

Something's Fishy
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
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Ah, Jonah! Jonah has a very special place in my heart. My very first sermon that I ever preached, 15 years ago, was on the book of Jonah. I had just started seminary and my home pastor asked me if I would like to preach one Sunday. I said, "No." He said, "You know, if you're going to be a pastor, you might want to rethink that decision." So in January 1997, I stood in the pulpit of First Christian Church in Jeffersonville, sharing one thing in common with the prophet Jonah – I also wanted to run the other way!

When you ask people what they know about the Bible, the story of Jonah is usually near the top of the list. Most people know that Jonah was swallowed by a whale (although the scripture just says "a large fish"). This story is also the source of a lot of biblical skepticism. Did Jonah really get swallowed by a fish? How could he survive three days? We must remember that the bible is about theology, not ichthyology (the study of fish), so we'd do well to take this story as it is told rather than try to turn the Bible into a scientific textbook. Some folks try to do that, you know, but their motivations are a bit fishy.

So we know Jonah was swallowed by...a fish, a whale, Nemo, something like that. For most people, that's where their knowledge of Jonah begins and ends. And that's a shame, because this short book is one of the most interesting and humorous books in the Bible, and we risk missing out on the fun if we're not willing to dive into Jonah. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, but as is true with most fish stories, there's more to it than that.

The first thing to note about Jonah is that it is different than all the other prophetic books. While a few of the others contain some narrative description of the prophet, most of them are the proclamations of the prophet himself. So the book of Isaiah contains Isaiah's prophecies. But not Jonah. In its four chapters, there is only one prophecy from Jonah, and it's pretty basic: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!" That's it. The rest of the book is a story about the prophet and his attempts to run away from God.

The book starts with a very dangerous sentence: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah." That usually means trouble is brewing. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against it, warning them to repent from their evil ways or else be destroyed. This command isn't a lot different than what God tells the other prophets to do: go to a place and tell them that through their thoughts and deeds they have sinned against the Lord, and they better repent or else.

The only difference here is that most other prophets were called to go to the Israelites, God's people. But not Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, which would be the equivalent of telling a Christian to preach to the lions in the Roman coliseum. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, an empire that was a constant threat to the Israelites. They were the merciless and violent enemy. And here was God asking Jonah to go the heart of their territory and tell them they needed to shape up. But Jonah wants nothing to do with that, so instead of heading to Nineveh, which was 500 miles east of his hometown, he hops a ship to Tarshish, which was 2000 miles west of his hometown.

Why did Jonah run? Was he lacking in self-esteem and not up to the challenge of being God's prophet? Was he scared the Ninevites were going to harm him when he shared his

prophecy? If those were true, it might make his running a little more understandable. But there's another reason. Think about what that might be and I'll come back to that in a minute.

So Jonah tries to run from God, forgetting that God has a pretty good tracking system. While on the boat, the Lord sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship, and the pagan sailors do everything in their power to keep afloat, including praying to their various gods. Finally, they wake up Jonah, who had fallen asleep, telling him to start praying and bailing, and not necessarily in that order. The sailors discover that Jonah is actually the cause of the storm, and Jonah tells them to throw him overboard so that their lives may be saved. The sailors balk at first, but when they realize that is their only hope, Jonah walks the plank, the sea immediately calms down and all the sailors do what Jonah doesn't – they worship Jonah's God.

Meanwhile, Jonah is swallowed by the fish and spends three days and nights in there, during which he says a prayer of deliverance and presumably rethinks his original plan to disobey God's command. I would suspect spending time in a fish' gastrointestinal juices would make you rethink A LOT of things. The fish spews Jonah onto dry land and then we come to our reading for this morning, when God comes to Jonah and says, "Let's try that again." Jonah goes to Nineveh, makes his prophecy, and lo and behold, the whole city of Nineveh believed in God and repented. Hurray, right?

Not for Jonah. For him, something's fishy. In the translation *The Message*, the first verses of the fourth chapter says, "Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, 'God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!'"

Now we're getting at why Jonah ran away. He wasn't insecure. He wasn't afraid. He knew that God was true to God's word, he knew that God was a God of mercy and forgiveness, and Jonah didn't believe the Ninevites were worthy of receiving God's grace. Jonah says, "So God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!" How ironic, isn't it, that Jonah wasn't worried God was going to be too hard, but that God was going to be too soft!

It's tempting for us to tsk-tsk Jonah for his hard-heartedness. Surely he believed that everyone was a child of God and deserved God's grace, because that's what we believe, isn't it? Isn't it? Do we believe that's true of everyone? Puppy kickers? Parking space stealers? Child molesters? People who steal from the elderly? Are we really that different from Jonah? It's not a question of if we have our Ninevites; it's a question of who they are.

Jonah's selfishness was also fueled by nationalistic concerns. This book was thought to have been written during a time when Israel was returning to their homeland from exile and were in the process of clearing their territory of all the foreigners, the illegal immigrants who didn't have a right to be there. So in the midst of that turf war and the exclusion of foreigners comes Jonah's message of radical inclusion. Everyone deserves God's grace.

The truth that Jonah's story reminds us about is that we have no control over how God is in relationship with others. We may think that the prodigal son doesn't deserve a welcome-home party or the thief on the cross doesn't deserve a place in heaven or the death-row inmate doesn't deserve a last-minute conversion. And when those things do happen, because we worship a God who welcomes those kinds of things, we may want to respond like Jonah and a lot of older siblings we know: "That's not fair!" Isn't it funny how it can be a real challenge to draw close to God when God doesn't love who we love and hate who we hate?

Here's the fundamental difference between Jonah's view of the Ninevites and God's view of the Ninevites. For Jonah, these people who live in a far-away land are not individuals or

spiritual brothers and sisters or even human beings. They are the capital-O “Other.” And as long as they remain the “Other,” it’s easy for Jonah to hate them and wish destruction upon them. The Ninevites are not God-fearers; they don’t believe what Jonah believes; they don’t deserve the blessings he’s enjoyed. So when they repent and turn to God, Jonah’s whole rationale for hating them is turned on its head. There’s no more “Other” to hate.

For God, the Ninevites were never an “Other.” While they don’t figure prominently in the biblical narrative, we can assume each one of them was just as much a child of God as Jonah. Jonah is so quick to cry “Not fair!” when God doesn’t destroy them, not acknowledging that the “Other” have now become one with him. Sometimes it’s really hard to acknowledge that those who are different from us have a lot more in common with us than we want to admit, and they are no more outside of God’s realm of grace than we are.

Before we give into the temptation to label someone else as the Other, on the other side of the aisle, on the opposing ends of an issue, from a different place, speaking a different language, living a different way than us, we’d do well to remember that we are absolutely, incredibly, undeniably undeserving of God’s grace, and yet God gave his only son for us. For us! If we are willing to buy into God’s radical inclusion and to see everyone as worthy of God’s grace, it’s amazing how the label of “Other” is no longer useful, and the hate and animosity and resentment that comes with that label dissipates.

Jonah didn’t want the Ninevites saved. He wanted them judged, because in his narrow perspective, that’s what they deserved. Thank God – and I mean thank God! – we don’t get what we deserve. Instead, we are recipients of God’s grace. That’s the message we can humbly share with the Ninevites in our lives. And by doing so, we might just find that the ones we thought were “Others” aren’t actually “Others.” They’re us.