



From the Pulpit: July 2, 2023
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—

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Jonah 1:1–17

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, VI: The Inescapable Tasks of God

This summer Katie, Christine and I are preaching a sermon series called *Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible*, about the slim books there, Ruth and Jonah. Today we're looking at the book Jonah chapter 1.

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

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.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." 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.

"Jonah is telling God to take a hike."

If you were a Jew from Warsaw in 1943 and had lost your whole family at Auschwitz, how would you like to preach hope at Hitler's headquarters in Berlin?

If you lost your husband in the Twin Towers on 9/11, how would you like to preach grace to al Qaeda?

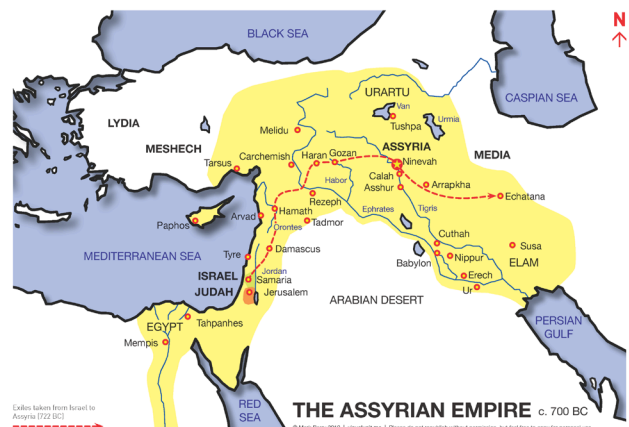
If your high school senior had been killed in his classroom by a gunman with an AR-15, how would you like to plead for mercy at that courtroom?

That is exactly Jonah's mission, and he just plain doesn't want to do it. God gives Jonah a triple imperative: Arise, go, preach. Preach good news to Nineveh.

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. Then the sailors 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. 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."

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. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us."

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" 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."

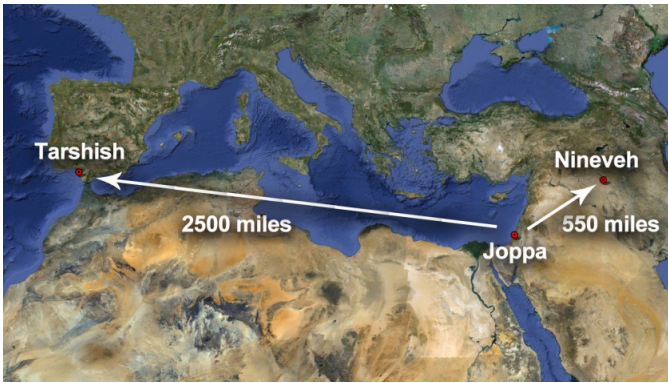


In the eighth century before Jesus, when Jonah lived,

Nineveh was the most important city of Assyria, the world's only superpower at the time.

Assyria was located in present day Iraq; Nineveh sat just across the Tigris River from present day Mosul. Assyria was a cruel and vicious bully and caused more chaos and malice in the ancient Near East than Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts.

Jonah does not want to preach good news to these desperados, so in response to God's triple imperative of Arise, Go, and Preach, Jonah answers with a triple indicative of Arise, Flee, and Sleep. He hails a taxi and heads for the seaport Joppa and books passage on the first ship going west. WAY west. To Tarshish, in fact.



God wants Jonah to travel about 500 miles *east* to Nineveh, and in response, Jonah starts a journey of about 2,500 miles *west*. This is not a subtle gesture. Jonah is telling God to take a hike.

Tarshish is literally the end of the world, at least so far as the ancient Hebrews knew. They didn't know about America or Canada or Brazil or Greenland. They might not have known about England and Ireland. You cannot go farther west than Tarshish; there is nothing out there; it is off the map, there is nothing there but dragons and The Abyss.

I love this map which superimposes the Mediterranean basin on the United States. What it says is that Jonah is in Charleston, and God asks him to go to Boston; instead, he hops the first nonstop flight to LA. Jonah is not subtle; he tweets in all caps with lots of exclamation points and exploding head emojis.

But here's where the story gets interesting: God follows. I don't know whether that's good news or bad, but that's the point of these four sermons on Jonah: The Inescapability of God.

The British poet Francis Thompson famously called the deity "The Hound of Heaven." This bloodhound just won't quit till he's treed his coon.

This story is a minor masterpiece. It's only 48 verses and 1,100 words long, or shorter than this sermon, but it's a gift from God. It's legend not history, it's myth not fact, as we'll see in a moment, but it is God's word.

God says "Arise, Go, Preach." Jonah arises, flees, and sleeps. Jonah flees but God follows. When he boards his westbound ship, he promptly goes down into the hold and falls fast asleep like a baby.

On his way to Tarshish across the mammoth, mercurial Mediterranean, Jonah's ship is swallowed up in a terrifying tempest which threatens to swamp him and the innocent sailors who are transporting their rebellious human cargo to its wrongful destination, and when a throw of the dice fingers Jonah as the reason for God's implacable wrath, Jonah experiences a brief moment of selfless conscience.

Throughout this whole story Jonah will show himself to be unscrupulous and monumentally self-absorbed, but at least here he offers to take a dive for the Skipper to save several innocent lives from certain destruction in the deep blue sea.

And then famously, before Jonah has a chance to flounder about for long among the towering billows, a ginormous fish swallows him whole and though I don't think you'd want to say that he is safe and sound and warm and dry, at least he's not drowned.

God gives him three days and three nights to reflect on the error of his ways in the belly of the fish, but then even the *fish* finds Jonah to be nauseating and she vomits him up onto dry land. It's a violent and distasteful image, but I guess it gets the point across.

Well, all this myth, all this fantasy, all these children's bedtime stories. What's the point? Well, I'm glad you asked. The great Hebrew Bible scholar Phyllis Trible says "Even as Jonah flees from the presence of Yahweh, that presence surrounds him. Jonah's flight is futile."¹

God's presence **surrounds** him. He is in the *midst* of it, he is *besieged* by it, he is *swallowed up* in it, quite literally.

Do you see how God bends the muscular powers of All Nature Itself to impose God's will upon us? The hostile storm, the loaded dice, the convenient fish, ultimately the dry land: God has endless stratagems to get us to do what God wants us to do even if we are loath to do it. Sometimes God can seem like Tommy Lee Jones to our Harrison Ford in that great old film *The Fugitive*.

"God's presence surrounds him. He is in the midst of it, he is besieged by it, he is swallowed up in it, quite literally."

God's love does not disappear just because we don't want it. God's grace doesn't collapse just because we won't attend to it. God doesn't give up on us just because we give up on God.

When storms rage, God is there. When the dice seem loaded against us, God is there. When wild beasts encircle, God is there. Does anybody here feel like Jonah in the belly of the fish? Is anybody here in a dark and hopeless place? Can you think of any darker, more hopeless place than that, and yet that is just the place where Jonah feels God's undeniable nearness.

You might try to flee from God's call, but you can't escape it. I didn't want to be a preacher; I wanted to be an accountant, like my dad. God gave me a triple imperative: Arise, Go, Preach. I answered with a triple indicative: Arise, flee, sleep. I ran in the opposite direction. That didn't work out so well for me. Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life are the

day you are born and the day you find out why."² Well, actually, Mark Twain probably didn't say that; I can't think of anything that sounds less like Mark Twain, but it's still wise, and we may as well give our little proverb some heft by saying a famous writer said it first.

Do you remember the teenage tennis star Andrea Jaeger from a few years ago? She grew up in Skokie and was the best tennis player at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire.

She turned pro in 1979 at the age of 14. ESPN described her as a "prodigy in pigtails and braces." In 1981, at 16, she was ranked #2 in the world. In 1983, at 17, she reached the Wimbledon finals. In 1987, at the age of 19, she retired from professional tennis. She burned out early and wanted to devote her life to something more meaningful than tennis. Have you ever heard of a

19-year-old retiree?

Andrea Jaeger is a devout Christian and today she is an Anglican nun. I didn't even know Episcopalians had nuns. She used to run a place called Silver Lining Ranch outside Aspen, where seriously ill children could spend a week forgetting about their challenges. They ride horses and whitewater rafts, go swimming, and play tennis.

Half of them don't even seem to know that their host was a star at the game. The original 12 children at Silver Lining Ranch many, many years ago were all from Chicago.

It all started when she was still playing tennis and she impulsively brought some toys to the cancer ward at Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, New York.

¹Phyllis Trible, *The Book of Jonah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, senior ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), vol. VII, 494.

²Quoted by Malcolm Gladwell in the podcast *Revisionist History: A Good Circle*, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/revisionist-history/id1119389968?i=1000616900292>

Twenty years later, she remembers what it was like. “They made me feel like Santa Claus. I went to give them something and I ended up with the gift. There was this boy with stubs for hands who wanted to play video games with me, and a girl who danced with her IV pole, and another who wanted me to rub her bald head.”

That little visit changed her life. She says, “I loved the game, but the tennis life became surreal for me after I met those kids. Here I was, I could order adults to put certain candies for me in the locker room—they would jump to do it—and there these kids were, thinking about dying. It puts having a bad day in perspective.”

She tells of receiving a phone call from one of her campers. Julia was calling to say good-bye, talking quickly and sounding rushed. She was planning her funeral, choosing the music and the clothes she wanted to be buried in. She asked the tennis player to send her a photograph from her days at the ranch. Andrea Jaeger says, “Julia was 14. When I was 14, my biggest decisions were about what to order from room service in five-star hotels.”

This is the lesson the former tennis star learned: “You never know if you have tomorrow. Whether you have cancer or not. I want them to have life while they are alive, in a place where nobody isolates them because they are different.”

Ms. Jaeger receives another phone call. This girl was calling not to say good-bye, but hello, talking quickly and sounding rushed. She was planning her wedding. She wondered if she could spend part of her honeymoon at Silver Lining Ranch. She said she wanted her new husband to see the place that had saved her for him, what had kept her going seven years ago when she needed to know that she was not alone.³

It all started with a little girl dancing with her IV pole. The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.

God’s pervasive, profound, prodigious, protective providence has plotted out your purpose, plan, and path. Go ahead and run in the opposite direction. See how that works out for you.

³Robert Lipsyte, “A Short Career, A Lifetime Commitment,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 2000.

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