

“A Whale of a Story”
Mark 1:14-20

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This morning, I would like to share a creative paraphrase of the story of Jonah by author and pastor Frederick Buechner, from his book *Peculiar Treasures*.

Within a few minutes of swallowing the prophet Jonah, the whale suffered a severe attack of acid indigestion, and it's not hard to see why. Jonah had a disposition that was enough to curdle milk.

When God ordered him to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, the expression on Jonah's face was that of a man who has just gotten a whiff of trouble in his septic tank. In the first place, the Ninevites were foreigners and thus off his beat. In the second place, far from wanting to see them get saved, nothing would have pleased him more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them.

It was as the result of a desperate attempt to get himself out of the assignment that he got himself swallowed by the whale instead; but the whale couldn't stomach him for long, and in the end Jonah went ahead, and with a little more prodding from God, did what he'd been told. He hated every minute of it, however, and when the Ninevites succumbed to his eloquence and promised to shape up, he sat down under a leafy castor oil plant to shade him from the blistering sun and smoldered inwardly. It was an opening that God could not resist.

He [God] caused the castor oil plant to shrivel up to the last leaf, and when Jonah got all upset at being back in the ghastly heat again, God pretended to misunderstand what was bugging him.

"Here you are, all upset out of pity for one small castor oil plant that has shriveled up," he said, "so what's wrong with having pity for this whole place that's headed for Hell in a handcart if something's not done about it?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

In the reading of this story we find out just what kind of readers we are—are we literalists or are we lovers of creative story-telling. I believe that, for the literalist, this must be a challenging story to justify as accurate history—try as they might. I find this story improbable as fact—but incredibly hilarious.

This story of Jonah and his mission to Nineveh almost comes off like a series of jokes. The basic structure of a joke is the set-up, and the punchline. The set-up gives us a reasonable situation with an expected obvious outcome—Jonah is given an assignment by God. Expected outcome—Jonah completes God's assignment. The punchline is to offer an outcome that is completely unexpected—Jonah runs in the opposite direction, trying to hide from God. And, not only does he try to hide from God, but he does so in a ridiculously exaggerated way. He tries to go from Joppa—his hometown—which is approximately 500 miles to Nineveh—to Tarshish instead—which is about 2,500 miles from Nineveh. That is roughly the distance

between New York City and Los Angeles.

In the next scene, we find Jonah aboard a ship in a wild storm on the Mediterranean Sea—trying to make his escape. He admits that he is the cause of the storm because he has angered his God. So, what do the sailors do? They lighten the load of all unnecessary flotsam and jetsam—which just happens to include Jonah. That is the set-up. And the punchline—while we then expect Jonah to either drown or be miraculously saved, he gets swallowed up by a giant fish or a whale—depending on how you interpret the Hebrew.

While inside the whale—or great fish—Jonah prays. He prays to the same God from whom he tried to escape. He prays to God for safety, and, at the same time, he blames God for getting him into this unfortunate situation in the first place. Next thing we know—Jonah is regurgitated onto the shore—just outside of Nineveh.

And then we come to our reading for this morning—"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." And, he repeats—almost word for word—what he told him in the first place: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

Why is Jonah so reluctant to go to Nineveh? Well, for one thing, Nineveh was known as one of the most contemptible and sinful cities in the known world. Most of the residents would probably just as soon kill him as listen to him—and they are not going to take kindly to him threatening their destruction. Even the Jewish kings didn't have a lot of respect for the prophets—and Nineveh was an enemy. It really was a fool's mission.

Also, according to the story, Nineveh was incredibly large. If it took three days to walk across it, and the average person can walk about 30 miles in an 8-hour day, then it was about 90 miles across, or about 8,100 square miles, which is roughly the size of Massachusetts. That is a lot of walking and yelling—and antagonizing the enemy. You can begin to understand why Jonah was so reluctant.

And then, *Jonah entered the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* ⁵ *And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.* He didn't offer them any hope—he didn't offer them a chance to repent—simply *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* That was all he did. "You are doomed!" But astonishingly, Nineveh does repent. I can't even begin to imagine the number of preachers who have preached much more stimulating sermons than this one of Jonah's and received nothing close to this kind of response!

And, what does Jonah do after his incredible victory of bringing an evil, pagan city to their knees before God? He wanders off to have his own little pity party. *"I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,"* he whines to God. No cry of success—no sense of accomplishment because he is able to bring 120,000 pagans to God—along with their animals—don't forget about the animals in sackcloth and ashes. Instead, Jonah has a death wish—*"Put me out of my misery."*

Yes—the Book of Jonah offers up some creative exaggerations that are almost laughable, much the same way Jesus does in some of his parables. So, is the Book of Jonah simply a parable, a myth, a fable, or is it historically accurate? Does it really matter? Do we gain insight into the ways of God through the parables of Jesus? Of course, we do! Can we gain insight into the ways of God through this story of Jonah and the Ninevites? Oh course, we can!

For me, two of the greatest lessons to be learned from Jonah have to do with our reluctance to serve God, and with our tendency to judge the behavior of others.

Part of my own call story strongly parallels Jonah. My own attempted escape from God's presence was done in years, rather than in miles. I felt God's call at the age of 15. During my late teens and most of my twenties, I tried to avoid God completely. I didn't attend church. I didn't read the Bible. I wasn't evil, or any more sinful than anyone else. I would probably have been identified as a fine, upstanding citizen—but probably not as a Christian—and certainly not as a disciple. But then, over the next six or seven years, something was happening within me. There were certain external incidents in my life – some of which I have shared before—that were instrumental in that shift—but it was more internal than external. And, of course, there were those times in which I felt like God was playing some kind of cosmic joke on me, but I was willing to take that leap.

The other lesson that I believe we can take away from the story of Jonah is to accept that God's way are not our ways, and that we shouldn't question God's grace. We certainly don't begrudge God's grace when it is extended to us, or to those we love and care about. Why is it so hard for us to accept it when God's grace is extended to those whom WE don't consider worthy? I find that I have a hard enough time dealing with my own sense of worthiness before God. I certainly don't have the right to judge the worthiness of others. That is why I try to see everyone with whom I come into contact as a child of God. I can't say that I am always successful, but I try, and I hope you do, too.

We may discount the Book of Jonah as a fable or a myth—or even as a holy joke—but I do believe that it is God's Word to us about some very important instructions for what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I have known Jonah's—in secular life, in seminary, among pastoral colleagues and in churches. And someday, each one of them will come to their own Nineveh—that place in which they will have to decide whether it is more important to serve God's will—or their own. AMEN.