

The story of Jonah is one of the first Bible stories that children learn when they begin Sunday school. It is a story that has fascinated people of all ages for generations and with good reason. The idea of a man being swallowed by a whale captivates the mind, sparks the imagination, and raises all sorts of questions. Was it scary? Did he have room to move around? What did he do in there for three days? Did he learn to speak whale?

It's also very possible that this story influenced the Disney movie "Pinocchio." There is a scene where Pinocchio rescues Geppetto from the belly of a Whale by building a fire and making the whale sneeze them out. And in the movie "Finding Nemo," Dory and Marlin get trapped inside a whale's mouth and Dory helps them escape by speaking whale..

But this has also been one of the stories that non-Christians hold up as a reason to question the historicity of the Bible. Could a man survive being swallowed whole by a large fish or whale? And if he could survive the initial trauma of being swallowed, assuming he were not chewed up first of course, would he be able to withstand the fish's digestive process? And if so, how would he breathe down there?

These are perfectly valid questions. Clearly, this story is not meant to be taken as literal history. And as interesting as it is, focusing on the fish and Jonah's experience in its belly really misses the point of Jonah's story. As one commentator said, "The great fish is mentioned in three verses... but the great God is mentioned thirty-nine times. It is unfortunate that many focus on the fish rather than its creator."¹

You see we remember that Jonah is swallowed by the fish, but only after he refuses to go to Nineveh as God has commanded. But most of us don't know anything about Nineveh or why Jonah would be reluctant to go there and that might be the most important detail in the entire story.

The book of Nahum says of Nineveh:

"Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, utterly full of booty-no end to plunder!
who has ever escaped your endless cruelty? I am against you, says the Lord of hosts..."²

Nineveh is the capitol of Assyria. You may remember hearing a little bit about Assyria in the Old Testament. It was Assyria who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. and who while looting and pillaging the nation, ruthlessly murdered many of its citizens and carried many others into slavery. After Assyria's conquest of the Northern Kingdom, it simply ceased to exist.

Jonah, as the text tells us, is a Hebrew. So in being sent to Nineveh, Jonah was being asked to walk into the lion's den and announce God's judgment.

To better understand Jonah's situation, consider what it would be like to be sent to Nazi Germany in 1940 to preach God's judgment, particularly if you were Jewish. Or ask yourself this: if God had commanded you to go to Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, just after the terror attacks of September 11, to preach judgment and repentance to the Taliban and to members of Al-Qaeda, would you have been willing to go?

I wouldn't have. My hunch is neither would you. It would have been dangerous. It would have seemed like a fool's errand because the people to whom you would have been preaching would be of a different religion and a different culture. But most importantly, it would have been something none of us would have embraced

¹ Ramsey, William R. The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible: Jonah, Westminster-John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, pg. 245

² Nahum 3:1-5, 19

because, especially right after 9/11, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda seemed like people of pure evil. Who would *want* to offer a chance for repentance to people like that? Better to just let God punish them and make the world a better and safer place.

Thinking about it in those terms, Jonah seems less like a faithless person and more like a man with a lot of good, solid common sense.

But there was another reason why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh: because he knew God and he knew God's nature and he had a strong suspicion of what God was going to do and it was not what Jonah *wanted* God to do.

Jonah had reason to hope that God would take revenge against the Assyrians for what they had done to the people of Israel. Perhaps reflecting on Sodom and Gomorrah, Jonah might have hoped that a similar fate would be in store for Nineveh.

But Jonah also knew as we know now that God is characterized primarily by God's great and abiding love and mercy. After being swallowed by the great fish, Jonah prays to God and his prayer reveals what he believes about God:

"I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice... Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"³

Jonah, who had blatantly disobeyed God's very direct, very clear verbal instructions, and who had foolishly tried to flee from God, believed that even in the face of his defiance and in the midst of God's just punishment God would still deliver him. "Deliverance belongs to the Lord," And Jonah wanted that deliverance for himself, but not for the Ninevites.

So when Jonah finally arrives in Nineveh and begins his proclamation, he doesn't really seem to put his heart into it. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That is all Jonah said. In his conversation with God afterwards, Jonah has lots more to say about God. He quotes the Psalmist:

"I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."⁴

But for the Ninevites, nothing. No explanation. No attempt to sell them on the benefits of repentance. No attempt to actually convince or entice them to repent. Just the statement "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

It's almost as if Jonah didn't *want* the Ninevites to repent.

So was Jonah surprised or disappointed or both to discover that his proclamation of Nineveh's impending destruction was received so well? In any case, the entire nation did, in fact repent.

³ Jonah 2:1-10

⁴ Psalm 145:8 & Psalm 103:8

The King decreed that every man, woman and child and all their animals would dress in sack cloth, sit in ashes and fast and repent of their sins. Moved by the Ninevite's attitude of total repentance, God decided not to destroy them.

And did Jonah get mad. Jonah wanted destruction. God granted mercy. Jonah wanted punishment. God granted forgiveness. Jonah could understand God's mercy for *himself* and for *his* people: the Israelites were after all, the chosen people of God; the people of the covenant. But he could not understand or even stomach God's mercy being shared with the Ninevites. *They* were outsiders and pagans. *They* were unclean and evil people. *They* did not deserve God's mercy.

In his anger, Jonah sat and pouted. God appointed a bush to sprout up and give Jonah shade, a turn of events that made Jonah "exceedingly happy." But then overnight, God appointed a worm to destroy the bush, which plunged Jonah back into a storm of anger. How angry was Jonah? He would rather have been dead.

Responding to Jonah's anger, God asked a question with which the book ends. But God's question to Jonah is also a question to us: "You pity the plant," God says, "which came into being in a night and perished in a night. 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?"

The question poses a comparison between the bush and the people of Nineveh and challenges Jonah to consider his view of each. If you are concerned about a simple bush that you did not grow, how much more should I be concerned about these people who I did create and who I love? The story ends with that question and you and I are placed in Jonah's seat, and are left to wrestle with it.

So we're sitting here, you and I, in this booth with Jonah, next to this shriveled up bush trying to come to terms with what it means for us that God's love and mercy have been extended even unto those whom we utterly detest.

We cannot ignore the fact that this is good news for us, because it means that if God's love and mercy are extended to the worst of humanity, then it is certainly available to us, too, no matter how intolerable we may become.

But it is, as the gospel always is, a challenge to us, and a steep one at that. Because it asks us to participate in God's love and mercy to the people we like least, fear most, and would most prefer to avoid if at all possible.

One of my earliest memories of the Church, is learning the song "Jesus Loves the Little Children."

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

How interesting that one of the first things we learn about God is that all people belong to God. Psalm 24 says "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it..."⁵ Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight.

The story of Jonah forces us to consider if we still believe that to be true, and if we do, then how can we live like we believe it is true? Do we really believe that no one is beyond the scope of God's love and if so, what does that mean for you and I?

⁵ Psalm 24:1

In 1995, Timothy McVeigh, a decorated US Army veteran of the first Gulf War, parked a truck full of explosives in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City, OK and blew it up. 168 people died in the explosion, 19 of them children.⁶ In the years before September 11, McVeigh was the poster boy for cruel, detached, evil. Like the Ninevites, McVeigh was reviled and hated and a lot of otherwise nice people wanted his destruction. At the time, I was one of them.

But a friend of mine told me a story that made me think about Timothy McVeigh a little differently. He was watching the news with his 7-year-old son when footage was shown of McVeigh being escorted into the courthouse during his trial. My friend described to me the conversation that followed:

“Daddy,” his son said, “is that a bad man?”

“Yes,” replied my friend.

“Daddy,” said his son again, “if that man trips and falls on his way into the courthouse and skins his knee, will God laugh?”

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

You might be familiar with the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, KS. Let me first say that they are in no way related to our Baptist neighbors next door. They are best known for picketing the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan proclaiming that God causes the death of these soldiers as punishment for America’s tolerance of homosexuality. Their protest signs include slogans like “God Hates Fags,” and “Thank God for dead soldiers.”

What about them? Could we muster any love or concern for these misguided people who seem to be so far away from the loving, merciful God of the book of Jonah?

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

You and I will probably never be in a situation where we will have to face the likes of Timothy McVeigh or the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, yet we will be faced hundreds of times over the course of a lifetime with opportunities to reach out in love and compassion to people with whom we disagree and to people who have values and beliefs that are very different from ours; maybe even people whom we don’t like very much.

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

If we take those words seriously, then what do they mean for our interactions with those with whom we disagree or with whom we are angry? What does it mean for our interactions with those in the church who do not agree with our stances on the ordination of homosexuals? Or the ordination of women? What does it mean for the way we work with or refuse to work with people who believe differently about whether our God is the same God that Muslims worship? What does God’s love for all people mean for our ability to worship alongside those who disagree with our ideas of how to treat the poor and of how to handle money in the church? How does it impact our willingness to serve with others who vote differently and who believe differently on the political and social issues we hold to be most important? There are no *easy* answers and like Jonah, we are left to struggle with these questions.

⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/people/shows/mcveigh/profile.html>

According to an old traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and revere no other god."

When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to Abraham and asked "where is your visitor?" Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him for these eighty long years although he dishonors me so. Could you not endure him for just one night?"⁷

Whether we know it or not, we are tribal people. We tend to seek out like-minded people who share in common our political leanings, religious beliefs, and the sports teams we cheer for, among other things.

And it is naturally easier to love and empathize and be understanding towards those who are in our own tribes; those who are most like us; those with whom we can identify. It is much more difficult to love and understand those with different beliefs and experiences; those who belong to other tribes. But God calls us to expand our vision; to reach out beyond the bounds of the familiar to include all of the children of God.

And ultimately, this is God's message to Jonah and to us: Loving God means loving of God's children, even the ones that are hardest to get along with.

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

To God be all honor, glory, power, and dominion. In this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁷ Craig Brian Larson, ed. Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1993, pg. 172