

Jonah

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Have I got a whale of a story for you!

A pair of kayakers had a close call a couple of weeks ago off the coast of California, when a massive humpback whale scooped their kayak up in its mouth, and then spit them out. Thankfully, neither kayaker was seriously injured. Can you imagine? When I read this story, I joked that knowing the story of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible, if I had been one of those kayakers, I might have been considering whether God was trying to get my attention.

As someone who chooses to interpret the story of Jonah as a deliciously funny folk tale, I wondered if a close call like these kayakers experienced, with a whale or a really big fish, was at the root of the Jonah tale. Maybe the original storyteller heard of or experienced something like this, and it sparked his imagination. Whatever the inspiration was, this ancient story of a life-saving fish and cranky prophet is perhaps the most entertaining, larger than life, call story in the bible and it's all wrapped up the timeless message of God's persistence and love for all people.

I've heard Jonah described as the worst prophet ever. In the Hebrew Bible, generally, the words of the prophets are held up as wisdom for faithful lives, as yardsticks for right and wrong. Jonah's story is different. It is the story of a prophet who, to be honest, might be among the easiest for us to relate to because he gets it wrong in some pretty big ways. One of the things Jonah's story highlights is the contrast between the compassion of human beings and the compassion of God. Our call, as people of God, is to align our lives with God. And we, like Jonah, struggle at times to do so.

God called Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to tell them to shape up, but Jonah resisted. Nineveh held absolutely no appeal to Jonah. In his mind, it was a vile place filled with enemies whose salvation was not worth sending a prophet, even a reluctant prophet. In fact, Jonah kind of liked the idea of Nineveh not getting God's message. So, instead of answering God's call, Jonah hopped a cargo ship to Tarshish, which happened to be in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Like he could hide from God. Jonah ended up in the belly of the big fish because the sailors, as a last resort to save themselves, tossed him overboard.

God had Jonah's attention. "Jonah, you cannot hide from me, now sit in this fish and think about what you have done." While in the fish's belly, Jonah prayed. God heard Jonah's prayer and caused the fish to spew Jonah onto dry land and God gave him a second chance: This is Jonah 3:1-5, 10.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Even the king took Jonah's message to heart.

And ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This was Jonah's short and to the point message to the Ninevites:
"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

It may come as a surprise to us that, in the story, the prophet's warning was heeded by the Ninevites. If a stranger walked through our towns, with a message like that, would we take him seriously? The Ninevites heard the urgency in Jonah's cries, and they changed their ways. So, I wonder, who are the prophets crying out to us today?

Do we hear their sense of urgency?

Do we listen to their cries and respond?

If you have been part of any community organizing effort, you have probably heard the mantra, "thought does not create action, action creates thought." Community organizers understand that change only happens when people feel that there is sense of urgency. In general, if people think they have all the time in

the world to do something, they will take all the time in the world to do it. And make all the excuses about why they are taking all the time in the world.

That's why activists work to get people involved in action first. It is no accident that, as we do the work of advocacy and justice, we come face to face with the ones most affected by the work. And when we see real people, learn their names, and begin to understand what is really going on in their lives, when we see their suffering, and hear the urgency in their stories, we start to think about things differently; action creates thought.

And when we get involved, it is easy to see that our own privilege so often keeps us shielded from the urgency that exists in the world and in the lives of our neighbors.

We need prophets like Jonah to remind us that immigration and border reform is urgent because someone is about to be deported and there is a chance that person's child is still in a cage somewhere in this country.

<https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention/immigrant-kids-keep-dying-cbp-detention>

We need prophets like Jonah to remind us that addressing food insecurity is urgent because someone right now is trying to figure out to stretch a box of Hamburger Helper without hamburger. 1 in 6 children in the United States lives in a food insecure household.

<https://www.paaap.org/epic-food-insecurity.html>

We need prophets like Jonah to show us that dismantling systemic racism is urgent because there are young, Black students on the school to prison pipeline in this country today. The ACLU reports: Black students make up 16% of the student body in public schools, yet 42% of the students who receive multiple suspensions and 31% of students arrested at school are Black.

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/school-prison-pipeline-infographic>

We need prophets like Jonah to remind us that investing in new ways to power our homes, offices, and cars is urgent because there are Inuit families along the coast of Canada and in Greenland in danger of losing their homes to rising sea waters right now.

<https://climate.org/rising-sea-levels-and-indigenous-communities/>

Today's prophets...the ones marching in the streets, making speeches, writing postcards, risking their own lives and comfort, are trying to tell us that we are running out of time. Every day we do nothing, someone's urgent need remains unmet and, for someone, it is too late.

But there was more to Jonah's story than his urgent warning to the Ninevites. After he delivered God's message and the people listened and changed their ways, he got mad at God for changing God's mind about destroying Nineveh. There was just no pleasing Jonah...even though his prophetic mission was successful, he wasn't happy. It seems like his idea of success and God's were completely different. And I wonder if sometimes the same is true for us.

I wonder if we sit in our warm houses, with plenty of food in the cupboard, our voter ID cards and health insurance cards in our wallets and we use all of that as a measure of our success. Surrounded by all of that, we might ask, is that success to God? Does our ability to secure those things for ourselves align with God's purpose for us in this world?

Based on the end of Jonah's story, I am going to go way out on a limb and say no. After Jonah let God know how mad he was about saving the Ninevites:

⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty

thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

God’s final words to the prophet remind us of the difference between human compassion and God’s. Jonah can muster plenty of self-compassion, but absolutely none for the Ninevites, “the others,” in this story. God should destroy the Ninevites, but not the plant protecting Jonah. God should save Jonah, a disobedient, begrudging prophet, but not the people of Nineveh who heard the prophet’s urgent cries and aligned themselves with God’s will immediately.

Our call is not to save ourselves, friends. We also don’t have to feel guilty that we have a home and food and access to health insurance and “the right” birth certificate, but we must understand that having those things is not why we are here, they do not make us successful in God’s eyes. Assuring our own security is not our end game. Instead, our call is to care for our neighbors, so they too are secure and to continually expand our understanding of who our neighbors actually are. Our neighbors are Democrats and Republicans. Our neighbors are Bartlesville Bruins and Ponca City Wildcats. Our neighbors live north and south of our borders and across oceans. Our neighbors see the world just like we do and vastly different.

If this moment in our lives is not the moment to listen, to act, to speak, to love, when will that moment come? Forty days might be too late for some of our neighbors. One of the things I love about this story is that, in our lives, at times we are like Jonah, running from God, asking for a second chance, reluctantly carrying God’s message, being mad because someone got something good they didn’t deserve. And, at times, we are the people of Nineveh, the least likely to listen, learn, and change, and then we do. Who are you most like today? May the story of Jonah remind us of the urgent need to listen to the prophets among us and to run toward the ways of God...and to take our neighbors with us. Amen.