Present God — So often, we are quick to cry out in our distress, but slow to offer prayers of thanksgiving. Yet, these same hearts also sing for joy and beat with hope. There is much for which we are grateful: for cherished bonds with family and friends, for communities that surround us with love and support, for opportunities to heed your call and practice our faith. We give thanks for the many blessings we enjoy, which we name before you in silence ...

Gracious God — You are merciful beyond measure and abounding in steadfast love. Help us, we pray, to pour out this grace and love so that it might bless others near and far. Call to us again, and empower us to be agents of your mercy, that we might love in the same way that you love us — with passion, with fierce hope, with challenge as with comfort. We pray in the name of the one who showed us the breadth and depth of your love, the one who taught us how to pray: **Our Father ...**