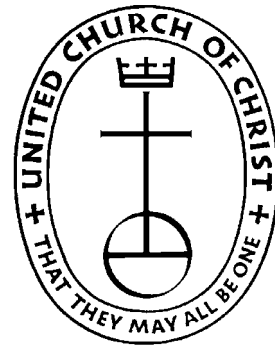


Once Upon a Time: The Story of Jonah Or, A Fish Story in Four Parts

A Sermon By —
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This sermon about Jonah shows that at our worst time, we are frequently operating out of fear, that part of grace of being a person of faith is having the assurance that even then, God is somehow present, that sometimes, just showing up is enough, and that even our enemies are God's beloved.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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Once Upon a Time: The Story of Jonah
Or, A Fish Story in Four Parts
Selections from Jonah

Once every couple of months or so, Perry Ellwood comes up to me and asks “When are you going to preach another ‘so what?’ sermon?”

A series of sermons that I preached several years ago, the “so what” sermons were each based in a story of one or two characters in the Hebrew Scriptures. Each one of them followed the same format. First, we look at where this story appears in the order of the books of the Bible, and how it’s constructed. Second, we hear the story – or at least my paraphrase of the story.

Third, we look at the social and historical setting of the piece of literature itself. What I always say here is that just as you’ve heard that the three most important words in real estate are “location, location, location,” the three most important words in Biblical study are “context, context, context.” This is different from the time in history in which the story takes place. Rather, this is identifying the time and the circumstances in which the story came to be. The social and historical setting in which the story was told can tell us as much about its intent as the narrative does itself.

And, finally, we’ll ask that most important question – the only question that, at the end of the day, really matters: so what? So what? This is an old story, told a long time ago, in a world and a culture far different from that in which we live. Why bother with it, why retell it, why try to make sense of it? Why should we even care?

And so today we turn once again to a story from the pages of the Bible, and poke around at it to try to find some relevance for our time and our living.

First: Where in the Bible is the story of Jonah found? This book is part of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we have called the Old Testament. It is found toward the end, in the collection that is known as the Twelve, the collection of short writings about twelve different prophets to Israel and Judah, and includes the stories of Joel and Amos, Hosea and Micah, Nahum and Obadiah.

Most of these short books have very similar features. They identify who was the king at the time, and so locate the story in a timeline. Most of them are a collection of sayings or oracles of the prophets – long speeches they made by the prophet, calling the king and the people to repentance and to acts of justice. Most of them are written in verse.

Jonah is completely different, and really doesn't seem to fit in with the rest of the Twelve. It doesn't name a king, so it, perhaps intentionally, isn't pinned to a specific time. Jonah, as a prophet, wasn't called to preach to the leaders or people of Israel, but rather their most bitter enemy, the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The book is written entirely in prose, and the one speech of Jonah is neither a call to repentance nor justice and doesn't even mention God, but is a brief pronouncement of judgment.

Let me say one more thing about the style of this book: it is almost farce. And it is really visual in nature. I can imagine this being a great silent movie, with campy gesturing and posing, and a tinny piano pounding out a dramatic soundtrack and captions splashed across the screen. So, maybe keep that in mind as you listen to the story of Jonah, which I'm calling "A Fish Story in Four Parts." "A Fish Story" because it's pretty outrageous. And there is a fish.

Part One: The Call Before the Storm. Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a man named Jonah. Jonah sensed that God was calling him, telling him to travel to the city of Nineveh, to warn them about their evil ways. "Warn them?" Jonah must have thought. "Warn *them*? Why would I want to do that? They're the evil empire. They're our sworn enemy. You want to wipe them out, God, that's okay with me!"

But, just to be sure he didn't get caught up in anything as risky as that, Jonah packed a bag, and, rather than heading east toward Nineveh, he took off to the west, toward the sea. There he found a ship going as far as possible in the opposite direction. He paid for his passage, went below deck, and hunkered down for a long voyage, deftly ducking out on his call to Nineveh.

Things did not go well. A huge storm rose up, and crashed down on the boat, threatening to smash it to bits. Desperately the sailors threw the cargo off the ship in an effort to keep it afloat. Soon, though, they figured out that their passenger, Jonah, had brought this misfortune upon them. They grabbed and heaved him into the sea – and the storm calmed and they were saved.

Part Two: The Belly of the Fish. Jonah landed in the cold, dark and raging water, struggling to stay afloat, gasping for breath, when out of the depths of the waters came a huge fish, which swallowed him whole! For three days and three nights, Jonah lived in the belly of the fish. And then he prayed. Borrowing words from the Psalmist, Jonah acknowledged God's presence with him – even in the belly of a great fish! And then, the story says, the fish spit Jonah out onto dry land.

Part Three: The Wimpy Yet Effective Prophet. Jonah finally arrived in Nineveh, the biggest, baddest city of them all. Capital of the world-crushing Assyrian Empire. The city was so big it took three days to walk across it. Jonah, whose heart was not fully in it, walked about a third of the way into the city and shouted one sentence: "In five days, Nineveh will be overthrown!" He liked the "Nineveh being overthrown" part; he just wasn't that keen on warning them about it.

Then the strangest thing happened – the people heard him and changed their ways. The king declared that all of Nineveh – from those in the highest seats of power to the lowliest animal in the field – would fast, and wear sackcloth, and turn their hearts toward God. And God's mind was changed and Nineveh was spared.

Part Four: Jonah's Dilemma and God's Compassion. Jonah was not happy. He couldn't believe what had happened. Sure that God's mind would change again, climbed up into the hill, built himself a little shelter, and sat underneath it to sulk. God caused a bush to grow next to Jonah, which gave him shade, and Jonah was happy. Then God sent a worm which killed the bush, and Jonah was unhappy. Then God a warm wind and made the sun to beat down on Jonah, who, by now, had had it.

"Just kill me now," he said to God.

God replied something like, "Really?"

To which Jonah said something like, "I am so over you. Look what you did to my bush. It was giving me shade. It's hot out here."

God, who usually has the last word in stories of this type, said, "You're upset about this little bush, which, by the way, you did not plant and you did not water – that was me doing that – but it's not okay with you that my heart should go out to the people of this city?"

And that's how the story, and the book of Jonah, rather abruptly ends. A tall tale about a big fish and cowardly prophet. How in the world did that make it into the Bible? Well, to answer that question, we have to look at the context in which this story emerged.

This story takes place probably in the 7th or the 8th century before the Common Era, when Assyria was the dominant military force in all of the Ancient Near East. Assyria, and the people of its capital, Nineveh, was the absolute enemy at that time. The Assyrian army was fabled for its barbaric use of excessive force, torture and

degradation of the people whom it had conquered. No way would anyone enter Nineveh expecting anything except, at best, the edge of the sword.

But this story itself, while set during Assyria's reign, did not emerge until much later – maybe 300 years later, after Assyria had been conquered by Babylon, and Babylon had been conquered by Persia. In the midst of these big power plays, the people of Israel and Judah were pawns. They'd fallen to Assyria, been taken into captivity by Babylon, and then sent home by Persia, so they could rebuild their cities, re-establish their farms and pay heavy taxes.

After the return from Babylon, which is called the post-exilic period, many of the Jewish people became isolationist, self-protective, xenophobic. The first thing they did was rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. They determined that to be a real Jew, not only your father but your mother, too, had to be Jewish, so there was ethnic cleansing, as wives and children were abandoned wholesale in an effort to strengthen and purify Jewish identity.

That was the particular context from which this story emerged. A story about God's caring and compassion for even one's worst enemies was told in response to building walls, naming some as outsiders, and codifying the "us" versus the "them." Jonah, with its farcical and over-the-top imagery, is a story of God's compassion and caring for all people, and is an instruction for us to go and do likewise.

This is the big take-away from the story of Jonah, and every sermon that I've ever heard based in Jonah is about God's radically inclusive love for all, and God's compassion for even those whom we would call enemy. But I want to very briefly look at each of those four parts of the story, and see if we can't tease out a bit more insight that this wacky story might be providing for us.

In Part One, when Jonah receives the call, it scares him. He acts quite naturally, quite humanly – he runs away. He hunkers down in the belly of the boat and hides, and he tries to sleep his way through his troubles.

In a sermon I preached three weeks ago, I reminded us that in most Biblical stories when angels appear, the first thing they say is "Don't be afraid." They know that we are! When faced with something big, something new, something risky, something dangerous – even if we know it's a good thing – is scary. We're not at our best when we're scared, and sometimes we make bad choice. I suspect that the story of Jonah might have had a different trajectory had he not succumbed to his fears, and our stories might, as well.

Part Two: The Belly of the Fish. Some commentators liken Jonah's being swallowed down by the fish and then spit up onto dry land as a metaphor for the dark night of soul – the descent that most of us make at least a few times in our lives when we are gripped with despair. Jonah's act in the belly of the fish can be a model to us. Even in despair, at the very lowest time in his life, he acknowledged God's presence.

Jonah didn't just pray that plea of desperation with which many of us are so familiar – please God, if you get me out of this, I will do x, y and z. Rather, his prayer was “God, the waters closed over me, the deep surrounded me, and as my life was ebbing away, I remember you, and you have heard my voice.”

The dark night of the soul comes for many of us. Depression. Loneliness. Addiction. Self-pity. Self-loathing. Feelings of helplessness. It's part of the human condition. And part of grace of being a person of faith is having the assurance that even then, God is somehow present.

That mystery of life that is the very source of all goodness is something that touches us, something that we can somehow tap into. Sometimes it is made manifest through the kindness of friends and family. Sometimes we recognize it in the sunset or seashore. Sometimes we feel its movement in music or poetry or laughter. But our faith does provide this – we are not alone. God, the mystery of life, the mystery of love, and the mystery of being is with us.

Part Three, the Wimpy Prophet. Jonah was probably the least enthusiast and yet the most effective prophet in the whole Bible. One short sentence was the best he could manage, and a city of 120,000 was saved! Maybe what this tells us is that sometimes, just showing up is enough.

I'm not offering this as an excuse for us to not try when things matter, or to not try to do our best. I think we should always strive to do our best. But there are, quite honestly, times when we just cannot bring our A game to whatever it is that we are doing. Maybe you're sick. Or the kids kept you up all night. Or you just got some bad news. We need to allow each other the grace to be human, to have bad days, to misunderstand the importance of a project, and not to lord our failures and our weaknesses over one another – or over ourselves.

Part Four: Jonah's Dilemma, Our Dilemma, and God's Compassion. Last week I heard a sermon at Claremont in which the preacher quoted a bumper sticker: “I think that when Jesus said ‘Love Your Enemies’ he meant ‘Don't Kill Them.’” While that

seems obvious and we laugh at the absurdity of it, there is something in it for us to learn. Jonah really wanted the Ninevites dead, and was disappointed when that didn't happen. We fancy ourselves as so much more evolved than that we don't even need to think about it.

But who are those to whom we do not extend compassion? We are all good liberal Christians, so of course we care about the homeless, and the disadvantaged downtown children. We vote to extend social services and fund schools.

But what about a politician whose ideology we cannot abide? What about someone who works to ban gay marriage or block a woman's access to a safe abortion? What about our in-laws, whose rants about class or nationality drive us crazy? What about the nutsy co-worker, who has polar opposite views about the Middle East? What about a fundamentalist evangelical who believes that you are going to hell? What about somebody you just don't like? What does "love your enemy" really mean? What does it take for us to rejoice with God that Nineveh is saved, and not go sulk under a bush?

This is hard stuff, and I don't know the answers, and I want to be comfortable and safe and protected just as much as anybody else does. But this absurd story tells me that even my enemy – even that person who scares me the most, who angers me the most, who is, to me, dangerous – even that person is God's beloved, and I have to take that seriously.

Let us pray: O Holy One, we are grateful for ancient stories and timeless truths that point us ever toward you love. May we find our way to live with one another with compassion and integrity, with respect for the fullness of one another's humanity, protecting it as we would our own. For your sake, and in your name, we pray. Amen.