

JONAH

The Book of Jonah

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 22, 2012, on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria.
The sermon followed an oral recitation of the book by
Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald.*

[Larry Hayward]:

The Old Testament Book of Jonah is short and sweet. Four chapters, 48 verses, 1300 words. You can read it while waiting for the bus at Cameron Mills and Virginia Avenue.

- On one level Jonah is a children’s story: a man gets caught in a storm at sea; God rescues the man by sending a great fish or whale; the whale swallows the man; the man lives in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights; and then the whale spews the man out on dry ground safe and sound.
- On another level, the book serves as a significant skirmish in the battle between “fundamentalists” and “modernists” in America. At the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, the first question Clarence Darrow, defending the teacher charged with teaching evolution, asked of Williams Jennings Bryan, the prosecutor, was:
 - “When you read...that the whale swallowed Jonah, how do you literally interpret that?”
 - The Great Commoner’s response: “I believe in a God who can make a whale and make a man, and can make both do what He pleases.”¹

The question as to whether the great fish in Jonah is literal or symbolic has been an argument for centuries, its answer often serving as a litmus test for each side. But the Book of Jonah is more than a story of exiting rescue or a point of argumentation over scripture.

¹ Available at <http://personal.uncc.edu/jmarks/Darrow.html>.

As we hear this story today, presented by both Casey Fitzgerald and two of our choirs, I invite you to pay attention to *all* the characters:

- Jonah, the reluctant prophet of God;
- The sailors, who are not part of the people of God;
- The Ninevehites, who up until this time, have been bitter enemies to God's people.

Above all, pay attention to the words and actions of God.

Once the Book of Jonah has been presented to us, I will have a few more comments at the end. Then I will be preaching from this short gem of a book for the next three Sundays.

Let us pray: *God of Word spoken and enacted, may our hearing of the Book of Jonah, through recitation, music, and homily, become your Word for us today. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

Listen now for the word of God:

[What follows in the service is a dramatic reading of the Book of Jonah by Reverend Casey Fitzgerald, with adult and children's choirs singing anthems giving voice to Jonah's prayer in Chapter Two.]

The Book of Jonah

Chapter One:

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

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down

into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.' 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. 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?' 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' 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.

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. 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.' Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Chapter Two:

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

*'I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
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.

*Then I said, "I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?"
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
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.
As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!
Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Chapter Three:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything.

They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

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

Chapter Four:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' 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.

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 labour 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 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

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[Larry Hayward]:

As you think about what you have seen and heard today, I invite you to read the Book of Jonah over the next few weeks, and I invite you to attend each of the next three Sundays. If you are unable to attend, I invite you to listen to the sermon on our website or print them out and read them. The sermons will develop three major aspects of the book I would like to point out briefly.

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First, notice that in the story, the people outside God's covenant are the ones who seem to do the right thing, while Jonah, the insider, dawdles:

- When the storm hits, it is the sailors who pray to their god while Jonah sleeps.
- It is the sailors who throw cargo overboard, while Jonah doesn't lift a finger.
- It is the sailors who come to recognize that the God of Israel actually has the power to still the storm.
- It is the sailors who "row hard" before throwing Jonah overboard, their last desperate act.
- And of course it is the Ninevehites, the longstanding enemy to the people of God, whose king, citizens, and animals repent after hearing Jonah's reluctantly whispered five word warning: "Forty days more: Nineveh, overthrown."

What does it mean that those who are outside the people of God – the sailors and the Ninevehites – embody God's will more than the reluctant Jonah? What does it mean that sometimes those outside the church seem closer to what God calls believers to be and do than those of us inside the faith?

We will address these questions next week.

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Second, notice that in the story, Jonah is reluctant to do what God asks him to do throughout.

- God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh; he takes a boat to Tarshish, the farther point away from Nineveh.
- God gives Jonah a second chance, sending him back to Nineveh, Jonah goes, but barely steps inside the city limits and whispers the word God has instructed him to deliver.
- When the people of Nineveh repent, Jonah sulks.

What does it mean that Jonah has difficulty accepting God's grace to the people of Nineveh? Do we have ever have trouble accepting God's grace as it is extended to someone else, especially someone who has hurt us?

We will address these questions on February 5.

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Third, notice that the story itself is downright humorous:

- A prophet that goes the opposite direction God sends him
- A prophet who sleeps while others fight for life
- A giant fish who swallows a prophet and then spews him out on dry land
- A king who repents in sackcloth and ashes
- Every animal in town repenting and wearing sackcloth.

What does it mean that in the Bible there is a book that is actually funny? What does it mean that the humor in this book is not directed at others, but is directed at the adherents of the faith in whose name the book is presented to the world? What does it say about a religion that is able to laugh, to laugh at itself, even to look at itself and be self-critical?

We will deal with these questions on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln.

Meanwhile:
Read the Book of Jonah.
Have fun with it.
Grow in your faith.

Amen.