

Oh, Jonah

TEXT: The book of Jonah

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on May 18, 2025

And, that's it. We have just publicly read the entire book of Jonah. While you can make different points about different pieces of it, when addressing our year-long theme of "Calling," you need the whole book in Jonah's case. For the first part of this year, we've been exploring what the Bible says that all Christians are called to **be**. For the rest of the year, we'll focus on the kinds of things God calls us to **do**, and how a wide variety of biblical and more contemporary people discern that and respond.

While we imagine God's call going out and those who receive it obediently responding, the book of Jonah reminds us that such a response is not always the case.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of Jonah's story, I want to put some things aside. The very first of those things is that no lesson about calling in the book of Jonah is in any way tied to whether or not this particular story is a factual account. As I've been saying from soap boxes for almost two decades now, "truth" and "facts" are related but ultimately different things. All facts are true by definition, but not all truth is factual.

The Bible contains some facts; and the book of Jonah contains some facts. But facts are not what God is trying to give us, either in Jonah or in the Bible as a whole. The Bible is bringing us truth claims about the nature of God, creation, and the relationship between them; and the backdrop for those claims are the storytellers of Israel from about 6,000 BCE to about 100 years after the birth of Jesus.

We can glean many such truths from the book of Jonah; but no matter which of those truths you're after, hyper-focusing on arguments about whether big fish can swallow people alive and spit them up three days later will make sure that you come away with exactly zero of the truths in the book. The book of Jonah is about a man's relationship with God and with both the human and non-human creation of which that man is a part. And the lesson it teaches is about what God values in such relationships. That lesson and those truths would hold, even if there was no real Jonah or giant fish or if the city of Nineveh was the land of Oz.

So, do not...I repeat, do not...get yourself in an argument about the facts in Jonah. No matter which side you take in that argument, both sides are going to miss the most important points of the book.

All that said, just because you can get at the message without the facts in Jonah, the historical details of the book can add color, help us get into the story more deeply, and help connect the truths within it to our own lives. Jonah's story is set in a real place and we can place the story's setting at least within a rough historical time frame. So, you know me and history. Let's look.

Jonah as a person doesn't get a lot of attention in the rest of the Bible. Jesus compares Jonah's three-day sojourn in the belly of the fish to his own three days in the tomb and lifts up the people of Nineveh as having better sense than the religious leaders of his own day. But it's not really clear if Jesus views that as a historical account or just a story that his listeners would know.

Apart from that, we know from just a couple of passages in the Old Testament that Jonah was the son of a court prophet in Israel's northern Kingdom named Amittai, whose name means "truthful;" and we know that today Jonah is revered as a prophet by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Within the ruins of ancient Nineveh, situated in the modern city of Mosul in Iraq, there is now a ruined mosque believed to be Jonah's tomb.

The mosque became a ruin when ISIS blew it up in 2014, because they objected to the religious tolerance and unity that the tomb fostered. That objection by ISIS was the height of irony, as it was just a contemporary version of what got Jonah swallowed by a fish in the first place, as we'll see shortly.

The ancient city of Nineveh was not only a real city, but was the largest city in the world in the mid-7th century BCE. The book of Jonah repeatedly describes it as “that great city” and says it took three days just to walk across it. At the height of its influence, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, the largest empire in the world up to that point in history.

When ISIS blew up the mosque in 2014, archaeologists were able to access the site to dig and found a sprawling palace beneath, with inscriptions that tell us it was the palace of Esarhaddon, who is mentioned in the biblical books of 2 Kings, Isaiah, and Ezra.

One of the inscriptions in Esarhaddon’s palace describes him as a “strong king, king of the world, king of Assyria, governor of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the kings of lower Egypt, upper Egypt and Kush.” It also clues us in on how Esarhaddon expanded his empire with another inscription boasting, “I surrounded, conquered, plundered, demolished, destroyed and burned with fire twenty-one of their cities together with small cities in their environs.”

That violence could have been predicted, since Esarhaddon only became king when he and his brother were so incensed that their father had tried and failed to capture Jerusalem that they killed him, with Esarhaddon taking the throne in Nineveh and installing his brother over Babylon. So, he wasn’t exactly known for his sweet disposition.

And Esarhaddon’s youngest son, Ashurbanipal, was worse, viewed by historians as one of the most brutal of Assyrian kings, boasting of his gory massacres of rebellious civilians. Ashurbanipal’s destruction of the people of Elam is widely regarded as a genocide.

But, hey, Ashurbanipal was a patron of the arts and his library, with over 100,000 cuneiform texts was the largest in the world before the Library of Alexandria in Egypt was built several centuries later. The Library of Alexandria burned to the ground, but we still have 30,000 cuneiform texts from the library of Ashurbanipal, which is one of the reasons we know so much about ancient Mesopotamia.

So, when God wants Jonah to head to Nineveh to get the people to repent, some of that actual history can help explain why God was sending them a Jewish prophet out of Israelite territory, as well as the kinds of things God hoped might change with a bit of soul-searching.

It also explains why Jonah might have been a bit wary of preaching in the streets of Nineveh, which would inevitably mean speaking out against the king. It was an exceptionally risky business.

But there’s also more in the larger historical context that explains why God might have called on an Israelite prophet to do the job. While Esarhaddon’s father had not been successful in capturing Jerusalem for their empire, two kings about forty years earlier **had** succeeded in taking the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital of Samaria. That northern kingdom was home to ten of Israel’s twelve tribes and they were either carted off into exile or they remained and assimilated with the Assyrian occupying force who moved in.

There is no doubt that the Assyrians would have had a use for captured Israelites in building their empire, and that a good portion of them would have been put to such uses in Nineveh. And the whole business with Assyria’s conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, especially in the assimilation of the people who remained in the land, is the root of the deep hatred between Jews and Samaritans we see in Jesus’ day.

While none of that history alters the truth of the lessons Jonah teaches us, it does give us a glimpse of the kinds of behavior God thought required repentance, helps explain why Jonah might have such animus toward the Assyrian capital’s inhabitants, and why his brief story was recorded and kept through the centuries as part of Hebrew Scripture.

It also paints a more vivid picture of God’s grace. Given the brutality of Assyria, God might have opted for the Sodom and Gomorrah treatment. Rain down fire and be done with the lot of them. But one of the truths

that Jonah tells us is that the God of Israel loves and gives the opportunity to repent to all peoples and nations.

The wrath of God has to be a real thing or the idea of a just and loving God goes up in smoke. The God of the Bible is not a pushover and will not be manipulated. Whether it is in the run up to Great Flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah it is only when, as Genesis 6 says, “The earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence...for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth” only then does God take extreme action—and even then, still sparing a few, so that life can continue.

But while Jonah is a story of large-scale horrors—the corruption and violence of the largest city in the world and the capital of the world’s largest empire—and God’s attempt to fix it on an empire-wide scale; Jonah is also the story of a man, a son of the prophet Amittai, whose name means “truthful.” Whether God had ever called on Jonah before this story or whether this is Jonah’s first rodeo, is not known. But Jonah’s response is telling.

Unlike with other biblical prophets, Jonah doesn’t spend days brooding over the call. He doesn’t feel any sense of inadequacy to the task like Moses, who responded that he wasn’t a good speaker or like Isaiah who objected that he was “a man of unclean lips.” Nope.

Jonah was completely confident in his own prophetic ability. He knew both his own skill and the merciful nature of the God who called him and felt the success of the mission was guaranteed. Which is why he didn’t want anything to do with it.

For reasons that well could have been related to the nature of the Assyrian empire, its religious practices of child sacrifice, its destruction of ten of Israel’s twelve tribes and remaining threat to Jerusalem, or something else entirely, Jonah was ready to get to the rain-of-fire part of the pattern. He could not himself forgive the people of Nineveh for their wickedness and so he refused to be part of helping God forgive them either.

While Jonah was aware of God’s essential mercy; Jonah did not seem to realize the extent of God’s persistence. And, even up to the very end of the story, Jonah did not appreciate that in calling him to save Nineveh, God was also calling Jonah to save himself.

When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah made the natural assumption that if he refused, his days as a prophet might be over, but God would just find someone else to do the work. We’re not told that Jonah had some special qualification to make him be the only possible religious ambassador to Nineveh.

Jonah doesn’t just object to the call, he refuses it. Blatantly. He gets on a ship headed in the exact opposite direction and then went into the ship’s hold and went to sleep. That’s a pretty blatant, “No, I’m not doing that, and I am not open to changing my mind.” And, if God’s call was only about getting Nineveh to repent, Jonah might well have gotten a big red X put next to his name in God’s book, and God could have called someone else.

But that’s not what happens. For whatever reason, Jonah has to be the one to do it. God sees that asking nicely doesn’t cut it, so you get a storm, Jonah getting tossed overboard, a big fish in waiting, and a decidedly uncomfortable three days to reconsider the offer.

Once Jonah is spewed out onto the beach he realizes another truth about God’s calling to individuals: Life will be turbulent until you say yes. Other plans don’t work out—we get either actually or metaphorically thrown out of the boat until we’re back at square one with God saying, “We can go through this as many times as you want; but, in the end, you’re going to Nineveh.”

Jonah decides he’s rather not do the whole fish thing again, so he agrees. And then, wonder of wonders, he brings his message to maybe the only king in Assyrian history who had a conscience. Not only is Jonah not arrested, the king joins the effort to lead the people of Nineveh to repentance and God spares the city.

And then we see that it's Jonah, the Israelite prophet, who is perhaps more lost than the whole pagan, foreign city. Jonah is furious that God saved the city and yells at God, "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."

Jonah's hatred for Nineveh has consumed him. The spirit of God may have worked through him to save the city, but God's spirit did not dwell within him. None of the spiritual fruit were evidenced in his actions.

He did what he did under duress and even in the process of watching an entire city repent before God; Jonah could not see their humanity or feel even the slightest twinge of God's love for them. Jonah was so upset that he had a part in sparing the city that he wanted to die.

If God's purpose had merely been to save the city, the story would have been over and God would have been searching for another, less troublesome, prophet for the future. But God loves Jonah just as much as the Ninevites. As Jonah sits and sulks outside the city—remember this is a city in Iraq, in the desert—God causes a shade plant to grow up over Jonah to protect him from the heat; and Jonah is happy about that. Not grateful, exactly, but at least a little less mad.

The next morning God sends a worm to kill the plant and Jonah is back to wanting to die. And then, the entire book ends with a question that hangs in the air for every person who has heard it ever since:

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

No other book of the Bible ends with a question like that; and we don't know if or how Jonah answers it because the book ends there. With a foretaste of Jesus saying "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing," God says, "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?"

If we're arguing about whether a fish can swallow a man, we will never confront this final, searing question—as relevant to this very hour as it was to those who first heard it thousands of years ago.

Who, exactly, do we think God doesn't care about? Is there any corner of creation—people, plants, animals—for whom God is indifferent? Who are we so eager to see condemned by God that we would refuse a direct call from God to help?

Part of the truth that the book of Jonah teaches us is that God's calling is generally as much about our own salvation and spiritual growth as it is about those we are called to serve. While Nineveh was spared through Jonah's preaching; the book leaves the question hanging about whether Jonah himself ever softened his heart.

As the destruction of the mosque adorning his tomb by ISIS shows, there are still those who want to try to erase any memory of God's mercy to those we consider outsiders, lest another Jonah agree to bring salvation to someone they would prefer experience God's wrath instead.

"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?" Are we grateful or angry about God's mercy? It's still a question awaiting an answer. Amen.