**The Pouty Prophet**

The biblical prophets are, on the whole, a pretty heroic lot, those brave men and women who stand up to the powers, speaking truth, courageously calling Israel back to her monotheism, to her God, to her dignity. They are often soaring poetic voices of lamentation and judgment, but also of redemption and salvation.

But not so our little Jonah, a minor Galilean prophet plucked from the obscurity of II Kings 14:25 in the only half a sentence about our main character found otherwise in the Bible. It just says Jonah was Jeroboam’s prophet, if this is the same Jonah.

The Jonah story is different from the more heroic prophets because Jonah becomes the symbol of the narrowness of heart and resentment toward others that we are to avoid. No… there is nothing quite like the Book of Jonah elsewhere in the Bible. It is his flaws which teach us today; he is our bad example.

The book’s themes are familiar to the period. God doesn’t live only in the Temple in Jerusalem. He isn’t confined to the Land of Israel. God actually loves everyone. These are the great themes of classical Judaism and also the gospel.

The Jonah story is a way to parody, caricature, and the parochial view that Yahweh is only a local, strictly national god. [[1]](#endnote-1)

The pagans are, ironically, the righteous characters of the story, both the mariners and the Ninevites. Does that sound at all familiar? It is kind of like how the tax collectors and sinners in the gospels are the righteous ones because they get Jesus.

Jonah is sort of the Charlie Chaplin of the story, always putting up a brave exterior but always short on character… but never failing in cowardice when the chips are down.

I’ve always found Jonah’s convenient and patently false piety amusing. In the belly of the fish, Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’ (2:4), which is a prayer, it seems to me, highly suspect of self-interest when you are in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the ocean.

He is quite eager to have God rescue him from trouble that he is himself responsible for. We might well ask, where is the repentance, the “I’m sorry”?

As MdM put it, “I know of no quality so easy to counterfeit as piety…” (Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 749).

We need context to make plumb the lessons of Jonah.

The repentance of the Ninevites is a strong play on Israel’s emotions. Because actually Sennacherib, the Assyrian King of Nineveh, is the one who laid waste to the Northern Kingdom of Israel around 700 BC, taking and destroying all of its cities, from Bethel to Dan to Lachish, and carrying some 200,000 captives to Nineveh. Only Hezekiah resisted the assault, Jerusalem crippled but defiant never fell.

[Insert photo of gates of Nineveh]

It was not only the largest city in the world, eight miles across, a true architectural wonder of the world; it was regarded in the Bible as the foremost, implacable, immortal enemy of Israel in its entire history. Nahum, whose book is a vivid description of the destruction of Nineveh, called it the City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of plunder… (Nahum 3:1).

The repentance of Nineveh….. such a notion…

The city was destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE. Of the two hills in ancient Nineveh one is called to this day, Nebi Yunus (Arabic for “Prophet Jonah”). In its shrine to Jonah there is a whale bone hanging from the ceiling I’m told.

Tragically, ISIS destroyed, even bulldozed, many of the remains of the archaeological site of Nineveh in 2014 and other ancient sites in Iraq, an inestimable loss to us all.

So the image of little Jonah marching across the city preaching doom and then Sennacherib and the entire city repenting in sackcloth and ashes before Yahweh, is a pretty grandiose scene.

By the way, Jesus loved the story of Jonah. In his own impatience with his Jewish compatriots, over Pharisaic exclusivism, the pride of the overly religious, he said that the men of Nineveh would arise at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah (Mat 12:41).

And when the scribes and Pharisees ask for a sign from him to prove he is the Messiah, he says they will get no sign, but the sign of Jonah, the call to repent (Matthew 12:38-42).

The second part of the story is where we find ourselves today and so let’s turn to the text.

**In the Text**

Jonah prefers that everyone outside of Israel bear God’s judgment. Jonah cries on the streets of Nineveh after being cast up on the land: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). He likes that part of being a prophet.

Of course, quite contrary to his expectation, the Ninevites repent, colourfully, from the king to the commoners to the animals (3:6-10).

When God forgives the city of Nineveh Jonah is intransigent in his embittered enmity to this old enemy.

‘But they are the Ninevites! They must be overthrown! They are our mortal enemies!’

…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. (4:1-2)

And he goes out of the city and plunks down, arms folded across his chest in a really biblical pout. O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4:3)

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?” (4:9-11)

What kind of God is this that is ready to forgive the Ninevites so readily, they who destroyed his promised land? The point of the Book of Jonah is as plain as could be. It is a juxtaposition of the soaring, incomprehensible grace of God on the one hand, and the shallowness of self-interest, of self-pity, of long-harboured resentment – of this pathetic pout.

It is about the distance between the human mind and the vastness of God’s love and forgiveness. We stand in wonder and awe.

**From the Text**

This pouty business looks beyond silly; it is a parody of self-absorption.

I asked Chrissy about how she viewed the pout; she said ‘it is wearing one’s heart on the lips.”

Jonah said, ‘I knew you were going to forgive them! I knew it!! I really really really wanted to see Nineveh destroyed!! Jonah’s intransigence to God’s unfathomable mercy becomes a parody’

I don’t want to get to particular in application because we all have our own Nineveh.

Jonah is the OT equivalent of the Pharisees of the gospels. When Jesus reaches out to sinners, the lost, to tax collectors… and they repent you would think the Pharisees would be thrilled to see those sinners repent. Or someone gets his withered hand healed in the synagogue and all we hear is “Hello… its Sunday Jesus.”

And when the Ninevites repent you’d think our little Jonah would be rapturous.

But living in grace towards others is the hardest thing! It’s like the heart has self-closing doors. In order to keep the heart open you have to constantly prop those doors open, or they will close on their own accord. It’s easier to just judge… to be Jonah.

We are Christ to our world when we are so profoundly transformed by our experience of grace that we are witnesses to that grace.

That is what Paul was talking about last week when he can see the possibility of a faith community so transformed by the experience of grace that even Jews and Gentiles can overlook their deep differences to stay together in Christ.

Here is what makes Jonah’s pout such a powerful teaching tool. He has judged the Ninevites according to his own narrow soul; he acts as judge and jury in the place of God. He should heed Joseph, Am I in the place of God?

The place of God on this is perfectly clear in this story. And it has nothing to do with fairness. Sorry Jonah.

Jesus never said anything to be about “fair” when he came into my life, did he to you? Because, by grace we are saved through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, nor of works lest any person should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Well, who are our Ninevites today? How do we enter these roaring 2020s with a game plan that keeps our church relevant in this time of the declining influence of church in society? How do we set about our ministry to make sure that we are here in 2030?

You may say to me ‘what if the Ninevites love coffee and they want to bring it into the sanctuary for church?! Then what are we going to do Pastor Dave?? I’m teasing us, but it shows us how much work we have to do in bringing the divine imagination to our mission.

If we want to share the gospel with the Ninevites we are going to have to work on a lot of things this coming decade. The question for us is how we prop the doors open so all for whom the Lord feels compassion may come to repentance and walk in this grace in which we stand.

1. Overall, the meaning of the story of the Book of Jonah is that God loves everyone, not just the Israelites in Israel, but all peoples. It is the primary theme of the Major Prophets, a corrective to Jewish exceptionalism. The worship of God will be extended to all the nations says Isaiah, and it is the thrust of the NT: Jesus, Acts, Paul and the rest (Gen 12:1-3; Isaiah 42:6-7; 49.; Matt 28:19-20; Acts 10:34-43; Ro 3:21ff, et al) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)