



From the Pulpit: July 16, 2023
fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Jonah 3

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

This summer we are preaching a sermon series that includes two slim books: Ruth and Jonah. I know more than a few people who hesitate to read the Old Testament because of anger, violence, and war. But in these two minority reports, God's steadfast and inclusive mercy is revealed in unexpected ways. It's an artful and challenging piece of literature. You've heard Bill's recap of the book of Jonah last week and you likely know the Sunday School story where God tasks Jonah with delivering a message to the wicked Ninevites. When Jonah books passage on a ship to run away from God's request, he's thrown overboard in a storm and swallowed up by a huge fish. We've been told that one moral of this story is "don't run away when God asks you to do something...or else..." This is why a number of 18th century pulpits are shaped like large fish, to remind preachers of their task.



Today we are reading chapter three of four, where Jonah responds to God's second, nearly identical command to go to the city of Nineveh:

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

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Humans 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. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

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.

As readers we often put ourselves in Jonah's place—a good position to hear God's word for today, but *not the only one*. The bulletin cover image is from an outsider artist or folk artist named David Butler. Because the person standing in the boat looks happy, I imagine this figure is one of the sailors. If you ran into him at an ancient dockside pub in Joppa, his whale of a tale might go something like this:

One day a man shows up at the pier in a huge hurry to get out of town. So we set sail for the edge of the earth. I don't know who or what he was running from, but Jonah's escape sure made God mad. This storm was unbelievable. Jonah

tells us to throw him overboard to calm the sea, but we don't want his blood on our hands. We rowed until our arms burned but the winds were too strong. So we had no choice but to toss him over and pray to Jonah's God like we've never prayed. Suddenly the storm stopped. We looked overboard and we saw Jonah's feet in the fish's mouth. Back at port we learned Jonah's life had been spared. We are not murderers. The fish was an answered prayer!

The power of art and literature lies in their multi-valent possibilities. Using scraps of tin roofing and found material, David Butler, created a colorful "yard show" filled with what the Smithsonian describes as "a dynamic oasis in which meanings and interpretations were infinite."¹ Butler's art

is known for illuminating the truth that "all that makes up our surroundings, and every person, regardless of race, background, or education—has merit and value."² In the same way, the author of Jonah uses humor and imagery to create a scenario where the huge fish becomes an unlikely agent of God's mercy for both the sailors and for Jonah. This tall tale becomes a story in which we might explore a number of ethical and theological questions.

Chapter three paints a ridiculous scene, as the author continues to use the word "big" over and over for comic effect. There's a big fish, a big storm, a big wind, and now we have a big city. The author exaggerates by saying it is a three day walk across. With just a few words from the reluctant Jonah, the entire city repents. "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown," is all he needs to say to inspire a mad rush to find the scratchiest, most uncomfortable sackcloth rags in town.

"Someone here faces a choice between a comfortable and a meaningful life."

The king of the city takes it a silly step farther, decreeing that even the animals wear sackcloth. There's no king of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. The entire scene is ridiculous in its exaggeration.

And yet, it's been said that Jonah is the most successful prophet in the Hebrew Bible.³ Ten words is all he needs to turn a city around. Jonah should be updating his resume on LinkedIn with this enormous accomplishment. But no, he's about to go sit under and plant and pout. Why? Because these wicked, enemy people have just proven Jonah's proclamation wrong. He predicted the entire city was going to be wiped off the face of the earth. The Ninevites take a gamble on God's mercy. They repent, God relents, and Jonah looks like a raving fool.

Haven't we all been in a situation where speaking up could make us look foolish, or worse? Colleagues hesitate to question a doctor's prescription error. Engineers are pushed to meet deadlines even when there's a faulty part. Students do social calculus before deciding to stand up for someone being bullied at the next lunch table. In *The Out-Laws* movie that's popular on Netflix, Owen, played by Adam DeVine, weighs the risk of losing his fiancée if he tells her "Your parents are bank robbers."

Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson names this the voice-silence calculation. It turns out that remaining silent is often easier, because the almost certain and immediate benefit provides safety from retaliation and being wrong. On the other hand, speaking up benefits the group, often at some unknown and less likely point in the future.⁴ Can you blame Jonah for choosing to run away rather than speak up?

¹Smithsonian American Art Museum, "David Butler," Accessed online: <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/david-butler-30511>

²Landry, Kent, "The Outsider Art of David Butler," *Country Roads*, 2011, Accessed online: <https://countryroads-magazine.com/art-and-culture/visual-performing-arts/the-outsider-art-of-david-butler/>

³Levine, Amy-Jill. "Agreeing to Disagree: How Jews and Christians Read Scripture Differently - The Book of Jonah," online lecture at the Temple Emanu-El Streicker Center, accessed online <https://vimeo.com/473225642>

⁴Hadley, Constance et al. "Make It Safe for Employees to Speak up - Especially in Risky Times," *Harvard Business Review*, 2023 Accessed online: <https://hbr.org/2023/04/make-it-safe-for-employees-to-speak-up-especially-in-risky-times>

The Ninevites get the benefit of God’s mercy, while Jonah’s doomsday prediction makes him look less reliable than a soapbox preacher yelling on the corner.

According to Edmondson, the antidote to our tendency to be silent even in the face of real risk and ethical concerns is to create psychological safety. Organizations and the people in them, learn and grow when errors can be revealed, questions raised, and there’s openness to changing direction, turning around, or even repenting.

I learned about the voice-silence calculation from a bishop during my study leave at Virginia Theological Seminary where I am working toward my Doctor of Ministry degree. Seminary Hill in Alexandria, I was able to visit a couple of the monuments and museums in the DC area, including the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Freedom House, the former site of one of the largest slave trading companies in the country.

Virginia Theological is currently celebrating its 200th year. Perhaps as institutions tend to do as they approach these types of milestones, the seminary looked back through the archives. There amidst wonderful accomplishments they found some history they weren’t proud of. In 2019 the seminary committed to “research, uncover, and recognize Black people who labored on campus during slavery, Reconstruction, and segregation.”⁵ Working with genealogists, local families, and seminary employees, they have been able to locate descendants of exploited laborers. They identified buildings still on campus that were built by enslaved persons, some of whom came from nearby Mt. Vernon. Being a Christian seminary, they heard God’s call to repent. They started by acknowledging the past and seeking a better way for the future.

Perhaps it would have been easier to keep quiet about this history; but instead they’ve committed to making amends in the form of a reparations fund for descendants and supporting the work of justice and inclusion within their denomination. And they’ve committed to learning and allowing room for this initiative to evolve as the families speak their desires out loud.

The Book of Jonah doesn’t tell us how the Ninevites repented after they fasted with their sheep and goats in the burlap garb. But we do know a bit about the Ninevites’ violent history, their “wicked” ways, and their acts of war committed against Jonah’s people because they carved their own misdeeds in stone. King Sennacherib, the ruler of the Assyrian empire, commissioned large stone panels to celebrate his victory and to decorate his palace in Nineveh in 700 BCE. Now on view at the British Museum, these large pieces depict the battle, the victory, and the brutality his army inflicted upon the Judean people. Even so in the book of Jonah, God changes God’s mind when the Ninevites “turned from their evil ways.”

“if God asks you to preach and practice Truth in the face of falsehood in a place like Nineveh, why don’t you give it a whirl and see if you can do any good?”

Amy-Jill Levine says this about the book of Jonah: “People are judged not according to ethnicity but by ethics. Jonah is in the same universalistic tradition as the first chapter of Genesis, which proclaims all people are created in the divine image.”⁶ Yes even our worst enemies.

In its multi-valent and humorous way, this slim little minority report stretches the limits of our imagination. God is merciful to the Ninevites, to the sailors, to Jonah, and to us. God will go to ridiculous lengths to accomplish God’s goals, never relenting until all creation is redeemed.

⁵Virginia Theological Seminary Reparations, Accessed online: <https://vts.edu/mission/multicultural-ministries/reparations/>

⁶Brettler, Marc Zvi & Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Bible with and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*. New York: Harper One, 2020, 320.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God's mercy is both wonderful and frightening. This week's newsletter from *Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation* put it this way: "The understanding that I am a holy child of God contains within itself of-ten unrealized consequences. If I embrace this notion about myself, I must accept its corollary: that is, if I am a holy child of God, then so *is everyone else.*" ⁷ Jonah will struggle with this next week as he pouts under a plant in the final chapter of the book.

Knowing then, that God is inescapably, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love," our task is to speak boldly, to love ridiculously, to live faithfully and to create space for others to do the same in our communities, families, and organizations.

Commentaries Consulted:

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Sarras, Niveen. "A Palestinian Feminist Reading of the Book of Jonah," in *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, 2015. Accessed online <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1112>.

Yanklowitz, Shumuly, *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*, New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2020.

⁷Lerita Coleman Brown, "Oneness with Everyone," Center for Action and Contemplation, 2023, Accessed online: <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/oneness-with-everyone-2023-07-10/>

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God, you know our hearts. You know our inmost thoughts. You know us and you trust us, and so we can trust you.

We can, with vulnerability, hand over to you the worries of our lives, the worries and the deepest joys, so that in conversation with you, we might know again in a new way that you treasure us, that you hold us, that you carry our burden and weep when we weep, that you are never remote from us, you are always near, even as your love extends beyond us to the farthest reaches of the universe. God, hold our yearning to reach greater heights, our strive for excellence, our determination to do more. Let the fire burn within us to make the better choice, to take the more excellent way.

When a significant trouble crosses our path, when a toxic relationship overturns our ability to hold steady, when unforeseen events muddle our hopes, dreams and efforts, give us your spirit, your tenderness, let us rely on you and one another, so that we do not need to fix it alone, we do not need to solve it alone. Give us gentle traveling partners, companions on the journey, a friend who becomes for us the light on the next section of the path.

As we think of Jonah, who is called to support not just individuals but a whole nation in the work of change, let us remember that the weighty troubles of the world are held in your tenderness, that you send someone here today even to care for the city, to arise and go, to be the embodiment of the light of the world and the salt of the earth, to be Christ's body at work for the sake of justice and peace.

Let us be one of the called, one who is asked to participate in such weighty work of goodness and mercy. Even in the impossible struggles in our city—racism, hunger, housing—let us arise and go. Even in the impossible struggles across the globe—public health, war, climate change—let us arise and go. Let the language of your spirit arise within us, so that we can hear your call.

All praise and honor and glory are yours, holy triune God, now and forever. Amen.