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Jonah 4:6-11

Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Jonah and the whale

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Jonah 4:6-11 New Revised Standard Version

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.  But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 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.” But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.”  Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor 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?”

It has been so fun to look at the Bible stories we learned as children and to see them again with grown up eyes. The first thing that you need to know is that Jonah wasn’t eaten by a whale so my sermon title is incorrect but that is how I remember the story. Jonah and the whale. However, in the Bible it says Jonah was eaten by a large fish. We don’t know who wrote this story, we don’t know when and we don’t know why. But we do know that this story is unique because it tells us a story about a prophet rather than just telling us what the prophet said.

The story of Jonah starts out with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah doesn’t go, there is a storm at sea, lots are cast to determine who the guilty party is, the guilty party is thrown off the boat, the storm stops, and an animal saves the one thrown overboard. There are stories with similar motifs in Buddhist literature as well where there is a story of Mittavindaka who disobeys his mother and gets on a boat. After 6 days the boat stops moving and the sailors cast lots to determine whose fault it is. Three times the lots are cast and they say Mittavindaka. He is thrown off the boat, and the boat starts going.[[1]](#footnote-2) Even the story of Pinocchio is reminiscent of the story of Jonah. Before Pinocchio was a Disney movie, it was an Italian story where a storm at sea threatens the boat that Gepetto is on. The boat sinks and a shark swallows Gepetto. Pinocchio tries to rescue his father and the shark swallows Pinocchio too. Both Gepetto and Pinocchio are saved from drowning by the shark.

Back to Jonah. Jonah is told by God to go to Nineveh at once but Jonah gets on a boat to go to Tarshish to flee from the presence of the Lord. Jonah wanted to get as far away from the presence of the Lord as was possible. And then there is this storm and the terrified sailors start praying each to their own god and they start throwing cargo off the ship to lighten the load. During all of this Jonah is asleep in the hold of the ship. The captain wakes Jonah up so that he can pray to his god too. Then the sailors cast lots to see who is responsible for this storm. We don’t know if they threw dice, if they had to pick sticks of different lengths, or if they were stones of different sizes. But, it was similar to flipping a coin and Jonah was the lucky winner or loser. The sailors start asking Jonah where he is from, what he does, and when he says he is a Hebrew and that he worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, the sailors know that the storm is Jonah’s fault because Jonah was running away from God.

Jonah offers to get thrown into the sea as the storm gets worse and worse. The sailors throw Jonah overboard, the storm stops and the sailors are now in awe of Jonah’s god, so they offer sacrifice and make vows to Jonah’s god. The sailors have transformed from praying to unnamed gods out of fear to worshipping Jonah’s god, Yahweh, the Lord God. The sailors are following God more than Jonah is.

A large fish swallows Jonah up and Jonah is in the belly of the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Jonah prays to God from the belly of the fish but it is a very self-absorbed prayer. In his prayer Jonah says that God was trying to kill him and that Jonah has shown true faithfulness in the midst of all of this disaster. Jonah’s sense of reality is distorted, but the fish has saved him and is also going to kill him if he isn’t let free soon. So, after 3 days and 3 nights the fish spews Jonah onto the dry land. I love how my children’s Bible puts it, after the fish spat Jonah onto dry land, from them on, Jonah did what God asked him to do because for a second time God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and this time Jonah goes. Jonah decides to show up and to pay attention to where God has asked him to go, and when he gets there Jonah tells the truth. Jonah preaches to the people in Nineveh and says that God is going to destroy them for their wickedness. The people believe in God and everyone in the town fasts and puts on sackcloth including the king. This is a public sign of repentance and humility before God.

The king issues a decree that no human, no animal, no herd or flock shall eat or drink. They will all be covered with sackcloth and cry to Yahweh, Jonah’s god. Everyone will turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. There isn’t a storm in the skies, and there isn’t any evidence of God’s love, mercy and grace, but the people of Nineveh believe in God. God sees what the people in Nineveh do and God saves the people there. Well, Jonah didn’t like that one bit. He had to be in the belly of a large fish for 3 days and 3 nights and these people will have no consequences at all. It isn’t fair. Jonah had not preached about God’s mercy, he had preached only about the people’s wickedness. The Ninevites had turned from evil but Jonah is filled with bitterness and anger and evil. Jonah prays to God in anger saying that this was why he didn’t want to come because God is so gracious and compassionate and loving, and if God isn’t going to destroy the people of Nineveh then God might as well just kill Jonah now. The story of Jonah is about showing up, paying attention, telling the truth, and not getting attached to the results. Jonah showed up, he paid attention, he told the truth, and right now he is too attached to the results.

I love God’s response to Jonah, “Have you any right to be angry?” God doesn’t acknowledge Jonah’s words, Gods doesn’t talk about Jonah running away, God doesn’t talk about Jonah’s death wish. God doesn’t talk about the past or the future. God focuses on Jonah right now in the present.[[2]](#footnote-3) Jonah was angry and God asks, is it good that you are angry? Why are you so upset, Jonah? What is this really about? Jonah leaves the city in a huff, and makes a shelter so he has some shade for him to wait and see what happens with the city.

Now we come to our scripture for today and to our bulletin art which was made so beautifully by Russell Faulhaber. “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.  But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 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.” But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.”  Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor 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?””

We are invited along with Jonah to reflect on the meaning or the value of anger. I will never forget the first wedding that I officiated as the pastor at Krum UMC. When I asked the couple about scripture that they wanted read during the wedding, the groom immediately said that passage in James that talks about your tongue getting you into trouble. “For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (James 3:7-10). I had never thought of this passage as a good one for a wedding, but the groom said that was meaningful to him. Yes, the tongue can get you into trouble but from the same mouth come blessing, too. Just like anger, the tongue isn’t all bad.

When God talks to Jonah, God isn’t saying that anger is bad, God is saying that the responsibility for anger and its consequences resides with Jonah. Jonah holds onto his anger and if he keeps doing that, it is going to lead to his death. Jonah has to work through his anger because it is hurting Jonah as he keeps it in and yet when he expresses his anger it hurts others. God tries in different ways to get Jonah to come to this conclusion on his own. God tries to lead Jonah away from anger. It is like the story of the Prodigal Son: God is like the loving parent, Nineveh is like the prodigal child who spends all of the inheritance but then repents and comes home to a loving parent who throws a welcome home party, and Jonah is like the older brother who resents the mercy and forgiveness of the parent.[[3]](#footnote-4) God’s question to Jonah remains unanswered, it is up to us to find an answer for ourselves, “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?”” For me the answer is yes, yes, God should be concerned about Nineveh and the 120,000 people who live there, and the animals.

A few months ago I was listening to Suzanne Stabile, an enneagram teacher on her podcast, The Road Back to You. She said some mantras that she shares when she is teaching on Jonah. Showing up, paying attention, telling the truth, and not getting attached to the results.[[4]](#footnote-5) We all feel unwilling when God calls us. We don’t want to get out of our comfort zone. We don’t want to look at the homeless and see people who are just like us. We don’t want to have to look inside of ourselves and see our bigotry. We don’t want to, but we have to. Show up. Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don’t get attached to the results.

There is a wonderful joke about a bedoin family going across the desert on camels when the father turns back and tells one of the children, “Stop asking if we’re almost there, we are nomads!” Show up. Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don’t get attached to the results. As we journey together in Christian faith may we continue to grow in love: with God, with one another, and for our neighbor. May we serve God and our neighbor in all that we do. Remember, you don’t have to do or be anything or anyone special. Just show up. Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don’t get attached to the results. We can all do that. Amen.

1. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume VII. The Book of Jonah. P. 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume VII. The Book of Jonah. P. 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume VII. The Book of Jonah. P. 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Suzanne Stabile shared these nuggets of wisdom on her enneagram podcast, The Road Back to You. She said that when she teaches on Jonah, these are the mantras that she shares. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)