

## Jonah

How do you move past a tribal God? How do we love our enemies and accept that God also loves our enemies? Jonah is a great story to explore these questions.

Most people don't associate parables with the Old Testament, but it's actually chock full of them. The book of Jonah is one such parable, but could be further described as equal parts parable and slapstick routine.

On the one hand, it is a prophetic tale with many paradigmatic elements, and can be understood to bring into focus important theological questions: What is the nature of prophetic calling? Are humans free to resist the will of God? Does God change God's mind? What is the role of human repentance? And how do foreign nations figure in God's plans?

What Jonah is not, is the historical report of a real prophet. Rather, it is part of a long history of basically fictional tales written and preserved by ancient scribes, such as Ahiqar and Wenamun. The content and style of these stories vary, but, in general, tales in the genre seem to be reflections on how (and how not) to live. And although they are broadly entertaining, they seem to have been ideally aimed at a courtly audience of more-or-less educated people, who might even travel to foreign lands like the main characters do. The aforementioned stories also all contain serious theological messages alongside their other content.

When God called Jonah to go and warn the violent and godless Ninevites of their impending doom, all his pride in being Hebrew, and therefore uniquely favoured by God (so he thought along with many others of his nation), rose up in rebellion. Pagans, to him were the worst kind of human garbage, not even fit to pollute the good earth by living on it. They were the

“untouchables”, and that God should take an interest in them was unthinkable.

In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the Assyrians plundered Palestine, looting and burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. Nineveh was proud of killing Hebrews. Wall reliefs found in a palace in Nineveh depict a siege with images of Judeans being impaled, and stacks of Hebrew heads being counted by their scribes, for a pay per head policy.

“Go to Nineveh”, says God. And Jonah says, “Anywhere, Lord; anywhere but Nineveh.” For perspective, imagine a mid-20th century Jew being asked to go witness to the guards at Auschwitz or an African-American being asked to preach to the Ku Klux Klan.

The biblical story is simple. God orders Jonah to faraway Nineveh to tell the sinful people that their days are numbered. Jonah makes an entirely logical decision. Rather than walk to a place where he is likely to be slaughtered (what ARE you thinking of, God?) he goes the exact opposite direction. Jonah plays the truant, fleeing in the opposite direction and boarding a ship in Tarshish.

Just after it embarks, God assails the vessel with a great storm. Jonah takes the blame, tells the sailors to throw him overboard so that the ocean will cease raging. Instead of drowning, the prophet is rescued by a divinely appointed fish that swallows him whole. Inside the fish, Jonah prays and apparently receives divine forgiveness for his disobedience. He is delivered safely back onto dry land and commissioned again. This time Jonah submits to God's command and travels to Nineveh.

But there is a problem. The king and people of Nineveh take Jonah seriously.

VERY seriously. And so they put on sackcloth and ashes and show that they truly repent of their wickedness.

God takes their repentance as valid and chooses not to destroy the city and slaughter the people. When the Lord relents and does not execute the intended penalty, a pouting prophet begs God to let him die. Poor Jonah. He is so distressed at the idea that God would show mercy to those horrible Assyrians - those violent pagans. Which brings us to our opening question.

***How do you move beyond a tribal God?***

For most of the Jewish Scriptures, God is, essentially, seen as a tribal God - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel. This is the God who actively fights for the tribe, as in the story of the Exodus. But over time a new understanding of God erupts, seen most often in the writings during and after the Exile, when the people discover (almost as a surprise) that even though the temple has been destroyed, God is still with them. They re-understand God as much more than a tribal God, they start to see God as the God not just of Israel, but of all the people. And this forces them to start to wonder how they should see other people.

Once we see that God is not just the God of our tribe, our people, those who are like us, then we are forced to admit that maybe we should love them. Even if for no other reason than because God loves them. In this month when we pause to remember, when we remind ourselves "Never Again", when we recall the horrible cost of hatred and fear of the other, it is good to remind ourselves that we have moved past a tribal God, and that God calls us to a higher way of living. We understand that God is NOT a tribal God. God is not just our God, God is God, the God of all the world. We may not always like what that suggests, but, like Jonah, we need to learn to live with that reality.

After preaching God's message, Jonah leaves Nineveh and perches himself to the east of the city. He watches at a distance to see what would happen, no doubt hoping that God would blast the city to oblivion. Nineveh is not the only one in need of repentance.

In order to win back the wayward Jonah, God creates a scenario that is intended to teach the reluctant prophet a lesson in divine mercy and compassion. Instead of raining down destruction on Nineveh, God turns his attention to Jonah. Jonah is given a plant to provide him with shade; the following day, however, God sends a worm to smite the plant, along with a sultry east wind to "beat down on Jonah's head". The cranky prophet seems to care more for his own comfort than for the city's inhabitants.

Taking advantage of Jonah's acute discomfort, God steps in with a lesson: God asks Jonah, "Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?" "Yes", he replied, "so deeply that I want to die". Then God said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?"

The wind, the worm, and the weed are charged with placing Jonah back on the path of compassion, and to remind him that God alone decides to whom he will give mercy. But the human heart clings to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, cling to pride than embrace mercy. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: the Ninevites are not the only recipients of God's mercy. God stays with the bitter and unforgiving prophet, extending mercy to the

merciless, and compassion to the one whose heart is set on wrath.

Human forgiveness is unreliable, but divine pardon is bestowed upon those who repent. While God remains free to execute sovereign will, the Ninevites are not punished for sin when they turn from their evil ways.

Forgiveness is only slightly less ancient than sin. While examples of forgiveness are found throughout the Bible, nowhere is forgiveness formally defined. Three episodes in the book of Jonah centre on forgiveness: God's salvation of the rebellious prophet, mercy to the wayward Ninevites, and discussion with Jonah concerning universal clemency. Though God models love in each instance, it is not clear that the prophet ever understands divine grace. Forgiving one's enemies has challenged people throughout time, especially in recent history.

Those victimized by some of history's darkest moments, such as the Holocaust and apartheid, and individuals who grapple with the ordinary lacerations of everyday life - seek guidance. Forgiving requires calling forth the strongest love contained within the human soul.

Jonah's story resonates through the ages because his struggle is archetypal. When God directs him toward Nineveh to condemn its inhabitants, Jonah faces what may seem like an unbearable burden. No Superhero, Jonah is an ordinary human, much like us, who seeks to evade responsibility and duty, and has difficulty accepting his enemies as deserving of forgiveness. Jonah "went down" to Joppa, thus beginning his descent into the world of noncompliance. From Joppa he goes to Tarshish, an ancient seaport, at the end of the then-known earth. The city represents the furthest distance imaginable and shows just how far Jonah is willing to go to avoid God's bidding.

Onboard ship, as Jonah sleeps, God commands the sea to rage. A symbol both of divine power and human inner turmoil, the storm is dark, violent, and potentially deadly. In the bowels of the ship, a second descent, the prophet escapes into the oblivion and non-accountability that slumber affords. But when it appears that all is lost, he confesses his identity and asks to be hurled into the ocean, a noble if belated gesture of self-sacrifice. Jonah believes that the ship is in danger of breaking up and that the sailors' lives will be saved if his is lost at sea. When Jonah is thrown overboard, he undergoes a kind of baptism. The waters close around him and wash away his former insubordinate self.

After being spit up onto dry land, the prophet is presented with a second opportunity to learn obedience, and the issue of divine forgiveness rises to the surface like sea foam. Once Jonah yields to the terror of the deep, and the human conscience it represents, both the sea and the prophet are transformed. The trip into the behemoth's innards is a third descent. This creature represents Jonah's monstrous misdeeds, as well as being an instrument of salvation. For three days, Jonah survives on the threshold of self-annihilation, a voyage into his inner being. By "dying" to his physical self, as represented by his disappearance into the fish's belly, Jonah can receive God's forgiveness and be reborn.

The prophet never directly asks for forgiveness. Yet after praying and meditating on the Lord's power to rescue and redeem, Jonah concludes that "Deliverance is the Lord's!" Inside the fish, Jonah has time to reflect on his perilous situation and change his attitude. God then seems to forgive Jonah, for the previously willful prophet is blown by the winds of promise and wafted back onshore among the living.

After Jonah is released from his aquatic life raft, he obeys God's second

command and goes to Nineveh.

If Tarshish represents distance from God, Nineveh represents blackest depravity. Ancient Nineveh was well known for its lawlessness and violence. Yet Nineveh also represents second chances to hear and obey God. In Nineveh, Jonah issues a single proclamation that the city "shall be overthrown." Miraculously, the people and their king repent, their instantaneous righteousness serving as a stark contrast to Jonah's obstinate refusal to obey God.

Though the Ninevites do not know the Israelite God well enough to be certain that the prescribed punishment will be lifted, God decides to save them from destruction. Forgiveness is implied if not specifically mentioned. Surely Jonah should congratulate himself on a job well done. He delivers his message of doom and a guilty people are saved. Mission accomplished! But Jonah is not pleased with the outcome and goes off by himself to brood. God and Jonah must still work things out.

In the book of Jonah, God's loving-kindness is established as universal. What remains to be demonstrated is whether Jonah, himself recently delivered, accepts God's merciful plan for the whole world as symbolized by the Ninevites. In the final chapter, God's conduct is presented as a model for human beings, encouraging the same flexibility as the deity.

When Jonah sulks, complains, and asks for death rather than watch the deliverance of his enemies, God rhetorically declares: "Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city!" The book then abruptly concludes without a reply from the prophet. God has the last word ... Why? Because God and not Jonah, is the hero and main character in the story. The tale exemplifies forgiveness and subtly encourages human beings to emulate divine behaviour. Jonah's

silence constitutes an open ending, inviting readers to question what they would do in a similar situation.

God's last statement to Jonah encourages readers to engage in the struggle that grips the prophet. God implies that divine forgiveness should be awarded to the Ninevites, but never suggests that Jonah follow suit: a genuine conundrum. Jonah's story demonstrates that no one in heaven or on earth can force another to forgive; there must be a desire to do so. Jonah is deeply conflicted and seems ambivalent about letting go of his grievances. The Ninevites never directly ask for Jonah's forgiveness, so he may feel unable to pardon them. He knows God is gracious, so perhaps he believes that adding his forgiveness would be superfluous.

Maybe he hates these foreigners so much that he cannot imagine divine leniency extending to them. Whatever his motivation, many have experienced the same stinginess of spirit at some time, and there can be legitimate reasons to withhold forgiveness. Cheap grace may encourage wrongdoers to victimize others, yet those who let go of disappointment, anger, spite, and desire for vengeance may free themselves from these same emotions. Human forgiveness is not only a gift magnanimously conferred upon others; when bestowed in suitable ways, it lifts the giver to a higher level.

When we look beyond the Bible, there is much to learn about forgiveness. First, forgiving and reconciling are not identical. Forgiveness can be unilateral, but reconciliation is a two-way street. If we have an opportunity for genuine dialogue with people who have wronged us, or whom we have wronged, perhaps we would forgive and be forgiven. It may be inappropriate to absolve those who have not apologized or promised to mend their ways. God forgives offenses against God, but people must make amends for



transgressions committed against one another.

Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing, for one may forgive an oppressor while remembering the concept of "Never Again". Also, forgiving people does not necessarily mean that they deserve tender treatment. Admitting guilt and asking to be released from blame are surely components of the process. Punishing wrongdoers remains a way of mending what is broken, and forgiving does not always mean that the penalty should be revoked.

What Jonah fails to perceive is that forgiveness is love as it is practised among people who realize that no one behaves perfectly. It is an internal process as much as an external one. In our hearts, we stop holding on to the hurt. If forgiveness does not occur, the wrongdoer will continue to win the power struggle, causing the Jonah within us to remain wounded and unemancipated.

For those who suffer, forgiving has advantages. Laying down the burden of wrath can be a relief contributing to emotional well-being. If we withhold pardon, we may lock ourselves in a dark, cold tower we help to preserve. And where is God in all of this? The Book of Jonah shows that God chooses to pardon even the most sinful among us, though ordinary people might not. Whether we struggle to forgive misdeeds causing mere personal inconvenience, or catastrophes resulting in international trauma, we are all Jonahs.

Those whose love for their enemies transcends human hatred understand this. It is a love that is hard to comprehend. Maake Masango, the black South African pastor was studying in the United States before the fall of Apartheid. His forgiveness, his openness, were hard to understand as he headed back

to South Africa, and the probability of prison.

Unlike Jonah, Maake Masango has a vision of the wideness of God's mercy that carries him beyond the natural hatred he could feel for the Afrikaaner. His model is not Jonah, but Jesus, and his motto is not "Punish them, Lord" but "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." Jonah, like King Lear, remained a tragic character to the end. But we don't have to. The good news is this: in Jesus Christ you can become a new person altogether. We are made in God's image and, by God's grace made to open our hearts to one another.

**Amen.**

**THE PRAYERS FOR NOVEMBER 10, 2024**  
God of love ... MAKE US CHANNELS OF YOUR PEACE

God of peace and love, today we gather to remember. We remember that in Jesus of Nazareth you have called us to be people of peace saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers" and reminding us that we are to love our neighbour and our enemy as we love ourselves.

Loving God, we acknowledge that as a global community we fail to live out those words. We give thanks for all who have chosen to serve their country. We give thanks for their bravery, commitment, and love. But we know that when armies meet on the field there are always some who don't come home.

We pause in the memory of those who went and did not return to mothers and wives, husbands and children. We remember all who fell and were buried far from home, or who sank to a watery grave in the cold Atlantic. We remember those in this century who went back to the battlefield only to return in a coffin carried solemnly to a waiting aircraft.

God, whose hope for the world is peace, we not only remember the fallen of Canada who lie buried under a military tombstone. We also remember the fallen of all the nations of the world. We honour all who die as a result of humanity's common failing to live in the peace you have hoped for all these millennia.

We pray too for those who returned from battle forever changed by what they had seen. For those who bore, and still bear, wounds of body and soul. Help to reawaken and strengthen our commitment to work for peace, as we remember that peace will never come from a gun barrel but from the depths of our hearts. Help us remember our calling to be peacemakers at home and abroad, in the big things and in the small. And may we never forget the cost that has already been paid.

We pause in the midst of our remembering to hold in our hearts, minds and souls those who struggle with mental, spiritual, and physical challenges, especially Bishop Kathy, Kristin Steele, and Jean McKain. May they know that they are not alone and may your promised word of peace touch the disquiet and disorder in their lives.

We pray for the church, for our own congregation and for Mount Olive Lutheran in Surrey and Rev. Lori-Anne Boutin-Crawford, our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and

volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

The past few days have been a mixture of potential and grief around the world. Even as the events around us tempt us to close our eyes to the world at large, help us to see beyond ourselves to the cares and joys of a bigger world.

We pray for all who bear the burden and privilege of leadership: political, military and religious, asking for gifts of wisdom and resolve in the search for reconciliation and peace.

We pray for our world that faces so much violence. We pray especially for the people suffering war conditions and the threat of war. May leaders at every level learn to speak in favour of humanity and justice.

Lord, we pray for your church that we be a beacon of hope, grace, love and light in this world. May our open doors reflect your open arms to all. May our arms and hands reaching out to those in need reflect your love for all. May our forgiveness of one another reflect your forgiveness for all.

God of truth and justice, help us to lift our eyes above the torment of this broken world, and grant us the grace to pray for those who wish us harm. As we honour the past, may we put our faith in your future; for you are the source of life and hope, now and for ever.

**Amen**

Joined into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught ...

**Our Father ...**