

A Lot Can Happen in Three Days
The Book of Jonah (part 2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4VrujheblY>

You've heard that cute little girl now tell almost the whole story of this funny strange book that's lodged in the middle of the Hebrew Scriptures. There's one more chapter in the book that she left out, and we'll come back to that next week. I don't know how she did it, but that precocious 5-year-old memorized most of three chapters of the Bible, with a little additional flair thrown in. I'd love to see who she becomes as an adult, wouldn't you?

We've used that YouTube version of our text for this series because, frankly, an adult reader would have read this Bible story much too seriously. This is a story that's meant to be heard just as it was written—with a sense of the absurd. As Pastor Sam said last week, we were never meant to believe that a real person got swallowed up by a giant fish, lived for three days inside its stomach, and got spit out in the place where God was sending him to go do prophet work.

On the other hand, this crazy story has a whole lot of meaning packed into its four short chapters. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest whose writing has re-shaped my faith, says that the Book of Jonah is *the* book of the Hebrew Bible that anticipates the whole Christian Gospel; that the Jonah story affirms some truth about God that humans just weren't ready to see before then. Jonah is Jesus. Jonah is the prodigal son. Jonah is us. Honestly, we could spend a whole season studying the more profound messages buried in the farce, and the genius, of this story. But for now, just three lessons we are drawing out of this text, over three weeks.

Last week Sam offered the first lesson: You cannot sleep through a storm. Jonah tried. Out in a boat, trying as hard as he could to get as far away as he could from the evil city of Nineveh and the voice of God, Jonah went down below and took a nap. He left the hired sailors alone and tried to ignore the wind and the waves. It didn't work. They woke him up, and then, on Jonah's own suggestion, as a last ditch effort to save the ship, they threw him overboard, into the sea. That worked. This is what the text says:

They picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. Afterward, the men [who had not been followers of the Hebrew God before] worshipped Jonah's God with a profound reverence and gratitude; they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made solemn promises.

Meanwhile, the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

The Bible's first clue that something miraculous—something only God can do—is about to happen is always the number three. Three days and three nights Jonah stayed in that dark, tomb-like belly of the big fish. Does that ring any bells for you? Whenever a story in the Bible speaks of three *days*, we know the power of God is at work, just as it was in the three days between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The world is about to turn.

And indeed, a fish manages to turn Jonah around, back in the direction that God had wanted him to go in the first place. That big fish—that we imagine as a whale because we can't think of any other fish big enough—listens to God's instructions in a way Jonah couldn't, and it spits Jonah out onto dry ground, not too far from Nineveh. And before Jonah could start walking in the opposite direction again, maybe before he could even clean the seaweed out from between his toes, "the Lord's word came to Jonah a second time: Get up and go to Nineveh, that great big city, and do what I asked you to do the first time. And (finally) Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord's word."

That cute little girl already told you how this story comes out. God knew what he was doing. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the empire that had sacked the northern kingdom of Israel and held the Hebrew people hostage for a hundred years. But oddly, the king of the most brutal empire in Israel's history listened to Jonah, repented, and led his city to turn toward justice. Jonah, despite all his efforts to the contrary, becomes the most successful prophet in history.

So why did he resist so hard?

Let's look at this from Jonah's perspective for a minute. Jonah hears this little voice in his head that sounds like it might be God. The voice says, 'I want you to leave your comfortable place and go to a city that's different, maybe even dangerous. It's full of people who don't believe what you believe; in fact, they're likely be pretty hostile to someone like you. But I love those people too, and I haven't given up on them. So I'm asking you to go and talk to them.'

I imagine Jonah had a whole raft of good reasons for saying no. They're not going to change; this will be a waste of time. This kind of thing never works. We tried this once, God—don't you remember? They're just too stubborn...or too evil...or too powerful to listen. They've got the votes; I know. I've counted.

Or maybe Jonah didn't really want to be part of saving Nineveh. Maybe deep in his heart he secretly wished that God *would* destroy that city. They're terrible people; they've had chances before; why try to save them now?

Now I begin to see myself in this story. I too might have second-guessed that voice. It would have sounded to me naive, like it contained a sort of misleading hopefulness. Sometimes when I hear what God says, I treat it more like a suggestion, as though God is saying to me, 'Hey, Kath, I've got an idea. What do you think?' So I substitute my better idea, a plan that feels more updated, or more realistic. And I have no doubt that I have sometimes talked myself into getting on a boat going the opposite direction from where God was asking me to go. Maybe needed me to go.

In our Western culture, we don't think of obedience as a particular value for adults. We want our children to be obedient, but what we value more in grownups is the ability to think for ourselves. We admire a willingness to disobey an instruction—even a law—that seems unjust or illogical or unrealistic. We want to see the whole picture, exercise our own judgment.

But we are also people of faith. People who—just like Jonah—find our place in a story that says life is bigger than what we can see for ourselves. Faith that there's a wisdom beyond our own, a grace that can, once in a while, turn even the most formidable empire toward justice. And so I wonder if this story is asking me: Are there times when it's not my consultation that God is seeking, but my obedience?

God loved those Ninevites, and he wanted something better for them. God was not going to let them go, or let Jonah rationalize away their chance at salvation. What God needed from Jonah was simply a willingness to be part of a graceful plan, a plan that God could see and Jonah couldn't. Fortunately for the people of Nineveh, God was persistent. "The Lord's word came to Jonah a second time." And this time, finally, Jonah went.

In the Jewish tradition, the story of Jonah is told every year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the people confess their sins against God and neighbor. Every year, the story invites them, and today maybe it invites us, to gather up again the humility we have misplaced along the way of our independent, self-sufficient lives. To find our way back to the simplicity of obedience. To let God be God.