

Jonah 1:1-17

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah set out to flee to **TARSHISH** from the presence of the Lord. He went down to **Joppa** and found a ship going to **TARSHISH**; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to **TARSHISH**, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷ The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ “I am a **Hebrew**,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord,

The Book of Jonah is considered one of the Minor Prophets in the Bible. It tells of a Hebrew prophet named Jonah sent by God to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. But Jonah tries to escape the divine mission as the Assyrians were fierce enemies of Israel. While the story has become mostly known for the large fish or whale (only mentioned twice in the story); the book is primarily about the vastness of God’s compassion and extraordinary love. Jonah questions God’s decisions, believing God is too lenient on wicked people who should be destroyed rather than redeemed.

Nineveh:: was an ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia, located in modern-day northern Iraq; on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, and was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. They were proud of killing Judeans (Jonah 1:2) hence the wickedness. If you visit the British Museum, you can see spectacular wall reliefs depicting Assyrian sieges. The famous siege of Lachish shows multiple images of Judeans being impaled, and stacks of Judeans heads (yes, disembodied heads) that were counted by Assyrian scribes, presumably for a pay per head policy with the soldiers. Archaeologists discovered this relief in Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh (you can read about them more about Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18-21).

Joppa:: Joppa = Jaffa = south side of Tel Aviv (Jonah 1:3) Those beautiful beaches of Tel Aviv contain the site of Joppa/Jaffa. In light of the above point, Jonah’s decision to flee to Joppa was actually quite sound. The city lies in the port city of Tel Aviv.. Jonah went straight to Joppa because it was a gateway to the west -- the natural way to get as far away from Nineveh as possible which would have been **TARSHISH** located in Southern Spain on the limits of the known world for the people then.

the mariners were afraid : Sailors were massively superstitious and with good reason (Jonah 1:6-16) Sailing was a precarious profession. Before modern nautical science, sailors knew about waves, currents and severe weather, but attributed these forces to the deities. The reaction of the sailors to the storm was naturally attributed to the disfavor of the Lord, so they desperately tried to divine appeasement through the sacrifice of Jonah.

I am a Hebrew : Jonah identifies himself with an ethnic marker. Designating an individual as a “Hebrew” is quite rare in the Hebrew Scriptures, first used with Abraham (Genesis 14:13) & then with Joseph (Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12), both of whom were similarly called to a long journey. This is significant in considering God’s call to send a Hebrew to the Ninevehites.

cast lots : Is a practice akin to our practice of drawing straws to make a decision. While we might think of it as based on chance, the ancients saw it as a choice made not by luck but by divine providence. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the practice of casting lots is heavily associated with dividing up the land that the Jewish people were acquiring. ...

have done as it pleased you.”¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

¹⁷ But the Lord provided a **LARGE FISH** to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the **FISH** three days and three nights.

Jonah 3:1-10

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¹ *The word of the Lord came to Jonah* a second time, saying,
² “Get up, go to **Nineveh**, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”³ 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.⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and **Nineveh** shall be overthrown!”⁵ And the people of **Nineveh** believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of **Nineveh**, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

¹⁰ 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.

Jonah 4:1-11

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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

God specifically instructed them to do this as a fair way of dividing up the land that He would give to them related in Numbers 26:55.

LARGE FISH :: Jonah is not about a fish/whale (Jonah 1:17; 2:10) The book of Jonah mentions “fish” for a total of two times. “God” is used 14 times; “LORD” is used 21 times. Even “sackcloth” is mentioned three times. We may want to rethink all those fish-themed Jonah study guides!

cast lots:: he was a court prophet who lived in the time of King David. His actions are described in the Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. He announced to David the covenant God was making with him (2 Samuel 7), and he came to David to reprimand him over his committing adultery with Bathsheba while she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite whose death the King had also arranged to hide his previous transgression (2 Samuel 11-12).

The word of the Lord came to Jonah:: this turn of phrase is the traditional way in which the prophets are spoken of, to describe their vocation and receiving of God’s word.

turned the Hebrew word שָׁבָה (sabu) means “to turn” – physically as well as ethically or metaphorically. It’s the same sense as the Greek word μετανοέω [metanoēō] (from [metá]: “changed after being with” and [noiēō]: “think”) in the proper sense it means “to think differently after,” “after a change of mind”; to repent (literally, “think differently afterwards”). The word μετανοέω is used in Romans 2:1-4 which speaks to the choice that Jonah both makes, and won’t make to allow the Assyrians to know God’s grace. “¹Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.² You say] “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.”³ Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?⁴ Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

you are a gracious God... from punishing : this same phrase occurs in Joel 2:13 “rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” This nearly liturgical refrain is used repeatedly in the Hebrew Scriptures to evoke the paradox that while God is judging and just, God’s mind can also be changed by intervention and through compassion....as happens here in the story of Jonah at Nineveh.

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?"

booth:: a temporary shelter of twigs and branches, such as the Israelites were directed to dwell in for seven days at the feast of tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16; Leviticus 23:42; Nehemiah 8:14-16). They were built to be used as a sacred place in which to celebrate. This was done at the dedication of the Temple, and annually as a way of reminding the Israelites in every generation of their deliverance by God from Egypt. Such were the "tabernacles" commonly translated as "dwellings" which Peter proposed to make on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8)

*In my study notes I borrowed freely from Roger Nam's commentary which you can find in whole online at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/?lectionary=nl>

Questions for the Practice of Examen & Contemplation

Traditionally we hear the story of Jonah as one about vocation. We, like Jonah, are called by God to be active in what God is doing in the world. How do we, will we, respond to God's call in our life? Will we reject it as Jonah did? Or will we move into it with obedience? On a deeper human level though we have to ask what will it take for us to accept God's call? What motivates us? Reward? Fear? Anxiety? Failure? The threat of hell? The promise of heaven? The experience of grace? How has God called you, or is calling you today? How have you responded? How did that change what God did, or is doing?

The story of Jonah can also be heard as much more than about a fish and Jonah's call. The word "fish" is used only a total of two times, whereas "God" is used 14 times and "LORD" 21 times. God calls us to be surprising. Jonah is to proclaim repentance and peace to a wicked people undeserving of grace. God journeys with Jonah in the rejection, darkness, anger, fear and repentance. God's love is more awesome than Jonah – or we – could ever imagine. God has compassion on the Assyrians and the Hebrews. Both peoples are redeemed. How do we make God smaller than God is in terms of our love of others, our vision of what God prioritizes and who God wants to include at the table of justice – the vision of God's kingdom in Isaiah 2:1-4? What Saints have taught you in your life to see the abundant and generous largesse of God's love?

Who do you struggle to include as worthy of God's compassion and extraordinary love? How do you talk with God when you disagree, or struggle to accept God's leading, word or direction? Talk to God about where you're struggling today, how you need help, grace and bigger vision...maybe you need your heart to be bigger, or even broken, for more of God's love to dwell within the confines of your innermost being.