

# THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

## Jonah Readings

The story of Jonah, like other stories in our Older Testament (Daniel, Ruth, Esther, Job) is very personal, but also speaks to a people's history. How do you live in God when so much in your life and in the world is uncertain, tragic, unfair, even cruel? The Hebrews were a small and vulnerable people. Their land was in a strategic location between larger powers seeking greater land and wealth. To gain and maintain ever larger territory requires conquering people, taking their land and enslaving them for their labour. This also means erasing their distinctive identity and assimilating them into the empire. Sound familiar?

Jonah is from Northern Israel... The North was conquered by the Assyrian empire (modern day Iraq). The capital city was Ninevah. The brutality of this conquest, the slaughter, the destruction of towns and cities, the displacement of peoples and separation from family for those who survived... all of it was told in stories, poems and songs...

Jonah is a prophet. The role of a prophet is speaking for God, speaking truth, even when your life is on the line. The role of a prophet is also to listen for what God wants versus what is sometimes in your own heart. Jonah struggles with this. Why? The loss and rage and grief of a people is also carried by Jonah. Jonah's journey is also the people's journey and it's a difficult one.

But I must also warn you as I warn myself... The story of Jonah is about a journey of the heart... And once we're touching the heart, the connections transcend time and place to find any one of us, should our hearts be open. Every time I meditate on the story of Jonah I find myself at a different moment in my own life journey. Where is God finding me today? The journey has many twists and turns. Are you ready?

### Jonah 1. 1-3

**1**Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>**'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'** <sup>3</sup>**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.**

Away from the presence of the Lord... Running away... Have you ever run away - away from God, from yourself, from truth, from what you must face and do should you have the courage, the grace and the will so to do?... Have you ever avoided confronting some situation, dealing with some relationship or person, a wrong that must be righted, an apology that must be offered with sincerity of heart and readiness to face the consequences and make reparations to be worked out?

All of us have run away at some point, sometimes for a long time... God is still our God, always... God still loves us fully and completely. That doesn't change... But like Jonah, we have been fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

But can Jonah flee forever? No. The truth, what must be faced, God, catches up to him. The ship runs into a heavy storm. The crew and all passengers are terrified. But Jonah's terror is also one of guilt and responsibility. This can't all be a coincidence. And so he tells the crew that the storm that is raging and

threatening the ship's welfare is also a storm raging within Jonah and between him and God. He is the problem the crew must deal with.

## **Jonah 1. 7-12**

**7** 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. <sup>8</sup>Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' <sup>9</sup>'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' <sup>10</sup>Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

**11** Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup>He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.'

Can you believe it? Jonah's solution is the ending of his own life. Running away from the presence of God, from his life, from truth, from what he had to face... Running away has brought him to this point of self-termination.

Have you ever felt caught, up against a wall, paralyzed, impotent, confused, even hopeless and in despair about any way forward? Have you ever felt like giving up? Have you ever felt it was all too late because you hadn't dealt with something when you should have or you allowed things to get so bad that it now seems too high a wall to climb over?... So it is for Jonah... Just throw me overboard, all is lost, I have failed, it's all too late to change or fix or solve at this point... Very sad, yet very real to life at points.

Jonah is thrown into the raging sea in despair and hopelessness. He is swallowed by a big fish. Is this the end? Or does the fish represent a holding place at the very bottom – You're still alive, but barely. Is it the end? Or is it a prelude to something else?

Have you ever hit rock bottom, whatever the bottom may have been for you? What happened there? How did you emerge? What did you learn at the bottom? For all you lost, what did you gain you wouldn't know you gained till much later?

## **Jonah 2. 1-10**

**2**Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup>saying,  
'I called to the LORD out of my distress,  
and God answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.  
<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Then I said, “I am driven away  
 from your sight;  
 how shall I look again  
 upon your holy temple?”  
<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me;  
 the deep surrounded me;  
 weeds were wrapped around my head  
<sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains.  
 I went down to the land  
 whose bars closed upon me for ever;  
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit,  
 O LORD my God.  
<sup>7</sup> As my life was ebbing away,  
 I remembered the LORD;  
 and my prayer came to you,  
 into your holy temple.  
<sup>8</sup> Those who worship vain idols  
 forsake their true loyalty.  
<sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
 will sacrifice to you;  
 what I have vowed I will pay.  
 Deliverance belongs to the LORD!’  
<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Somehow, Jonah makes it. Nothing has happened yet other than the fact that he is not dead. He is alive, barely, yet alive... But more. He cries out to God. No more blocks or barriers. No more hiding. Stripped bare with nothing left, somehow, instead of shutting down in despair, Jonah cries up to God.

Biblical scholars recognize in these verses of Jonah one of the most ancient of writings of the Old Testament. They believe, in fact, the whole story of Jonah would have been constructed around these psalm-like and pre-psalm like poetic verses.

These verses also express core ways of praying and connecting with God. Our prayers are never more sincere as when we come to God in our utter need, stripped soul naked, ready for whatever comes because there is nothing left to lose. There is no way further down. That’s how it feels... Have you ever been here? Whether you have or have not, why does it feel somehow familiar? Why does it feel familiar to me? I’ve never been quite where Jonah has, not even close. And yet, if I pay too close attention to these words and enter them with my heart, tears come to my eyes. Why? Is this some core human experience at the heart of many of us if we allow ourselves to be stripped down utterly trusting and open before God?

So what happens to Jonah?

### **Jonah 3. 1-5, 10**

**<sup>3</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be**

overthrown!" <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

**10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it.**

Wow! A lot happens in just a few short verses. Jonah survives, but more than this. Now he takes up the call he had been running away from at the very beginning. He goes right into enemy territory and speaks truth, unvarnished truth: "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!"

So what did Jonah believe would happen? What was he hoping would happen? We're not told. What we are told is that something astonishing and shocking happens. Jonah is not beaten, stoned, imprisoned, executed. No. He is not mocked and jeered and laughed at. No. The people listen. And they not only listen; they respond with profound remorse, regret and repentance. But think of what they have done! Think of what they had done to Jonah's people! How could they ever atone for that?! Is it right that God is ready to "change God's mind"? Is God so soft? What about the victims?!

So who's side are you on? Forgiveness is a great thing, but is it always the right thing? Is forgiveness ever too easy or cheap? How can victims truly heal if there is no atonement that costs, some counter punishment and pain?

Have you ever been on one or the other side of some hurt or wrong or injustice? Were you ever satisfied with the outcome, the sincerity of repentance, the release of forgiveness, the peace of reconciliation or just walking away and leaving it be? Or is there still a thickness in you, a knot, a block, something unresolved between you and God and another person and life?

So, what about Jonah? Let's see...

## **Jonah 4. 1-5**

**4But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the LORD and said, '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. <sup>3</sup>And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' <sup>5</sup>Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.**

Wow! Jonah digs deep into himself, past his fear, and what does he find? Anger! Pure, unvarnished anger! In fact, it's more like hate. He discovers that even past the fear of having to go and face an enemy more powerful than him, an enemy he and his people have feared for a long time, an enemy on the enemy's own turf... More than fear it is anger and hate that lives in Jonah. He ran away, he says, because he knows God is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Recently, I was reading an article by an evangelical pastor in the US, who is very troubled by what is happening in the nation with the rise of what is called "Christian Nationalism" – a militant movement supporting the January 6 insurrection and a racially purified, white Christian nation. One Sunday the pastor read and preached on Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies as a

counter-form of resistance. He was taken aback when a large enough group of congregants cornered him after the service and told him flat out that Jesus' message is not realistic in the world. The pastor countered by saying "but, this is the gospel!" They replied that it may have been the gospel then, but it cannot work in the world today.

Isn't this shocking and sad?! We have our Canadian versions too and as a pastor and preacher I have had my moments of encounter over the years... And yet, Jonah would side with these nationalists. Now to be fair to Jonah, he had also lived a deep trauma of the atrocity committed against his people and maybe to him and his own family too. It's hard not to hate when you have been a serious victim of it over a long time.

But even beyond this, how many people do we know, (and maybe we ourselves too if we can enter empathetically into a victim's heart and mind), how many people do we know who have been hurt and harmed so deeply that they cannot let go the anger and the hate from their hearts? Is God asking too much?

So what happens? Let's continue...

### **Jonah 4. 6-11**

**6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'**

**9 But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' <sup>10</sup>Then the LORD said, '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. <sup>11</sup>And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'**

What a brilliant response by God spoken into Jonah's heart! Jonah is struggling deep within as many of us do. Think about how many Jews must be feeling about Gaza. Is trying to root out Hamas by harming and killing thousands of innocent men, women and children, animals and infrastructure too, a solution?

God wants to challenge Jonah who is more upset about a bush withering, a bush that gave him some shade under the hot sun, than a multitude of people and their animals, most of whom are ordinary folk who happen to be part of an oppressive society and maybe suffering in their own way too. God wants to challenge Jonah within to see these people as precious human beings just like he and his people are precious human beings. And animals do not take sides in a conflict either.

God wants to appeal to Jonah's heart, to release it and free it and open it up to the sunlight of God's love. Jonah needs to heal just like the people of Nineveh need to heal. Repentance, healing, atonement, reparation, reconciliation, justice, peace... this has to involve people seeing each other as people, as siblings put into terrible situations causing awful harms, experiencing profound suffering and loss.

So where do you and I need to become more humanized? Where do we need to let go, let be and see another as a child of God for all their damage? Where do we need to be stripped bare and open? Where do we need to be confronted, comforted, challenged, healed?

And guess what. This is exactly where the Book of Jonah ends, with a question. It is left open-ended. We don't know what Jonah does, whether he is ever reconciled to a God of steadfast love and mercy. I believe it is left this way for our benefit. We have to give the story an ending. How will we end the story? How will our own story end?

While I don't carry anger and hate as Jonah does, I can sympathize fully with where he's at. I cannot imagine the struggle I would be undergoing if I had witnessed, lived, and suffered what Jonah and the Hebrews had.

But I do know what it feels like to run away and avoid because I am afraid.

I also know what it feels like to hit a wall, to feel hopeless, to question whether there is a way through that will be life-giving.

But I also know what it's like to get second, third, and fourth chances. And I do know what it feels like to have the love of God find me in many different ways, and often through people, where I am stripped bare and inspired to rise again with courage, to find my way into the new place I am put in my life journey right now...

What about you?.... Amen.