
I'm a Prophet, Get me Out of Here

Jonah 3:1-5,10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 22, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I was on a Christian radio show a week or two ago and the presenter was asking me about one of my books. He said, "I guess you found yourself asking these questions and having these wonderings, and you thought, 'I'll go look at the Bible and see what God wants to say about these things.'" I wasn't looking to be argumentative, but I replied, "In fact, it was the other way around. I was reading the Bible and it made me ask all these questions and have all these wonderings." I quickly realized that was the wrong answer, and before I knew it I wasn't talking to the presenter but to the producer and she was thanking me for being on the show and I was off air and gone.

There's a way of talking about the Bible that turns it into a self-help manual, that's full of good advice about how to navigate all of life's problems. That approach was clearly what my radio interviewer was looking for. But that approach ends up looking silly when confronted by a story like the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah pushes us into a lot of questions and a lot of wonderings. You can't quickly turn it into a moral fable. It makes us laugh and it makes us cry. Somewhere along the way it makes us Christians.

Today I want explore how. I'm going to tell the story of Jonah four times, once for the bare bones of the narrative, a second time to see what the story means to Jews, a third time to see what this strange story meant to the early church, and a fourth time to see what it might mean to Christians today. So here we go with the bare bones.

Jonah's one of those tiny books tucked in between the end of Ezekiel and the end of the Old Testament. Most of us have had that scary moment when someone says, "Oh, Sam, could you just read to us from Jonah chapter 3?" And we've replied, "Ah, yes, Jonah, errr, my favorite, errr, Jonah, yes, short book, errr.. after Amos, isn't it? And, err, oh no that's Joel, ... err, after Joel, and Obadiah, but before Micah, err... yes, obviously, before Micah – yes, of course, everyone knows that, ah, here we are, which chapter was it again?" So we come to these short stories expecting them to be obscure and fearing they'll expose our ignorance. But we all know Jonah's a story about a whale. It's up there on the children's shelf next to Noah and the ark. So surely that must make it the easy one, right? Wrong.

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to cry out against its wickedness. Jonah's having none of it. He sets out in the opposite direction, gets on a boat heading across the Mediterranean. The Lord sends a hurricane upon the sea, and the boat is in all kinds of trouble. The sailors try to work out why this calamity has come upon them. Eventually Jonah admits that he's running away from the Lord. Jonah tells the sailors to throw him into the sea – which, reluctantly, they do. Immediately Jonah hits the water, the storm ceases. Jonah's swallowed by an outsized fish and takes up residence in the fish's belly. There he thanks God for being given a second chance. After three days and nights the fish vomits Jonah up on dry land.

The Lord hasn't finished with Jonah. The Lord tells Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and tell the citizens to repent because God intends to destroy their city. This time the reluctant prophet does as he's told. Much to Jonah's astonishment, Nineveh does repent, and in no time not only the common people but even the king and the livestock are dressed in sackcloth and ashes. Now that's prophecy. Way to go, Jonah. God's impressed, and decides not to destroy Nineveh after all. But Jonah isn't impressed. Jonah's furious. He doesn't want anything to do with this mercy nonsense. He'd be more than happy to see God destroy Nineveh.

This time, instead of sending a big fish, God sends a bush, and the bush, together with the little booth Jonah has made for himself, gives Jonah shade from the sun. But God sends a worm to attack the bush, and a hot east wind to make Jonah dehydrate. Jonah has totally had enough. He asks to die. The story ends with God saying, "If you care about the bush, how much more should I care about the people of Nineveh?"

If we wanted to make it a story with a simple moral point, there's a couple that come immediately to hand. God can work through us, but if we don't cooperate, God can find another way to get the job done. That's one. And a second is, what really makes us angry isn't God's justice, it's God mercy. There's nothing more infuriating than God loving our enemies. God's mercy is utterly outrageous.

But before we rush ahead to the moral, let's read the story again, this time with our Old Testament spectacles on. The key word is Nineveh. Nineveh isn't just any old ancient city. Nineveh's the capital of the Assyrian Empire, today a huge archaeological site located in northern Iraq. And what is the Assyrian Empire? It's Israel's nemesis. David and Solomon's kingdom split around 900 BC into two kingdoms, northern and southern. Around 175 years later the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom and took its leaders into exile. They never returned. The northern kingdom was lost and gone forever. So Nineveh's a name that evokes being destroyed, being gobbled up, being digested and never being seen again. Another 140 years later the Chaldeans invaded the southern kingdom and took its leaders off to Babylon. This is the crisis from which the whole of the Old Testament arises. Would the southern kingdom be wiped from the face of the earth like the northern kingdom was? This is the question lying behind most of the Bible, including the Book of Jonah.

The secret of the book goes back to Genesis 12, and God's call to Abraham to be one in whom all nations may find a blessing. Jonah, or should we say Israel, forgets that his whole purpose is to be faithful to God and so be a blessing to the nations. The sailors on the boat with Jonah represent those nations. They are in peril because Jonah has lost the plot. Jonah's swallowed up by the big fish just like the northern kingdom is swallowed up by Assyria and the southern kingdom by Babylon. The key question is, what happens next? It turns out, unlike the northern kingdom, Jonah finds he can make himself quite at home in the belly of the big fish, and in its welfare find his own welfare. The time comes for the fish to spit him out, just as Babylon returned the Jews to Jerusalem.

And now Jonah gets a second chance. This, surely, is the moment when the Book of Jonah is written. The book is telling the people of Jerusalem that, astonishingly, they've returned from Babylon – they've been spat out from the belly of the big fish. What are they going to do now? Run away again? Or be what they were always called to be – a blessing to the nations? Notice Nineveh's so big that it takes three days to walk across it. That's a subtle nudge to see Nineveh as the equivalent of the big fish, in which Jonah spent three days. But Jonah misses the analogy. Once again he ignores his vocation. And in doing so he denies his heritage. Abraham argues with God like Jonah, but Abraham argued to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, not to destroy them. Moses, like Jonah, is given the task of saving a people, but Moses carries out the task rather than refusing it. Elijah tells God he wants to die just like Jonah does, but in Elijah's case it's because his mission against Jezebel has failed, whereas the reason Jonah wants to die is because his mission has succeeded. Job tells God he can't live because God is so harsh. Jonah tells God he wants to die because God is so merciful.

All of these parallels focus down on the definitive nature of what Jonah is going to do. The bush that's killed by the worm at the end of the book of Jonah represents the withering of the line of kings tracing back to David. By the time this book was written, there was no more hope of a revival of that great 500-year line of kings. The restoration of God's people is going to have to come some other way. Somehow the whole crisis of the Old Testament focuses down on this moment, at the end of the Book of Jonah. Not once but twice God has done something astonishing to preserve Israel for its vocation to be a blessing to the nations. Jonah was glad to be on the receiving end of grace but he's disgusted at the idea of extending it to his enemies. So this is the question. God has abounded in mercy. What's Israel going to abound in?

And this, for Christians, is exactly the moment Jesus Christ walks into the story. Let's look at what the Book of Jonah meant for the early church. Think about the contrast between the Noah story and the Jonah story. In the Noah story, the whole world dies but the godly man and his family are saved. In the Jonah story, Jonah's thrown off the boat so that the whole world, all the sailors, are saved. Jesus is like Jonah at this moment. He dies, so that all people might be saved. He's the scapegoat and the sacrifice that gives the world a second chance. In his death he saves Gentiles and brings them to faith in God. And then what happens next? Jesus goes down into the tomb for three days just like Jonah goes down into the belly of the big fish for three days. If you bring in the Israel dimension, Jesus emerging from the tomb is as unlikely as Israel returning from Babylon or Jonah coming back out of the fish. But return is precisely what all three of them do. Jonah's vomited up on dry land, Israel finds its way back to Jerusalem, and Jesus rises from the tomb on the third day. This is what in more than one place in the gospels Jesus calls the sign of Jonah. And it's not the end of the story, because just as Jonah then goes and preaches to Nineveh, so Christians after the day of Pentecost go and preach to the whole world. For the early church, the Book of Jonah wasn't just a mini-Old Testament. It was a mini-New Testament too.

So finally, what is God telling us through Jonah today? The whole story begins with the LORD. We get so used to the term "Lord" that we forget what it means. It's the translation adopted for the holy name of God, so holy that Jews can't say it. It's not just the same as saying "God." A lot of religions and peoples, and even pledges of allegiance, speak of "God." But this is the LORD, gracious and merciful, and abounding in steadfast love. It's this name that Jesus adopted, it's this identity that caused the early church to see Jesus as not just the epitome of the merciful God, but the very heart of that God. Jonah is saved by the LORD, but he keeps relating to God as if it's the same distant, arbitrary deity. The Book of Jonah presents us with the three crucial characteristics of the God of Jesus Christ: the LORD is merciful beyond comprehension, the LORD does astonishing things, and the LORD will go to any lengths to save a people who will be a blessing to the whole earth.

Let me close with two examples, one global and one personal. Christians are hopelessly at sea about how to relate to Jews. It's partly confusion about whether Christianity is a new religion or whether it's best to think of ourselves as a prodigal child of Judaism. It's partly guilt about the Holocaust and the way the Holocaust came as a climax to centuries of Christian intolerance of the Jews. And it's partly misgivings about the State of Israel, and about whether, in a way that's hard to talk about, the relationship between America and Israel has become like a toxic marriage, damaging to the character of both parties. I suggest Jonah is the book above all others that Christians and Jews should read together. That way we can say the blunt and brutally honest things we need to say to one another. Jews can say to Christians, "You're the Ninevites. You're our enemies. It's only because we love the LORD that we're learning to love you. We have no idea what the LORD sees in you. Your existence is the embodiment of God's exasperating grace." And Christians can say to Jews, "You're Jonah. You only exist so as to be a blessing to the nations, like us. That's what God keeps you in existence for. Is it possible you've forgotten that? How can we help you continue to be a blessing?"

And here's the personal example. The story of Jonah is pushing us to identify who we're in the business of worshiping, serving, following, and loving: some faceless, arbitrary, coldhearted and distant God, or the LORD, made known in Jesus Christ. Which is it? Which was it, when you got out of bed this morning? Which is it, right this second now? Which will it be, when you face the week tomorrow morning? I'm going to ask you one question. I wonder, when you look back on your life, do you feel, like Jonah, that at a certain stage, maybe more than once, you've been in the belly of a whale, and somehow, astonishingly, the LORD has given you another chance when it looked like you were swallowed up and gone? And now, like Jonah, do you have the choice between whether to continue to see God as faceless, arbitrary, coldhearted and distant, and resent the LORD's mercy to those as undeserving as you, or whether to worship, serve, follow, and love the LORD, the one who repays evil with good, mistrust with mercy, and fear with joy? Is this the moment when you say, "At last I've found out what my story means and what I'm here for. God made and preserved me for this one thing: that my life should be a blessing."