

Endless Love
The Book of Jonah
Jonah 3:10-4:11
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May the God.....

The book of Jonah is more than a whale. Jonah is quite simply, four chapters of unvarnished humanity with a sea monster thrown in for special effect.

It's a story that most biblical scholars find difficult to date, but that doesn't matter because its timeless.

It all begins when God says to Jonah, "Go East to Ninevah, prophesy to those people and tell them to change their evil ways." And Jonah says, "Seriously?" and goes West to Tarshish.

Why? Because the Ninevites are the enemy, powerful ruthless conquerors who have recently destroyed the Kingdom of Israel. It's not where any self-respecting Israelite goes for a good time.

So Jonah, knowing that he needs to get out of town hops on a boat going the opposite direction. But doing this is the grownup equivalent of and closing your eyes and hoping that the person who is looking for you can't see you. Good for God. Bummer for Jonah.

While at Sea the Lord causes a great wind to blow up and buffet the boat with mighty waves. In hopes of saving the ship and their souls the sailors toss crates from the deck hoping to lighten the load and raise the ship's hold.

The sailors in their terror pray to their gods for relief from the storm, but still it rages on. Eventually they cast lots and find out that Jonah was the reason for the season. Jonah's presence on their boat is why God has stirred the sea. They find out that he is running from God. All they can say is: "Why did you run this way?" He replies, "Never mind—just throw me overboard and the sea will relent."

The sailors don't want to—they try to row him ashore but in the end it's just too much and so they give in to his request and toss him in to the sea, all the while praying to Jonah's God. As he hits the water the sea calms.

But as we all know things are going to pick up for Jonah—and along comes the whale. Three days and three nights Jonah sits in the belly of the whale. He prays and relents and says he'll honor his vows to God.

God makes the great fish vomit Jonah up on the beach. And again God says, "Jonah, now go to Nineveh and proclaim to that great city what I tell you."

And Jonah goes. He walks a third of the way into the city and thus begins the wimpiest prophecy in biblical history. “40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Repent. ” It’s not a prophet’s finest work, but the people heard Jonah and believed God. In spite of Jonah’s performance, they repented.

By decree of the King—every person, man, woman and child and every animal wore sackcloth. All creatures great and small fasted and cried out for God’s mercy. “Let us turn back from our evil ways, who knows God may yet see us and relent and let us live.”

Sure enough—when God saw what all of the people of Nineveh were doing, both great and small, God renounced the punishment and did not carry it out. God changed God’s mind and did not destroy them.

Nineveh repents, God relents, and boy was Jonah ticked off. You would think he’d be happy, proud of his prophetic performance, charismatic charm—his ability to save a nation—no—not so much—he is irate. He is irate for several reasons. One: that God would dare to care to save these people—Ninevites. Two: that he, an Israelite, had a hand in saving them. Three: He is irate because there is no mass destruction, havoc, chaos and widespread mayhem, proving Jonah’s chops as a prophet.

Jonah is furious and throws the biggest temper tantrum recorded in scripture. Picture if you will—Jonah’s face—not even red anymore—he’s so mad that his face is now white. He lashes out to the God of Heaven, who made the sea and dry land

“I knew it! Isn’t this just what I said before I got on that God-forsaken boat this is why I ran the other way. You—you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready, ready to relent from punishing.”

And then switching from 3 year old temper tantrum to drama king, “Please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

God says to him, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Jonah storms from the city. Builds a booth by the city wall and sits and watches and pouts as he waits to see what will happen to the city. It’s almost as if he is sitting there in hopes that God will change God’s mind and smite them all.

God watching Jonah, makes a bush grow next to him. The bush is lovely and full and grows tall quickly and shelters Jonah from the hot sun. Jonah becomes very attached to that plant. God then provides a worm that attacks the bush. It withers and dies. Jonah, back to the drama king says, “It’s better for me to die than to live.”

God says, “Is it right Jonah for you to be angry about the plant?”
“I am so angry that I want to die—“

God says, “You are concerned about a bush for which you did not even labor? A bush that came and went in one day. Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city of 120,000 people who don’t know their way? Jonah—do you do well to be angry?”

The story ends and we don’t even know what Jonah is thinking.

It’s easy to laugh and to mock Jonah, but the thing is, let’s think about it for a moment. I wonder in reality how very different I am or you or anyone of us how very different we are from Jonah—how many of us long for the people we dislike, the people who may have hurt us, how many of us long for them to be forgiven, cared for and loved compassionately by God.

The way it goes, at least in my life— Sometimes I want punishment, retribution, comeuppance at the very least for the ones who I think deserve it. Jonah’s actions and attitudes make sense. On many days—I’d make a pretty good Jonah.

Thankfully, neither we, nor Jonah are in charge. Author Annie Lamott sums this all up beautifully when she says, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

We do that don’t we? With the very best of intentions, we think God must feel the same way we do about politics, religion, the world and the people in it.

However, God is way bigger than we are. God is not limited by our limitations. That is the point of this story—that’s the gift of being faithful people—to realize that we can neither dictate nor contain God’s overwhelming compassion for absolutely everyone.

Though we may believe that they are far from God and beyond the pale, God thinks otherwise. God sees otherwise. God does otherwise. No one, no one—be they “us” or “them”—no one is beyond our God.

Dear friends that is good news, because more days than not, we are like the Ninevites, we are the ones who have slipped, we are the ones who have fallen, we are the ones who at times have benefited from injustices, the ones who have cheated, mis-stepped, misspoke, missed the mark. We are the ones in need of God’s endlessly patient steadfast love. God loves us. God loves them. God loves all of us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.