

**A Deep Dive into the Story of Jonah**  
**Unitarian Fellowship, Morehead City NC, July 25, 2021 (ZOOM)**

Once upon a time there was a prophet named Jonah. He was a really different sort of prophet, because he did not want to answer his call to preach. All the other prophets enjoyed shouting from the rooftops, and did a good job at it, but not Jonah. I suspect the reason this story is so beloved, is that most of us know what it is like to avoid something to which we have been called. Whether we think we are called by God, or by our conscience.

The word of God comes to Jonah, and he hears a call to go to the city of Ninevah, and cry against it because of their evil ways. Now, on first reading this most of us probably would say, here we go again. A vengeful, angry Old Testament God wants his prophet to go preach at some perfectly innocent people who were probably just partying a little too much. So when Jonah runs away to Joppa, to hide from The Presence of the Lord we might say, run dude. If I believed in that angry Old Man God I'd run too.

So, understandably, Jonah runs to Joppa and finds a ship sailing as far as he can get, pays his fare, and then goes to the inmost part of the ship, and falls asleep. The ship goes out to sea, and a big storm comes up. The sailors are afraid and they figure someone's God is to blame. Someone on this ship has bad karma and is going to take us all down with him.

So they cast some lots and agree it's that sleeper down in the hold. His God is the angry God making the seas rise. The captain goes down and says: Sleeper Awake! And Jonah goes up to the deck and the sailors beg him to intercede with his God. The long and the short of it is: Although they don't want to, not initially, the sailors toss Jonah overboard and sure enough that does the trick. The seas are becalmed. The God has been fed his sacrifice.

And you know the rest: This the best known part of the story. The Lord appoints a whale, or literally in the Hebrew, a "great fish" to swallow up Jonah. He's in the belly of the great fish for three days. Whereupon he at last repents for avoiding God and his calling, and gets vomited up on the shore.

The word of God then comes to Jonah a second time, and this time he obeys. He doesn't have much choice. This time he goes to Ninevah to preach.

I don't know about you, but learning about that story growing up, seeing it picture in books, and art, I thought the belly of the whale was the point of the story. But, really, it's after Jonah lands on his *tukhas* on the sand that the story takes a turn. If it ended

there, we might think it's a story about obedience. About a sovereign God trying to prove he's in charge. That there's nowhere you can run from Him. And so far it sounds that way. But it's about so much more. I hear it as a story not so much about how a Higher Power is all powerful, as that Love is all powerful. I'll show you why.

Jonah goes to Ninevah, and it is so huge a city that it would take three days to journey through it. Jonah's divine task is to walk through the city, crying out: Yet Forty days and Ninevah shall be overthrown! But he walks only one day into the city and the Ninevites repent. It was that easy!

In Hebrew the word for repent is *teshuvah*, which means to turn, or return. It is also related to the word sorrow. So the Ninevites feel sorrow at their evil ways, and they re-turn towards the good, to God. And for this reason, God "repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

One could imagine Jonah would be overjoyed. He didn't go through all that suffering in the whale for nothing. He's been a successful prophet! The Ninevites actually listened to his sermon without falling asleep. And what's more, it got to them. They repented.

But Jonah wasn't pleased. In fact he basically says to God:

I knew it! I knew you would do this. I knew that you'd be "*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. Therefore take my life from me now, for it is better for me to die than to live!*"

Wow. What a self-righteous, self-pitying, resentful prophet. And we thought God was the angry character in this story! Who is this Jonah, who apparently either doesn't want the people he preaches to, to actually listen to him?

Or, he doesn't want God to forgive those people. Or both.

If the Ninevites had turned a deaf ear, or treated Jonah poorly, certainly God would have punished them. And it appears that's what Jonah wanted. He wanted the Ninevites to be punished. Not forgiven. Why?

Well, haven't we all longed to see an "enemy" punished for the evil they have done in the past? Don't we find ourselves sometimes saying, they'll get theirs. That's how life works. Karma in this life. It could be that's what this story is about: That aspect of our human nature. The vengeful side of all of us.

But in doing research I learned that something besides pettiness made Jonah angry that the Ninevites had not been given their just desserts. Turns out, if you were a Jewish person, hearing this story thousands of years ago, you would know why the Ninevites were being called to repent. That they were the ethnic cleansers of their time and place. The Ninevites practiced ethnic cleansing of Jews, in particular; were famous for putting

the heads of their enemies on the entrance pillars to the city as a warning to all who entered.

The Ninevites were genocidal maniacs in other words. The Slobodon Milosevics and the Omar Al Bashir's and the Hitlers, of their time. Some of them anyway. Others in the city would have been those quasi-innocent bystanders who watched and did nothing.

So let that sink in for a minute. God is asking Jonah, a Jew, to preach to an early breed of Nazis, asking them to see the error of their ways. Suddenly the story itself turns. Every kind of preconception I ever had about the story, fell away when I learned this. Jonah was not lazy, he wasn't actually a reluctant prophet, he was a sane one. He was doing what any one of us would do when he ran away from the call to preach to Nazis. No wonder he ran away to the ocean and jumped on a ship.

And perhaps most importantly, this changes who the character of God is in this story as well. God is not an imperiously angry God randomly exacting obedience from his mildly disloyal subject.

But who is he? And why is he putting Jonah in such a dangerous situation?

I think the story is demonstrating to its listeners, that the reach of the divine power of love is infinite. Why else choose the Ninevites, the most extreme example possible of Evil?

I think this is one of the stories that must have made our Universalist ancestors wake up, as they read their Bibles and say, Whoah, God loves everyone. God is NOT actually a vengeful God. And so their theology grew, out of this story, as well as countless others that have the same message in the Bible. God IS love.

Imagine being led by a Presence so powerful that you were called to actually preach to your worst and most terrifying enemies.

Who would the Ninevites be today, in our own country?

Who are your personal Ninevites?

Jonah has been called to speak truth to power. What if you were called today to speak truth to power? Who would that be to? What if you heard clearly, in your heart, or however you personally hear wisdom that is beyond your ordinary ability, that you were supposed to go to the house of your least favorite politician and ask them to repent?

What if that politician, after only one day of your protestations, said: Ah I get it, yes, I will turn, I will turn in sorrowful repentance. I will don sackcloth and sit in ashes.

Would you believe them?

Of course not. You'd probably think they had a trick up their sleeve. You'd probably do what Jonah did next. You'd go outside the Beltway, and sit in the shade of a tree and watch and wait. In deep resentment.

Jonah builds a little booth outside the city of Ninevah and waits, in anger, disappointment, and loathing. He waits to see what will become of the city.

I guess Jonah wants to see if, when God turns his back again, the Ninevites will return to their old tricks. Or better yet! God will change God's mind and mete out a little punishment after all. How can God let these people get off scot free? Surely they ought to suffer at least a little as their victims did.

I don't know about you but I've built a booth in my mind. And I sit in it some days, waiting to see what's going to happen to some of the people I have decided are the enemies of Democracy. Will they have to pay their dues? Do they know anything of repentance? Of sorrow and turning?

Jonah becomes exhausted by the whole struggle, by his own inner battle. As I sometimes have. As we all get exhausted. Waiting to see what happens to this story of Good and Evil we are living through.

Jonah (basically) says to God: If this is what life is about, if the bad guys win, well forget it, I might as well die. Life Itself (God) is not fair, Jonah decides. I've been good, I did what you told me to do, and look what it got me. Nothing ever works the way it should.

And then God asks him a question: Do you do well to be angry?

And then he gives Jonah a plant. He puts it over him to give him comfort. And small as this token is, Jonah is exceedingly happy. Maybe he thinks: Now I am loved by God after all. Maybe God does love me better than the Ninevites he saved.

But then God withers the plant and Jonah begins to melt under the heat. So his mood plummets again. And again he feels jerked around by God, by life. Unloved again. And again he says: I might as well die.

He is such a drama queen.

And God asks him again: Do you do well to be angry?

And again, Jonah says: I do well to be angry, angry enough to *die*.

Then God asks Jonah a final question. And I believe it's a rhetorical question. Because we are not told Jonah's answer. It is left hanging, to reverberate within our hearts and minds.

The God character says: *"You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. Should I not pity Ninevah, 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 much cattle.” End of story.*

Here is what I get, at this point in time, from the last paragraph. I hear that this God character is trying to convert the worst possible sinners he could find, to a whole new *way* of living, in love and justice. So he is saying to Jonah, everybody is offered redemption. Everybody is loved by me. And if I, Life Itself, am about that, who are you to be partial?

So the story is about *Jonah's* repentance; *Jonah's* turning, his returning to God and to a worldview of universal love. Not the Ninevites. It's not about the Ninevite's repentance at all. It's about the mirror that is held up to Jonah over and over again.

Yet we don't learn if Jonah turns. If he repents. So, it is also about us. We are being asked to turn. We are Jonah. God holds up a mirror to Jonah, to us, and says: Look, look in your heart. Do you do well to be petulant, or resentful, or unforgiving, when I, the source of all, the Love at the heart of the Universe, am forgiving to everyone?

He also says, these are people who don't know their right hand from their left. They are ignorant of the **way** of love and justice. They need to learn this lesson over and over again. They need to un-learn their familiar ways. Maybe one day they'll get it. Until then, I will forgive them, over and over again. Even if it looks like life is not therefore fair, to you.

And he's also saying to Jonah: And so do you, need to learn, how to do that, over and over again. To unlearn your disobedience to Love. The story wants us to look into ourselves. But it does not want us to set up a booth and camp out inside of all of our resentments.

God as Love, which is what our Universalist ancestors believed God was, Love itself, is what needs to take root in the Ninevites. In Jonah. In us.

So we are called, by this story. We are called to action, for the power of love, even if that action takes us into scary places.

And yes we should look inside our hearts as well. We're called to look in there as well. We can ask ourselves: Do I do well to be angry in this moment? Maybe I do. But am I being self-righteous? Am I petty and vindictive and a fan of a cruel form of justice?

I'm not certain if this story is telling us to *love* our enemies, it might be. Or it might be telling us that God loves our enemies. And God knows we often don't have the stomach to do the same. So we don't have to, not yet. God will do it for us.

So I'm not preaching that Jonah is not a good person if he speaks truth to power without love in his heart for his enemy. It is clear who God is in this story and it is not

Jonah. Maybe the story is telling us we can leave the forgiving up to a higher power, for now. I'm not sure I have done enough work on my own soul, and my own heart, to always be able to speak truth to power, and love the powerful at the same time. But we do well, to ask the Power of Love to be there with us before we speak.

I think the story might also be telling us that we are indeed an interdependent web. And that that doesn't just mean in all the sweet and good ways we love to ponder when we are out in nature. If our lives are inextricably caught up together in one big web, then what the wonderful theologian Richard Rohr says is true:

That both "sin" and salvation are corporate and social realities. He writes "we are all guilty with one another's sin and not just our own. We are all good, with one another's goodness and not just our own. My life is not just about me."

So in a way, the story of Jonah *is* about obedience. But obedience to Love. When we are at our deepest depths it is Love that calls us out. And it is out of our own/other darkness that Love is calling us.

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