

God Sends Us  
Jonah 1:1-17  
Jonah 3:1-10, 4:1-11

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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### Jonah 1:1-17

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 quiet 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 quiet 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 three days and three nights.

### Jonah 3:1-10, 4:1-11

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.

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 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?"

Let me tell you a story.

It's the story of the worst prophet to ever serve God. Or, at least, the worst that the Hebrew Scriptures tell us about, and the one with the worst attitude.

Jonah had already spoken truth to power once, before the story everyone knows about him. Back in the book of Second Kings he went to King Jeroboam of Israel and got him to restore borders to where they were supposed to be.<sup>1</sup> That was good, and Jonah deserves credit for that. But it's a Biblical footnote. It's not what Jonah is known for.

Because next God doesn't send him to his people, the people of Israel. God sends him to his people's enemies.

The Assyrian Empire, with their capital in Nineveh, in present-day Iraq, are not good neighbors. They keep conquering other countries, razing cities to the ground, and that sort of thing. They worship idols. They take and keep slaves.

God sends Jonah to "cry out against" the Assyrians, in their capital city. You've seen the stereotypical homeless-looking guy on the street with the sign that says, "The End is Near?" God is telling Jonah to be that guy.

Jonah ... tries to refuse the assignment. Instead of going northeast overland to Nineveh, he books passage on a ship going

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 14:25. Yes, just one verse.

west, all the way to the edge of the world that his people know about, on the Atlantic coast of present-day Spain.<sup>2</sup>

God is not pleased. God sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship and kill everyone on board. Jonah is thrown overboard, and a giant fish swallows him for three days. The fish then spits him out on dry land, and God says to Jonah, "Get up, and go to Nineveh." We still don't know what the fish did, or what happened to it. So this time Jonah goes to Nineveh, and he proclaims that God will destroy Nineveh in forty days.

To everyone's surprise except, apparently, Jonah's, the people respond to Jonah's proclamation. They put on sackcloth and ashes. They mourn. They fast. They change their ways. And God does not destroy Nineveh.

Jonah is beyond angry. Angry is fading away in the rearview mirror. Jonah is incensed. He had not been afraid that he would fail – he had been afraid that he would succeed! Jonah wanted God to destroy the city of Nineveh, and everyone and everything in it, down to and including the livestock and the household pets. Jonah is so

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<sup>2</sup> That's where Tarshish was. It is not at all the same place as Tarsus, a city in Turkey where Saul/Paul was originally from.

angry at Nineveh's being saved, and at his role in it, that he says it would be better for him to die than to live.

I picture God being speechless here. Jonah has just turned around the course of an Empire, and saved thousands of people from destruction, and he's angry that he succeeded.

God finally asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah does not answer. He just goes outside the city to pout. God creates a bush that grows up and gives Jonah shade. Jonah likes that. Jonah likes it when God provides comfort for HIM.

The next day, God has a worm destroy that bush, and, once again, Jonah is outraged at God. God asks again, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

God shows Jonah that he is upset over a bush, and he wants God not to be upset about a city of over a hundred and twenty thousand people.

The book of Jonah ends here. We don't know what happened next.

I would like to believe that the VeggieTales were wrong when they said that Jonah "sadly never got it."<sup>3</sup> I would like to believe that

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<sup>3</sup> *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* (2002).

Jonah hit his head with his hand and said, "D'oh!"<sup>4</sup> I would like to believe that Jonah finally got the point. But we don't know.

When we do know is this: each one of us is a child of God. The bad news, as I said last week, is that we don't get to choose our siblings. And God chooses lots of them.

We also know that, just like Jonah, we don't get to choose where and when we are called to serve God.<sup>5</sup> God chose to put you in the time and place where you are. Just as Jonah couldn't go to Tarshish, we can't go back to when we were comfortable.

This time of transition in the early twenty-first century is uncomfortable for a lot of us. The world is changing. The United States is changing. The economy is changing. The demographics of this country are changing. Changing in terms of age, and in terms of race. There is deep division in America over this ongoing change.

But God has not changed. "Though the mountains be shaken, and the hills ... removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who loves you.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Homer Simpson reference is intentional.

<sup>5</sup> Thank you Len Sweet for this insight.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 54:10, my paraphrase.

Or, to put it another way, "In time the Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble; They're only made of clay. But our love is here to stay."<sup>7</sup>

God is still a God of love for all of God's children, no matter what lines and divisions we want to create among ourselves. God still wants us to love our neighbors, all our neighbors, even those neighbors we don't want to love.<sup>8</sup>

So our response to social division has to be to reach out in love.

Love reaches out first. Love does not say, "The other has to reach out first." That's pride, not love.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."<sup>9</sup>

As Thomas Carlisle said,

"And Jonah stalked / to his shaded seat / and waited for God  
to come around / to his way of thinking.

And God is still waiting / for a host of Jonahs

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<sup>7</sup> George and Ira Gershwin, *Love Is Here To Stay*(1938).

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

in their comfortable houses / to come around / to His way of loving."<sup>10</sup>

In this time of transition, I pray that we would all come around to God's way of loving.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Carlisle, "You! Jonah!" (1968).