

Jonah: God's Little Comedy

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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I call the book of *Jonah*, “God’s little comedy.” It pokes fun at our human foibles, and it has a happy ending. Frederick Buechner says that a tragedy is about the *inevitable*, and a comedy is about the *unforeseeable*.

A man slips on a banana peel. *Jonah* is full of the unforeseeable. Sometimes we learn a lot on the other end of a banana peel. And learning to laugh at ourselves is no small virtue.

And such is why while the Bible contains the tragic, it is not a tragedy. God is a God of the unforeseeable: “Behold I am doing a new thing”, says the Lord.

Jonah was what we could call an anti-prophet, or the UN-Prophet. He was a man with a negative disposition. He didn’t like people much.

How did this, misanthropic prophet named Jonah wind up helping God save a foreign nation that he, Jonah, hated? We shall see in this delicious little comedy called Jonah.

Act I: The Call

The tale begins with God’s call to Jonah: “Arise, go to Nineveh and cry out against it. Tell them their wickedness has come before me.”

Jonah was dumbfounded. *Nineveh*? The very name brought fear and revulsion to the ancient Hebrew heart. Capital of the dreaded world power, Assyria, Nineveh personified all that was evil: Opposition to Yahweh, a military threat to Israel, a reputation for sin, cruelty and ruthless power.

Jonah could not believe that God wanted him to go preach there. They deserved no mission of mercy. They would not repent—and if they did it would only be a ruse. “Me, preach your Word there?” said Jonah, his voice cracking with incredulity. “Talk about pearls before swine. *No way Yahweh!*”

Our prejudices rise up from deep within us. They attach our fears and disgust onto people, groups, nations and races. It is learned at parents’ knees, reinforced by culture and tragically blessed from pulpits. In wartime people are demonized and dehumanized. America’s original sin was white supremacy. It began in the enslavement of black persons. It insinuates itself into the hearts and minds of America’s people, consciously and unconsciously. And it has been a tragic part of American foreign and domestic policy. Lord have mercy.

What did Jonah do when asked to go preach to a nation he loathed? A prophet is supposed to “stand before the presence of the Lord.” Jonah “fled the presence of the Lord”. God said, “Go east.” Jonah went west to Tarshish, a faraway place where he could disappear and forget. Margaritaville. He bought a

ticket and headed toward Tarshish—whose name sounds how you talk after a few margaritas.

Our Tarshish need not be far away. It can be a Barcalounger, a few martinis, a T.V. and a remote control. We can flee the presence of the Lord in many a way.

Act II: The Ship

Jonah bought a ticket and headed west. A storm arose. The sailors were frightened for their lives. Meanwhile Jonah was sound asleep in the belly of the ship. The sailors woke him up and asked him to pray to his god. They had already prayed to theirs. When the prayers didn't work, they resorted to magic. They cast lots to see whose fault the storm was. When things go wrong, find a scapegoat! The lots fell to hapless Jonah.

“Who are you?”, they asked. “I'm a Hebrew”, Jonah replied. “I worship Yahweh who controls the land and the sea (not to mention the dice on the table.) It's all my fault. Throw me overboard.”

Was this a gallantry on his part: an effort to save them? Or was it the act of a man wallowing in despair?

The sailors obliged, and threw him overboard. Suddenly the sea calmed, and the sailors converted to Yahweh on the spot! Jonah, an evangelist despite himself. It doesn't say whether the sailors, amid their praise of Yahweh had another thought about Jonah, now on his way to the bottom of the sea.

Act III: The Fish

There is a delightful rabbinic tale about this scene. The sailors repeatedly throw Jonah overboard. Over he goes and the sea calms. They fish him back on board, and the storm starts again! They throw him back in the sea, and the sea calms. They bring him back on board, and the storm starts again. Over and over until the great fish ends this foolishness and gobbles him up. Enough already!

Act 3 happens inside the whale's belly. Actually, the text doesn't say "whale". It says *dag gadol*, a great fish, species undetermined.

This part of the story has been subjected to great scrutiny by fundamentalists and liberals alike. In his novel *Moby Dick*, Melville satirized the debate mercilessly. One explanation: Jonah found a hollow tooth inside the whale and hid there. Just think, if the whale had practiced good dental hygiene, Jonah would have perished! Another explanation: Jonah hid in the decaying carcass of a dead whale for three days. There's an appetizing thought just before lunch. A third explanation: Jonah was picked up by a ship named "The Whale".

Some liberals try to prove a non-miraculous explanation. Fundamentalists say: “If you don’t believe it the way it says it happened, you’re calling God a liar—and Jesus too, since he mentioned the story himself.

God rolls her eyes. The point is not the chemical composition of the digestive juices in the belly of the whale. The point is the drama going on inside *Jonah*. And the drama inside *God*, as God tries to save both Jonah and Nineveh.

Here’s the crux of this part of the story: Jonah who could not believe God would love Nineveh, would rather die than live in such a world as that. And God who loves both Jonah *and* Nineveh, would not let Jonah so easily consign himself to the deeps and death.

So we see God’s redemption at work. God sends a great fish to catch Jonah’s descent and haul him back to life.

Oh, the odd mercy of God who finds a way to save even those who deny him and flee his presence. Did Jonah remember Psalm 139?

Where can I go from thy Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there!

If I make my bed in the depths of Sheol, Thou are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell

in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Thy hand shall lead me
And Thy right hand shall hold me.

Right into the belly of a whale!

The fish was not God's punishment, but God's instrument of salvation; the monster, an angel of the deep. Sometimes God is there in the dark, in the belly of one kind of whale or another, and what looks like damnation leads the way to salvation, and monsters turn out to be angels.

Act IV: the Sermon

Three days later, the fish spat Jonah on shore, which goes to show, as someone quipped, "You can't keep a good man down."

But he wasn't yet a good man. What's often missed in the story is how *little* change there was in this newly regurgitated prophet. The fish has changed his destination, but not his disposition, his geography but not his theology.

Jonah went to Nineveh to preach God's message, not happily, but grudgingly, not hoping Nineveh would repent and be saved, but hoping they *wouldn't*.

Jonah's message to them is captured in five Hebrew words,

Forty

Days

More

Nineveh's

Toast

Can you picture Danny DeVito cast in the role of Jonah, waltzing through town delivering his message of judgment, barely able to disguise his glee at the prospect of coming destruction?

If Jonah had delivered the sermon in the classic “three points and a poem” format, the three points would have been:

- 1) God is just
- 2) You are not
- 3) Sayonara—bye bye

And the poem? Something like this:

In forty days, you Ninevites

The Lord will rain down fire.

Like ham on a spit

You'll turn bit by bit;

You've roused the Almighty's Ire.

For your sins, you'll die, I prophesy,

There are many, more than a few.

It's forty short days

'Til your buildings He'll raze

And make you a B-B-Que.

Jonah preached his hell and brimstone sermon, didn't wait for an altar call, not even one verse of "Just As I Am". He laid the word on them, cleared out of town, sat on a nearby hill and waited for God's fireworks to begin.

Act V: A City Repents

What happened? The unforeseeable happened. Repentance happened. Much to Jonah's dismay. All over the city of Nineveh, we see the miracle of "turning", from the king to the cattle. Everyone put on sackcloth and ashes, "from the greatest to the least."

Then the remarkable verse:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God repented of the evil which he said he would do. God did not do it.

God repented because they repented. God changed His mind because they changed their hearts. It boggles our imaginations. God is not the Unmoved Mover, forever unchanging. The future is open, not fixed. What we do makes a difference—to God and the world around you. God is not a God of the inevitable but the unforeseeable. And if God has something to do with it, it will be unforeseeably good.

Act VI: Jonah's Fit

Jonah is not happy. He throws a fit. "I knew you would do it, You Softie. I've read the verse a hundred times":

Yahweh, a gracious God
 Merciful, slow to anger
 and abounding in steadfast love
 and repentest of evil.

Jonah is interested in God's justice and mercy: God's mercy for me; God's justice for others.

I hate God's enemies
 with perfect hatred

says the Psalmist. And Jonah would have added: "Why can't God do as much?"

Anne Lamott quotes a priest friend who says, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people as you do.”

So Jonah beholds God’s mercy to Nineveh and asks God to end his life.

Jonah wants to write the end of his own story. But God has mercy in mind for Jonah too.

Spiritual sanity is releasing the end of our story to God; it is giving the end of *everybody’s* story to God. It is releasing all verdicts and all outcomes into better hands than ours. Maybe that’s what forgiveness finally is: letting go of all verdicts and outcomes. Trusting all of it to God.

Act VII: the Question

There’s one more scene, one more unforeseeable turn. As Jonah sits there asking to die, God “appoints” a green leafy shade plant to grow up and protect Jonah from the blistering Middle Eastern sky. For Jonah it was a sign of some elemental goodness left in the world.

But as the dawn came, God who “appointed” the plant to grow, now “appointed” a worm to chew it, and in the muscular language of the King James Version, “it smote the gourd so that it withered.”

Jonah exploded, cross-eyed with rage. God asked “Do you do well to be angry?” Jonah answered, “Do I do well?! I indeed do well. I’m so angry I could die.”

God asks one more question, the last words of the book:

Jonah, you pity a little plant you did not make or tend or grow which perished in the night. Can I not feel pity for a city of one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hands from their left, not to mention the animals?!

It’s the only book in the Bible that ends in a question.

The whole book asks us questions: When are you like Jonah? What is your Nineveh? Where is your Tarshish? Can God not have mercy on his children wherever they are, even you? Not to mention the animals?

How we answer may save our souls.

