



From the Pulpit: July 9, 2023
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Jonah 2

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, VII: The Inescapable Presence of God

This summer Katie, Christine, and I are preaching this sermon series that includes two slim books: Ruth and Jonah. What we mean by that is that we find that there is a broadness or inclusiveness or wideness in God's mercy that's lacking from the Hebrew Bible.

*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his
God from the belly of the fish, 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.*

*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.*

*The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.*

*But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"*

*Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah
out onto the dry land.*

Let me beg patience from those of you who were here last week and recap Jonah's story for those of you who weren't. One day God tells the Hebrew prophet Jonah to go and preach repentance to the great city of Nineveh, but Jonah doesn't *want* to preach hope and repentance because Nineveh is the Moscow of the Ancient Near East and everybody hates it, especially Israel. So Jonah catches a taxi to the seaport town of Joppa and hops aboard the first ship sailing west. WAY WEST. To Tarshish, in fact.

"Nevertheless
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expectation,
Jonah succeeds in
his mission."

God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh, about 500 miles EAST of Jerusalem. In response, Jonah sails for Tarshish, about 2,500 miles WEST of Jerusalem. This is not a subtle gesture. Tarshish is as far west as it is possible to go. As far as the ancient Hebrews were concerned, Tarshish is the western end of the world. They didn't know about Canada or America or Brazil. For the ancient Hebrews, there was nothing beyond Tarshish but dragons and the Abyss. So Jonah is telling God to take a hike.

This map of the Mediterranean basin superimposed on a map of the United States gets the point across. If Jonah is down here in Joppa—near Charleston—and God asks him to go 500 miles northeast to Boston, instead, Jonah books the first non-stop to LA. This is not a subtle gesture.

Well, you probably know the story. God is so mad that Jonah is swallowed up first by a terrifying tempest, and then by a ginormous fish, which eventually vomits Jonah up onto dry land. Dazed, confused, and slimed up with fish bile, Jonah is convinced by now that God means business and finally travels to Nineveh to accomplish his God-given mission.

Now you wouldn't think that a preacher as reluctant and cranky as Jonah would be terribly effective. How would you like to listen to a petulant and sulky preacher every Sunday? Don't answer that.

Nevertheless contrary to all expectation, Jonah succeeds in his mission. This amazes everybody, including God and Jonah himself. The entire city of Nineveh instantly wakes up and smells the coffee and turns from the error of its ways, from the least to the greatest, from the humblest peddler on the street corner hawking newspapers and matches to the great king himself. They close the brothels and the casinos and the strip joints and the taverns, they kneel, they pray, they fast.

And God relents; the city is saved from destruction. Jonah's story is about the Inescapable God. The English poet Francis Thompson famously called the Deity "The Hound of Heaven." This bloodhound just won't quit till he's treed his coon.

Someone here is feeling the first gentle but later insistent urgings of God to Gospel duty. Someone here is being called by God to preach or practice Truth in the face of falsehood. Someone here is caught between what *she wants to do* and what *God needs her to do*. Someone here faces a choice between a *comfortable* and a *meaningful* life. Someone here stands at the crossroads of Broad Street and Narrow Way. Someone here doesn't know whether to sail *west* to friendly Tarshish or hike *east* to wicked Nineveh.

I know it's hard. Dave Barry says, "When I hear about people making vast fortunes without doing any productive work or contributing anything to society, my reaction is, How do I get in on that."¹

To what Nineveh is God sending you? You could always sail for Tarshish; it's in the South of Spain, on the coast of the beautiful Mediterranean. There are beaches there and cabana boys who will bring you a margarita or a Corona with a slice of lime. You could get all tanned and relaxed and happy, but maybe empty too, maybe a little lost.

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

Every year First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich would send a mission trip to a school for poor kids in Honduras, K-6. Some of us went to run a Vacation Bible School

for the kids, but years before we started going there, some brilliant dentist had set up a temporary dental clinic in a classroom, because he noticed that none of the children or their teachers had ever been to a dentist one time in their entire lives.

They shipped used but genuine dental chairs to Honduras from the United States, all the polishing and drilling equipment. They ran a water line into that classroom, and another line for forced air, everything you see at Dr. Duda's office but old and dinged up.

So every year we would round up all the dental professionals we could find—two or three dentists and three or four hygienists—and we'd go for a week and clean the teeth and fill the cavities for all 160 students and teachers at that school. Well, I say "we." I didn't do anything but go along for the ride.

In their getting-paid-for-it lives, these people spent 40 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, scraping and drilling teeth, and what do they do when they get a week off? Scrape and drill teeth for a 160 kids and teachers, 15 a day for five days straight. Kathy went six times.

¹Dave Barry in *The Miami Herald*, quoted in *Reader's Digest*, May, 2003, p. 61.

When we started this mission, none of those kids or teachers had ever been to a dentist. You can imagine what kind of a mess those mouths were when we started going there, but after we'd gone for about ten straight years, those students and teachers had some of the best teeth in Honduras.

So you go ahead and flee to Tarshish, with its beautiful beaches on the Mediterranean, and its cabana boys with their margaritas. You'll be all tanned, relaxed, and comfortable. You deserve it. You really do. But every once in a while, 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?

This week while I was thinking about God snatching Jonah from certain death by drowning in the roiling billows of the mammoth, mercurial Mediterranean, I thought of another intrepid mariner for whom God did almost the same thing.

Do you know who John Howland is? In 1620, John Howland was a 21-year-old indentured servant who boarded the Mayflower in Plymouth, England, bound for the New World. One day crossing the Atlantic, a violent storm was tossing the ship back and forth across the waves like a toy boat.

For some inscrutable reason, John Howland decides to climb out of the hold and go up on deck at the height of this terrifying tempest. When the ship lurched in a serious gust of wind, John was tossed overboard. This should have been the end of him, but a long rope, the topsail lanyard, was dangling in the water behind the boat, and John grabbed it in a death grip and wouldn't let go even though it hauled him ten feet down beneath the waves. He hung on long enough until a couple of sailors aboard the Mayflower hauled him in and snatched him back on deck with a boat hook. That's the seventeenth-century equivalent of a fish vomiting you up on dry land.

John Howland must have said to himself, "Well, I guess God has a purpose for my life. I better make the best of it." And he did. He earned his freedom from indentured servitude and got married. John and his wife had ten children and 88 grandchildren—88!

There were 102 passengers aboard the Mayflower. Only 51—exactly half—only 51 of them ever had children. But do you know how many Mayflower descendants there are in the United States today? Thirty-five million, or more than 10% of the population.² The Inescapable Presence of God can do remarkable things, if you work with it.

"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?"

²Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking/The Penguin Group, 2006), pp. 32–33, 356.

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

Lord of Lords,
Very God of Very God,
Spirit of Embodied Love,
the glow of morning tugs us awake,
and your presence stretches out
across the shimmering day.

Sunlight glitters off the windowsill
as sparrows flock and goldfinch forage.

This day is set in motion
by the spark of your presence,
launched by your grace,
drenched in the mystery of this life
in which you bend and tend and prompt and call,
you in whom we live and move and have our being.

We give you thanks
for the hummingbird hovering just beyond reach,
and the flash of tiger lilies across the way,
for the unexpected gift from a neighbor
and the generosity of a new friend,
for the return home to a place of comfort
and the surprise meet-up after way-too-long.

For the proposal,
the wedding,
the birth-announcement,
the baptism.

For the summer vacation,
the joy of returning to a place made sacred
by time with loved-ones.

There is a puzzling abundance in this life,
even when our heart is abuzz,
a hive of longing for something more,
even when our spiritual hunger
brings us to this sanctuary
full of questions, doubts, desires
and an ache, a longing.

We surrender to our desire to draw near to you.
Draw near to us.

We pray when our hearts are full,
just as we do when our hearts are broken.

We hand over to you the joy of life,
just as we do sorrow.

For the unplanned loss,
the abrupt grief,
the untidy reality.

For the staggering pain,
the steady heartbreak,
the sudden appearance of medical professionals
advising, predicting, prescribing, diagnosing.

For the lonely loop of mental anguish,
the intrusive thoughts,
the night's sleep replaced
by strange and fragile worries.

We long for the something-more
found at the trembling edge
of your goodness and mercy.

We extend our arms, our hearts,
our minds, reaching for your peace
that passes understanding.

We pine for your spirit to be our balm and relief.

For the 500th day of war in Ukraine,
ammunition running out,
peace feeling far off.

Those near and far long for
malice, conflict, enmity, and friction to cease.

For the sake of the innocent.
For the sake of the vulnerable.
For the sake of the strong
who become weary
of one more day in which
one more round is loaded
into an unwanted weapon
of an unwanted war.

For NATO and its upcoming
world-bending decision-making.

For the possibility of warfare's ceasing.

For the dream of another way,
a more just way,
paved with dignity and resilience and ease.

Lord hear our prayer.
Lord draw near.
Lord, let us be ready for your tender mercy,
for your pervasive calling,
for your love undenied.

And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us saying...