

Harris Athanasiadis

September 24, 2017

## A STORY IN FIVE PARTS

Jonah 1:1 – 2:10

The story of Jonah. It's about a man who lived a long time ago. The reason it's in the bible, though, is because it's also a story about us. Jonah travels a great journey. And even though his journey covers thousands of kilometres, more importantly it covers a great distance in his soul. Let's look at this story, but let's look at it not so much as a journal of places traveled to in the world, but of places traveled in the soul. Will we find ourselves in it? Let's see.

I've broken down the story of Jonah's journey into five parts.

1) Part one starts with Jonah's call from God. His job is to be a prophet. A prophet is supposed to speak truth. It's not always easy to speak truth. The truth can be painful. The truth can get people upset. The truth can get you into a bad situation. Have you ever got yourself into trouble for speaking truthfully?

Jonah is supposed to go to this great city called Nineveh and proclaim to its inhabitants that they are responsible for great wickedness. Why? Well, Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Assyria has committed terrible atrocities against people all over the world including the Israelites - slaughtering, pillaging, and destroying. So, wouldn't Jonah the Israelite be more than happy to tell them that they've got it coming big time? Yes, he would. But he's a survivor. Survivors like to stay alive. Maybe he hates the Assyrians, but he loves his life more. That's one way to interpret what he does in response to the call of God. He runs away. He boards a ship in the opposite direction, "away from the presence of the Lord," we're told.

Running away... Have you ever run away? I know I have, more than once. We run away because we don't want to face what we should face and do what we should do. Why? Because we're afraid. We're afraid for ourselves. We're afraid for others. We're afraid that something is going to change or something is going to be lost and we will never be able to make it good again. Running away is a common response to anything difficult we must face.

Jonah runs away from what he must do. But can he ever get away from the presence of God? Can he ever run away from his conscience, from the truth, from what he must

do? Can we? We can for a while. We can as long as we convince ourselves we don't have to deal with it. But what about the consequences?

2) The second part of the story is about the consequences catching up to Jonah. He is running away but can he ever run away from God? It all happens through a storm. A storm can be destructive. Think about the tropical storms we've been witnessing in the Caribbean for example. But a storm also represents an inner crisis. If an inner crisis forces us to change a destructive way we are going, then it's a good thing. In the end, it's not destructive but redemptive. We don't know it at the time, though. Jonah doesn't know it and neither do the other people on the ship. They're scared for their lives. They pray to their gods. But not Jonah. Remember, he is running away from the presence of God. He's asleep while everyone else is in a panic. Sleep represents an inner shutting down of his soul. Jonah doesn't want prayer contact with God because he's afraid of what that may awaken in him.

But the storm forces him to wake up. His running away has consequences for those around him. Paranoia sets in. "It's all because of me this storm is happening." And isn't that the way it is with guilt? When we feel responsible about something, we interpret so much that happens around us as connected to us somehow. We are responsible somehow. We can go on for a long time denying, running away, avoiding, blaming everyone and everything else but ourselves. But then, this all turns on us viciously when something bad happens. It's all our fault now, we believe. 'If only I did this, if only I didn't do that'... We torment ourselves relentlessly and wear those around us down with our constant preoccupation of guilt, self-condemnation and stress.

So how does Jonah resolve this heavy guilt he is carrying? 'Throw me overboard,' he tells the ship's crew. 'It's all my fault this is happening. Get rid of me and you'll be ok.' What an act of despair, is it not? Jonah can't see any way out other than death. Life is over. There's no way out of the mess. His moral failure is irreversible, the consequences unchangeable. Despair.... Hopelessness.... How many of us have ever gone through periods of guilt, shame, self-condemnation or times of hopelessness and despair?... Sadly, people make fatal decisions when in such states of being and the consequences can be terrible. It's tragic how many suicides there are in our society, especially among young people. People believe in the moment that there is no other way, and they are unwilling to trust in some larger truth other than the immediacy of despair, hopelessness, or crippling guilt that can find no constructive release. In crazy moments, we run. In crazy moments, we destroy ourselves and others in despair.

Jonah is thrown overboard in a raging storm into the middle of the ocean. How can he possibly survive?

3) This brings us to part three of our story and Jonah's cry from the depths. If we are able to find that place in us to cry up to God, this is a sign of hope. It's a sign that we want to live, that we want another chance, that maybe there is another way? Something happens inside Jonah. From total despair he turns to God, not as his judge and condemner, but his deliverer. God is a God of second chances. Jonah doesn't quite know this yet but the fact that he cries up to God is a sign that he's open to this possibility.

What about you and me? Do we believe in second chances? Do we believe in God that way? Or is God our judge, if God is real for us at all?

4) This brings us to part four. Jonah is saved. He is given a second chance. This time he listens to God's call. He does the right thing. He goes to Nineveh and proclaims the message God has told him to proclaim. What's the message again? "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." There is no word of redemption here, just a word of judgement and destruction. These people from the leadership on down will get what's coming to them. They will pay for all their many sins against humanity. Jonah can only be happy about this, right?

But then, something startling happens. Something totally unexpected happens. The people listen to Jonah. They are upset. But instead of reacting violently against Jonah or becoming fatalistic, hopeless and lost in despair, they grieve. They begin to fast and wear sackcloth. These are actions of mourning. People do this because they're sad. Are they sad because they are anticipating their doom? Are they sad because they're truly sorry for what they have done? Are they doing all this as public display hoping to pull at God's heart strings to change the judgement? Well, whatever their motivations may be, we're told that their act of contrition pulls at God's heart-strings. God decides not to destroy Nineveh. God chooses to believe the best about the Assyrians, that they are prepared to change their ways. God has to absorb all the evil they have done, as well as trust their better intentions for the future. God has to do this in order to forgive them. At least this is how God is believed by the narrators of this story.

If this is, indeed, God's way, do you think God is wise here? Do you think God is a fool? Do you think God is too soft with the Assyrians? Well, but isn't God a God of second chances? Would Jonah not know this? Didn't he get a second chance? Yes, but we're

talking about the Assyrians. They're real sinners. They've got a lot of blood on their hands. Aren't they beyond the pale of God's mercy?

5) This brings us to part five. Here we get to the real heart of the story. Jonah is angry. He hates the Assyrians. He doesn't want God to get warm and fuzzy about them. He was afraid of this possibility all along. He says this to God in his prayers: "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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Wow. Here it is. The reason Jonah ran away at the beginning of our story was not fear of the Assyrians, but hatred. He didn't want to be part of a plan of mercy and forgiveness. He wanted to hold on to his hate. His hate kept him fuelled and alive. To let go of his hate is equivalent to dying for him. He has nothing else to live for. His hate is fuel.

Sad, isn't it? But what about us? What gives us energy? Is it always life-giving in God's eyes? Maybe it's not intense hate that fuels us, but what about cynicism, resentment or bitterness? What about jealousy or envy or competitive ambition? What about worry or self-pity or narcissistic self-focus oblivious of the needs around us? What about a perfectionism to which neither we nor those around us can ever attain? What about attachments to people and perceptions of them that are unrealistic? Are these what fuels our energy in life? What would happen to us if we let these things go, surrendered them to God one by one? Would life be over? Or would life begin a whole new chapter?

The story ends with God's challenge to Jonah. And this challenge is like a struggle in Jonah's heart. It's all in his prayers. There is a bush that grows and gives Jonah shade. But then the bush withers under the hot sun and dies. Jonah is really angry and upset about it. Here's God's challenge to him: Jonah, "you are concerned about the bush for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 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?"

That's how the story ends, with this question from God into Jonah's heart. We don't know how Jonah responds. The story ends that way as a challenge to us. How will we respond? To forgive.... To forgive others.... To forgive ourselves... to forgive God... to

forgive life... To forgive is to see the value of life greater than our hate, our anger, our despair.... To forgive is to see that life's possibility for good is always greater than we can imagine in our darkest day and most anxious night.... To forgive is to believe in God, and to believe in a God who values life – even the most decrepit and evil.... God values life and does not want it destroyed.

God cares about the victims, yes. On the cross God identifies with all the victims of our world. On the cross God condemns all crucifiers, whoever does the crucifying. But God will never deal with crucifiers by destroying. Hatred can never be converted into justice or good. Anger must always be channeled by love not hate. Forgiveness is a courageous act that acknowledges the wrong, names it as wrong, and yet believes that there is a way to redemption even with the wrong forever leaving it's imprint on our lives.... We can't get rid of the wrong by pretending it hasn't happened. But we can't get rid of the wrong by destroying the wrong-doer either.

Many don't believe this. Many will never believe this. Many will reject a God of infinite mercy preferring one of judgement, condemnation and vengeance, especially of our enemies.... But the God in Jesus, the God of cross and resurrection, the God of Jonah.... This God is also calling each of us here and now.... How will we respond? Will we live the call of God to live truthfully? Or will we run away in fear? Will we pray to God, awakening our conscience and our hope? Or will we get stuck in fatalism, anger and despair? Will we learn forgiveness, or will we refuse to let things go in order to find new ways to tackle the wrongs? The God of Jonah, the God in Jesus, has a way for you and for me.... Will we open our spirits to such a way? Amen.