

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Two Faiths”

Jonah 4:1-5

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Some of you have heard me tell an old rabbinic story in a Picnic Sunday sermon, but don't spoil it for your neighbor in the pew. A nobleman is traveling through the countryside when he comes across a barn with many targets painted along its side. Remarkably, someone has shot an arrow in the bullseye of every target.

The nobleman is amazed. He himself is an archer who has won awards for his marksmanship, but he has never seen this kind of accuracy before. He goes to the modest house up the hill. He knocks on the door and a man answers.

“I have got to meet the archer who shot those arrows in the side of the barn. Was it you?”

“No,” answered the father with a groan. “That would be my son, Enosh.”

“Your son? May I speak to him?”

“Enosh, come to the door.”

The nobleman is astounded when a boy, looking no older than 12, appears. “How did you gain the skill to hit the bullseye every time?”

The boy gives a guilty glance at his father. “I shot the arrows into the side of the barn, and then I painted the targets around them.”

I chose our passage by shooting an arrow into the book of Jonah. Jonah is one of those books in the Hebrew Scripture where it is difficult—almost impossible—to preach on a single passage.



The book of Esther is like that. It tells of the beauty pageant winner chosen to be a queen, placed in a life she did not choose, robbed of her agency as so often happens to women of that day, but then finding that she can be *God's agent* in intervening on behalf of her people. How do you lift a passage from that book without telling the whole story?

The book of Job is like that. How do you isolate a passage, even the beautiful poetry, without at least reminding everyone of the story of the virtuous and prosperous Presbyterian Elder with the nice home up Mill Mountain being stripped of his wealth, his family, his reputation, his dignity... everything except his life and his wife, who is quick to point out that he'd be better off dead?

And the book of Jonah is like that. To isolate a passage out of Jonah is like trying to discuss a scene in the movie, *The Sixth Sense*, without talking about the ending (And if you don't know the ending, the movie came out before the turn of the century, so don't be shocked if someone spoils it for you).

I'm going to read only a few verses from Jonah, but then we'll talk about the whole story. Listen for the Word of God in both the passage and the story.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² 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 and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ 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.

Let's paint the story around the arrow. I know many of you know the story already, or at least the part where Jonah finds himself in the belly of a whale, but maybe I can throw in some interesting observations along the way.

Jonah is a prophet given a mission by God. We can be sure that Jonah is not running a scam, saying that he has heard a Word from God in order to get what he wants, because what he hears, *he doesn't want*. God is telling him to go on a mission trip to Assyria—to travel to Nineveh, the capital city, located on the River Tigris about 175 miles northeast of present-day Baghdad. Jonah is to preach—to call for Assyrian repentance so they may be saved.

Some context helps here. Israel had been split in two nations:

- the northern nation of the ten tribes of Israel,
- and the southern nation of the two tribes of Judah.

Assyria invaded and obliterated the northern nation. Almost all self-identified Jews today are descendants of the two tribes of Judah because the northern ten tribes were almost lost to history, surviving in the DNA of Samaritans and others who have lost their strong, traditional ties to the Torah. *And Jonah is to preach for Assyria's salvation?*



This past week, Millie and I went with Jeff and Jackie Luckett to see the new *Mission Impossible* movie. It begins as all the *Mission Impossible* movies and TV episodes begin, with Ethan Hunt hearing the instructions of a recorded message, “Your mission, if you choose to accept it...” The mission is always impossible, and impossibly dangerous. But Jonah would rather accept Ethan Hunt’s kind of mission because at least Hunt gets to try to make bad things happen to terrible people (and you can light fuses and blow stuff up).

What God wants Jonah to do sounds not only *impossible* but *unthinkable*. God shouldn’t be asking this. God has seen the evil of Nineveh. God has seen what Assyria did to God’s people. If God would just provide the fuse, Jonah would only be too happy to light it.

But no. God wants to save the city. God wants to save the people in the city that is the center of a power that basically erased ten tribes from history. Jonah is to go to Nineveh to ask these **Nazis** to see the error of their ways and become the kind of people God wanted Israel to be.

Silly Jonah thinks he has the same option Ethan Hunt is given: to choose, or choose *not*, to accept the mission. *Jonah chooses not*. He books passage to the port city of Tarshish in Spain. But God won’t have it. God sends a terrible storm. The sailors and passengers are *wind-whipped* and *bone-soaked*, their desperate prayers to their gods to save them drowned out by deafening thunder. With the ship about to break in two, Jonah lets it out that maybe... maybe... he is the reason for their trouble because he disappointed God by being on this boat in the first place. That is a problem the sailors can fix, and Jonah is tossed into the sea where he is swallowed by a beast. Call it a whale if you wish, it doesn’t harm anything, but the text doesn’t. This is some kind of sea monster. The beast swims to an Assyrian beach and spits Jonah on the shore.

Jonah gets it now. This is not a mission he can refuse to accept. Jonah makes his way to the outskirts of Nineveh and with the kind of delivery one would expect of someone of weak voice and bad attitude, Jonah preaches about the sins of the Assyrians and the carnage that they could expect if they continue to be agents of carnage. The reluctant prophet doesn’t for a minute think that his impossible mission will succeed, and that is fine with him. “God, watch them ignore the warning and then *show me the fuse*.”

Only it works. Jonah wanted to light a fuse that would lead to an explosion, but not the explosion of a revival.

- People hear his sermon,
- it shakes them up,
- they pass it along by sending the link,
- until even the king of Assyria hears a podcast of the sermon and takes it to heart.

I’ve seen the trailer for the new movie, *Napoleon*, where the emperor says, “I am the first to admit when I make a mistake. I simply never do.” It is not normally the spiritual gift of dictators to recognize their wrongs and confess the errors of their expansionistic ways, but somehow the Assyrian king comes to understand the human cost that has come of the destruction of other nations, and he repents. He repents and calls for all of Assyria to repent.



Jonah sees it happen. He sees how his sermon fuse leads to a revival and he doesn't like it one bit. He expresses what he thinks is righteous indignation. But God only hears the indignation for what it is: familiar whining. We've heard it, we've said it:

- I knew it!
- I told you!
- This is what you always do.

“You're supposed to have our back, God, to always be on our side, but I knew you were going to be merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and not give 'em what they deserve!”

Sometimes people who whine get their way with me because I just *want the noise to stop*. This is Jonah's play. Hoping his whining might actually change God's mind, he builds a booth on a hill overlooking the city to see what happens. But God is in the same pestering mood he was in when he had a great beast gulp Jonah down. God provides a tree to offer even more shade for Jonah—and then takes it away leaving Jonah stewing in the heat. Picking at him. Sounds petty, but God is getting Jonah's attention to make a point. He says to Jonah, “**Is it right that you are angry? There are a hundred and twenty-five thousand people that you are hoping will die.**”

And the story ends leaving Jonah caught in *the inner war of two faiths*.

That's Jonah's problem. His problem is not that he lacks faith. No, his faith is deep and profound. Fred Craddock (yes, this remains the summer of Craddock inspiration)—Craddock says that Jonah's faith is “**Abraham-and-Sarah deep. His faith is Exodus deep. His faith is Israel deep. He has the faith of his parents and his grandparents and their parents, all the way back to the beginning.**”¹ Jonah's faith is that God is the God of his people, *and also* the God of Creation. This faith is joined in the promise God made to Abraham: “**I will bless you and make your name great..., and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.**”²

Do you hear the tension in that promise? God chooses *one* people—to bless *all* people. That is a hard tension to maintain, and if we are not careful, it can break in two.

On one side of the tension, if one's faith becomes only about God being the God of all creation and all people, faith can melt into relativism and lose its moral core. Being *totally accepting* may sound fair, but it inevitably becomes accepting of injustice. The thoughtless embrace of inclusion sacrifices justice on the altar of fairness. “**If annihilating other people works for the Assyrians, who's to say they are wrong. It's their culture.**” No, have mercy on our world, no, no, no, no, no! There are lines not to be crossed.

But that is not Jonah's problem. His problem comes from the other side of the tension. If one's faith is only about the blessing of one people, then the faith slides into tribalism... into nationalism. Jonah, you see, is a Jewish believer, but he has almost become a Jewish nationalist.

¹ *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, WJK, 2011, p. 49.

² Genesis 12:1-3



He has cause. Lines have been drawn, and on one side are God's people, the Jews, and ten of their tribes have been obliterated. On the other side are the obliterated, the Assyrians, who deserve hellfire rained down upon them.

But I did say, "almost." Jonah cannot extinguish within him the other side of the faith of Abraham: that God is the God not only of *his* people but of *all* people. He believes it and it is tearing him up.

- It is why he fled to Tarshish because he knows God is a God of mercy.
- It is why he then preached so weakly on the outskirts of Nineveh because he knows that God not only loves Abraham but also loves the world.
- It is why Jonah now pouts in the shade because he knows
 - that those he so reasonably hates
 - are those who God so graciously loves.

I told a rabbinic story earlier in the sermon. I've got another one to tell you. It is set in the time of the Exodus. When it is time to get slaves out of Egypt and in the promised land, God is so busy that he appoints a *Task Force of Angels* to help out by handling Red Sea duties. The angels see the Israelite slaves approaching the sea, running for their lives, and the angel's part the Sea to allow them through. They see the Egyptian soldiers pursuing them with their chariots, their spears and their bloodthirsty shouts and they wait for the right moment. "Hurry, slaves, get through! Hold it. Hold it. Now!" The timing is perfect! Waters come crashing over the Egyptians, men and horses tossed about, many drowning. The angels fly up and down, give each other high fives, even bumping chests as they cheer. "We got 'em! We got 'em!"

God hears the racket. He tells them they are no longer in his service.

"Why! We got 'em!"

With hurt in his voice, God replies: "Don't you know? The Egyptians are also my children."

Jonah knows that story. He pouts because he knows it is true. All the world belongs to God. He knows that it is *just like God* to care for people like the Egyptians, and the Assyrians, and the Iraqi and the Taliban and the Russian invaders.

This tension of faith never goes away.

- We see it in Jesus saying that he has come first for his people but then later taking his ministry to Samaritans and Gentiles.



- We see it at the Council of Jerusalem where Jewish disciples insist that a collection be taken for the poor of Jerusalem, and Paul insisting that dietary laws be ignored in taking the Gospel to Gentiles.
- We see it when St. Augustine saves the Roman Christian Church by reminding them that the fall of the Roman Empire does not mean the end of God's Church or God's Kingdom.
- We see it during the 1500s when the tension is broken and theological arguments become nationalistic wars resulting in astounding bloodbaths and genocides,
- And again, in the 20th century in Germany when most of the German church supported the Nazi drive to German supremacy and racial purity, while the Confessing Church remembered that God is the God of all people.

Second Presbyterian Church exists to be what St. Augustine called the church to be: a *colony of the kingdom*. We are planted in this city, and among these people. And so, as American citizens who love our families, our community, and our country, we

- pay our taxes,
- serve in the military,
- cast our votes,
- and work for the betterment of those within our gates.

But in this sanctuary, we remember who we are and keep the tension alive. We don't let our faith break into two. We pray for our enemies and work for the blessing of all people. While it is admirable to love our families and community, and while it is admirable to love and serve one's country, the Bible and our theological tradition demands that our core identity is in Christ. This is where we pray for our enemies and work for compassion and justice for all people.

Sometimes we do that while pouting. But let's remember how God likes to pick at those who pout, and we might rather avoid the belly of the beast and remain in the shade.

