

Letting Jonah Grow Up

Menno Mennonite Church
January 31, 2021

Purpose: To explore the message of Jonah for our life and times.

Message: Jonah is a story speaking to the nature of God that challenges our assumptions, even now.

Scripture: Jonah 4:1-11

Synopsis: Jonah is a story that we, often, leave trapped as it is and where it is. We grow up with the fish story because, well, who doesn't like a good fish story. And this is where it stays—a somewhat cute, somewhat disturbing fable about how it is a generally bad idea to run away from the call of God. But when you read the whole story, though, we are left wondering whether Jonah is the hero/victim that we make him out to be, or whether he is being used to make a different point all together.

In the end, Jonah is commenting far more about the YHWH that will not be constrained by any bounds, especially our own parochial interests than it is about how one should respond to YHWH God.

Jonah 4:1-11

¹ But this was very displeasing to Jonah,
and he became angry.

² He prayed to the Lord and said,
“O Lord!
Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country?

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;
for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love,
and ready to relent from punishing.

³ And now, O Lord,
please take my life from me,
for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴ And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

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?"

In my days as a camp counselor I had one weekly, specific job. It was my duty, I found, during the years that I served to sometime during the week to take on the specific task of leading in the time honored tradition of the Lion Hunt. Most camp cultures have their various versions of this I have found: a romping call and response selection that gets the kids good and hyper right before bed. If you missed it, it is setting out on a long, convoluted journey to find a lion and figure out what to do with it. Of course, when given the opportunity, you can weave all sorts of detours and interactions and what not into it, something that the Camp Friedenswald, our church camp of choice, has one of the more unique version complete with commercial jingles along the way, and old ones at that. Given enough time and what not, you can stretch this thing out impressively. I think my personal record is 20 minutes or so.

The point is what it is with any good story telling: to draw the audience in, bring them along for the ride and have them, hopefully, eagerly anticipating more. The more involved the story is in the telling the better on many occasions. You get as many twists and turns as you can afford to make it all the more juicy and intriguing. The more you can bring people along for the ride, the better the story and the better the ending when you can bring people along for the ride. And the bigger switch that you can pull on them at the end the better. The Lion Hunt ends as it begins: with a bored kid turning to TV only to find Wild Kingdom as the only fare.

I bring this up both, well, to involve you in some story telling his morning, but also because that is what this story of Jonah is doing as well. At the end of this whole fish story lies some fairly crucial conversations about who YHWH God is and how God thinks and does not think along the way. But to get there, the story teller uses some classic misdirection and exaggeration to heighten the drama and meaning along the way. The trick lies in mistaking the drama of the adventures of the high seas and the improbability of a great fish swallowing Jonah whole to preserve and deposit him where ought to have been going the whole time for the point of the story itself. That is the background; the pay off, the meat of the story is in these later conversations between God and Jonah about what does it mean that God doesn't do what Jonah, ultimately and passionately wishes he would.

It bears mentioning here too that I call this a story because that is what it is: a story within the body of Scripture that tells us the happenings of the people around a regarding God. More than once I have been told forthrightly: if you want me believe that marine life can support human life for days on end in order to have faith, than I am not interested. Most of the time this

is a general protest of someone who is objecting to the concept of faith in general rather than this in particular. We need to address that this is quite the tale, and a bit at the boundaries of credulity. At the end of the day I would say too things 1) since when is a story that might be a bit far fetched, perhaps, fail to carry important truth and 2) even if you must paint it as fiction, since when is fiction unequal to speaking deeply human and theological truth? My speaking about story isn't to necessarily argue this one way or another, but to acknowledge it as it is: as speaking of the truths about God in the shape of narrative story telling.

Luke and Anna are already captivated by this one, asking the big questions about how, why and where fore, mainly surrounding the mechanics of fish digestion. This is where we leave this story mostly—with the kiddie Sunday School material; interesting to be sure, but not much up to real work. I think we do well to think of this as it first was: as a story told around a campfire to the eager crowd looking for something that is engaging and real, wondering what is about to happen next. Putting the whale at the center of the story, and making this a moralism about what happens when you don't listen to God substantively misses the point. We need a grown up Jonah to carry the weight of a grown world. Because when it is all said and done, this Jonah who we are offered so well and so long as the would-be hero, ends up being the one who may have been the problem all along.

Jonah uses one of the basic creeds of Israelite faith, sketched in Exodus 34: *"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* (Exodus 34:6-7) and stands it up to the test of realistic consequence of the world. This basic statement of identity is told time and again throughout the text, and most of the time it is spoken in the proprietary sense: this applies to those who are a lot like me. It makes great praise music and a good slogan. But life is far bigger than just the work of praise and easy acceptance of the nature of faith and life.

Jonah asks the big questions: are we OK if this happens to be true not just for me and you and the people we like and revere but for the folks who we don't like at all. Are we OK if God forestalls righteous anger on those with whom we are convinced have thoroughly and utterly brought it on themselves? It doesn't matter who your enemy happens to be, or where you

happen to find them, we are wondering whether God can love them too. Jonah fools us into thinking that Jonah is running away to avoid the burden of pronouncing doom on the people of Nineveh and the fate that they have coming for them. But all of that is to get us looking the other way while the really story is the story of YHWH God being YHWH God and applying that goodness, mercy and all the rest in places where it doesn't rightly belong, at least according to Jonah at any rate. There is no getting around the hatred held for Nineveh; they were the mortal enemies of Israel; from where Jonah was sitting they deserved what ever it was that they got. Time and again they had reeked havoc on the kingdom of Israel laying waste to what was supposed to be God's people. Jonah doesn't get what he wants because of the foot note in all those qualities about God: that this promise is not and cannot be ever thought to be exclusive no matter how you would like to draw the lines.

As such, I think Jonah is an excellent book for our times, and a story of how God really is, and not just how we would prefer God to be. We are beset with claims, always, of absolutism; that you cannot be a good whatever without believing XYZ and, more to the point, despising the opposition, whomever they happen to be. Our times of extreme have brought out in us the extremes that we often hold. Rarely, if ever, are we given a moment to consider whether ours is the righteous position and blessed of God. But no matter how true that may be, perhaps, we cannot ever confuse the righteousness of God, bound with justice and the inclination to hear the oppressed and act for the down trodden, with the mercy of God who also is moved by suffering and repentance where ever it is found. We struggle with these two qualities. We tie our sense of justice and our expectation of vindication always to the other being beyond the pale, devoid of feelings, and smelly to boot. With that in mind, who of us wouldn't want to run the risk of being fish food rather than being the bearers of their potential salvation. Insistent as we are that mercy is something that is merited and favor earned, it should not be too terribly shocking to have a Jonah wonder the same thing out loud and arrive at the answer that we are just not entirely sure whether we are Ok with sharing the graciousness of God with those who we might struggle to even like. These are big, hairy questions, and ones that come into play in our lives even today. Far from being an amusing, if pointed nursery rhyme, we are given a complicated relationship with God and with our fellows within humanity.

I wonder: how do we run away from the not-so-good news of God's mercy and grace? Are we ready for the fuller meaning of the things that we say about God being not just for us and

ours but also for those who we are not sure that we like? Where might it take us if we allowed the divine to be what it is: big enough to encompass us, and larger than we can ever imagine that carries us forward.

Jonah is a story that is true; true about human nature, and true about the nature of the God who moves even still healing all things, if we can let God be God; the one being in all the universe that lives up to his billing, even if we would prefer he didn't. We aren't always going to like it, desire it, admire it, but thanks be to God it is real then and now.

May we live to see it in our lives even still.

Amen.