

# *Jonah: And Repentant Nineveh*

## All Creatures Great & Small Summer Series

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Psalm 130

<sup>1</sup>Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. <sup>2</sup>Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! <sup>3</sup>If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? <sup>4</sup>But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. <sup>5</sup>I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; <sup>6</sup>my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. <sup>7</sup>O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. <sup>8</sup>It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Jonah 2:1-3:10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup>saying, "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. <sup>3</sup>You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. <sup>4</sup>Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy

temple?’<sup>5</sup>The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head<sup>6</sup>at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.<sup>7</sup>As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.<sup>8</sup>Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.<sup>9</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”<sup>10</sup>Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. <sup>3</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,<sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

<sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.<sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”<sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.<sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water.<sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.<sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

After three days and nights of being transported across the Mediterranean Sea, from Spain to Iraq, in a God-given submarine of a big fish, Jonah came to realize his options were limited. God's call could not be resisted. At least the reluctant prophet had the good sense to spend his time inside the belly of the big fish in prayer. So when his prayer concluded with the obvious affirmation: *Deliverance belongs to the Lord*, God granted Jonah the big Heave-Ho and he landed on that distant land he had tried to avoid.

A second time, God calls Jonah to a job he does not want. *Go to Nineveh and tell them to repent. Tell them to turn away from their violence and wickedness and turn toward me.* This time Jonah did as he was told and just look at what happened! He had the most successful prophetic mission recorded in the Bible. Remember the back story. Jonah had been reluctant because Nineveh was no easy mission field. It was the capital city of Assyria, an empire that had carried all of their neighboring nations into slavery. They had raided ancient Israel and taken some of the Hebrew people into bondage. They were known to be more cruel than the Babylonians, if you can believe that.

The entire book of Nahum is devoted to prophecies about the Lord's wrath over Nineveh. Nahum describes the city as being: a city of blood, corrupted with lies, utterly deceitful, full of plunder. The streets were filled with cavalry charging with flashing swords and blood soaked armor, leaving many casualties, piles of dead bodies, people stumbling over corpses – even infants dashed into pieces. The biblical description of Nineveh reads like a combination of Gaza and Kharkiv – nearly unlivable, desolate, full of grief, but people still unwilling to turn from violence, lust and power toward deliverance. The Ninevites were, according to the Bible, evil. In the minds of Hebrew prophets, they deserved to be destroyed by God, and Jonah did not want to go there and offer even a chance of redemption. Although he's beginning to see God's desire to save them.

In a play written by Robert Frost, the figure of Jonah is heard to lament,

“I cannot trust God to be un-merciful.” Or, in the more contemporary words of Anne Lamott: “You can safely assume that you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Jonah wanted God on his side.

However, in Nineveh, of all places, Jonah stands on a street corner, and reluctantly preaches one sentence, and the whole town turns around and does what God wants them to do. Now, the work of preaching is not exactly a competitive sport, however if you take on average eighteen hundred words a sermon, times forty sermons a year, times eleven and a half years, I’ve preached well over eight hundred thousand words to this congregation alone, not to mention the twenty-five years of preaching before I came to Bryn Mawr, and I’ve never had one church member respond to a sermon with a visible act of repentance!

Jonah preached one eight-word sentence. It was not even an inspiring sentence, that eight-word sermon - no heart-moving illustration, no poetic beauty, no prophetic eloquence. He said: “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And sure enough, with that the Ninevites believed in God, declared a fast, and everyone from the King to all the people to the animals of the kingdom put on sackcloth. What is sackcloth? It is coarsely woven, uncomfortable fabric used for sacks and typically made of goat’s hair, which is worn as a symbol of submission, grief and mourning, repentance, a change of their ways. It would be like coming to church in skimpy garments made out of recyclable grocery bags. How you get a herd of cattle to dress in sackcloth, I am not sure, but that’s what the narrative says.

It’s astonishing, isn’t it, that with one eight-word sentence Jonah accomplishes more than all the prophets put together. He converted the biggest city in the enemy empire. It is as if everyone in town turns toward God, comes to worship regularly, volunteers for Vacation Bible Camp, shows up to make casseroles with the Hunger Committee, puts a tenth of their income in the offering plate every week, serves joyfully on committees, loves their neighbors, and together work for the

reconciliation of the world. With a bad attitude, Jonah preaches a short sermon and all the inhabitants of that large city, more than a hundred and twenty thousand souls, believed in God and walked in God's ways.<sup>1</sup> And along with the people of Nineveh, every animal in town cried obedience to God! The bible says: *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God's mind was changed about the calamity that God had said would be brought upon them, and God did not do it.* The Lord, the God of heaven who made the seas and dry land, spared the Ninevites the judgment they so deserved, and acted toward them with abounding mercy.

You see - this larger than life "Once upon a time" kind of story is about grace. It's about how God's grace calls us to be better people, less judgmental, more helpful and more merciful toward others. All of the silliness of it, the reluctant prophet who heads in the opposite direction of God's call, the big fish who swallows him up and vomits him out on a distant shore, the King who instantly converts from being the Commander in Chief of cruelty, slavery and violence to the paragon of repentance and humility, and of course, the whole population dressed in sack cloth and the ridiculous animals out in the field wrapped in burlap bags. It's about responding to the God-exaggerated grace of the creator of the seas and dry land. God wants us to end our violent, cruel and evil ways, which destroy human life and pollute the good earth, and to live as people who are Instead becoming more gracious. God calls us - as God calls Jonah - to suspend our judgment of others in order to live with humility, charity and love for God and the fullness of God's creation.

A friend shared a story that speaks to the kind of mercy God shows to the repentant people of Nineveh, and to people like Jonah, who don't want the undeserving to share God's grace. It's a little snapshot of local history, but cast in the light of this scripture, it shows something true about human beings and the powerful mercy of God, our ultimate judge.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Ninevites and Ne'er-Do-Wells," *Gospel Medicine*.

Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and during all of World War II. In 1993 a panel of seventy scholars ranked him first among a list of the ten best mayors in American history. He was adored by many New Yorkers who took to calling him the “Little Flower,” because he was so short and always wore a carnation in his lapel. As mayor, he was a colorful character – he rode the New York City fire trucks, unified the city’s transit system, created avenues for promotion in the police department and city government, expanded public housing and parks, took entire orphanages of children to baseball games. When the New York newspapers went on strike, he got on the radio and read the Sunday comic strips to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, Mayor LaGuardia turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a disheveled old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. “It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor,” the man told the mayor. “She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson.” LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, “I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.” But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous hat, saying, “Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

The following day, New York City newspapers reported that 47 dollars and 50 cents was turned over to a bewildered woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Fifty cents of that amount was contributed by the grocery store owner himself, while some

seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.<sup>2</sup>

The inclusion of the book of Jonah in the Bible is the community of faith's standing ovation for God whose mercy is more abundant than we can or even want to imagine. The great scandal of this story is not the inept prophet in need of some courage and an attitude adjustment. The great scandal of this story is not just the repentance of the evil people of Nineveh, or their silly sack cloth wearing animals. The great scandal of this story is the persistent mercy of God that extends so far and wide as to include the Ninevites, to rescue Jonah himself, and to shower all the undeserving – including you and me – with grace. The great scandal of this story is that, we too are called beyond our reluctance, to be more boldly prophetic in extending God's grace to others. How clear is our vocation then? Remember -- the final act of grace is to make us more gracious.

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> LaGuardia story emailed to me from Jenny Shew entitled, "Voice of Compassion."