

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Jonah 1:1-3, 4-16 **“You Can Run, But You Can’t Hide”**

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

JONAH 1:1-3, 4-16 "YOU CAN RUN, BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE"

Jonah's Prior High Level Ministry With The Wicked King Of Israel And Territorial Expansion

<p>"In the fifteenth year of Amazi'ah the son of Jo'ash, king of Judah, Jerobo'am (II) the son of Jo'ash, king of Israel, began to reign in Sama'ria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jerobo'am the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amit'tai, the prophet, who was from Gath-he'pher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jerobo'am the son of Jo'ash. (2 Kgs. 14:23-27)</p>	<p align="right">781-746 BC, 8th Century: Historical Jonah Lord Is King, Rules His People National Protection National Prophet, Ambiguous status Associated Nationalism, Israel's Ancient Borders, Identity Merciful Uses His Ambitions</p>
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Parabolic Jonah

IA: 1:1-3 THE FIRST CALL OF GOD: JONAH IS DISOBEDIENT.

Narrative Prophecy, A Sudden Word, A Game Changer

1) v.1 FORMULA OF PROPHETIC REVELATION.

Divine Speaking = Sets Story In Motion

//3:1-3 Repetition

1 Now the word of the LORD (*YAHWEH*) came to Jonah, son of Amitai, saying, **Hard Assignment, Divine Revelation**
 //Ex. 3-4, 1 Sam. 16, 1 Kgs. 17:1-8, 18:1, 21:7

2) v.2 ORACLE FROM YAHWEH: A PROPHETIC COMMISSION - 3 Commands + Reason.

Nineveh = Modern Mosul, First Great State Of Assyria, God *Ishtar*

2 "Arise (Up!), **Ps. 24:1, Get up and go! Status Quo Is Over! Agent, Sense Of Urgency**

go to Nineveh (northeast), that *great* city,
 and cry against it (condemn it),

Beyond Israel To A Cruel Enemy, No One Approved

Name Its Sins, Unprecedented: Foreign Nation, Voice Of One Man

Jonah Is Full Of Hyperbole, 1. Divine Address, Commission Story

for their wickedness (evil) has come up before me."

vv.7b, 8a, Patience Taxed, Gen. 18:20 on Sodom

We Have Numerous Inscriptions Of Assyrian Cruelty// ISIS

3) v.3 JONAH'S IMMEDIATE DISOBEDIENT RESPONSE.

2. Objection To Commission

In Face Of Destiny/Difficulty, Human Soul Prefers To Flee

3 a1 But Jonah rose **Resigns, No Longer Serve, Anger, Treason, Escape His Disturbing Call**

2 to flee to Tarshish

Away = Descent *Down* To Chaos/Death

3 **from the presence of the LORD.**

Gen. 3:8, Ezek. 33:6-8, Is. 66:19 (Not Yet Revealed) Is This Possible?

God Says *Up*, Jonah Goes *Down*; God Says *East*, He Goes *West*!

b He *went down* (x1) to Joppa,

Phoenician Port, Due West Of Jerusalem, **DOWN TO JOPPA**

c. and he found a ship going to Tarshish;

II Chron. 9:21, Is. 66:19

c' so he paid the fare (lit. *her hire*)

Did He Rent The Whole Ship? Likely Yes

b' and *went down* (x2) on board,

DOWN TO THE SHIP

a'1 to go with them

Abraham Maslow's *Jonah Syndrome*

2 to Tarshish,

See Map, Spanish Coast? = End Of The World

3 **away from the presence of the LORD.**

No Fellowship, Gen. 14:6, Ps. 139, Lev. 22:3 End To Prophetic Service

Mt. 5:8 On Loving Enemies, It Is Often Uncomfortable To Live In The Divine Presence

How Do We Flee From Our Calling As God's Prophetic People?

IB: 1:4-16 THE SALVATION OF THE MARINERS (NON-JEWS).

Genre = Commissioning + Maritime Travel Narrative

1) vv.4-6 LORD STARTS STORM, CRISIS AND PRAYER TO GOD: THREW/PERISH.

4 a But the **LORD** **hurled (threw- Heb. hetil)** a great wind upon the sea, **DOWN INTO THE CARGO**
and there was a mighty tempest upon the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. **Personified, Yahweh Pursues**
They Sense The Supernatural Character Of The Storm
5 b Then the mariners were **AFRAID** and each **CRIED TO HIS OWN GOD**; **Polytheism, vv.10, 16, Tribal Deities**
and they **threw (hetil)** the wares that were in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. **High Cost**
But Jonah had **gone down (x3)** into the inner part of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.
6 Q1 So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, cry out to your God! **//1:2! Pray!**
Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not **PERISH**." **Jer. 23:18-22 God's Judges With A Storm**

2) vv.7-10 DIALOG I: QUESTION AND ANSWER: JONAH'S CORRECT THEOLOGY.

At The Center Of 2//2' Is A Speech Of Jonah, v.9//v.12

a) v.7 Jonah Identified By Lot.

Israelite Practice Adopted. Give The Deity A Vote!

7 "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, **Find Culprit, Hunger For Divine Revelation**
that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.'" **Jonah Did Not Confess Till Later**
So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah." **Divine Providence, Prov. 16:33**
Jonah Knows Who The Offended Deity Is

Q2-6 b) vv.8-10a Their 5 Questions/ Jonah's Confession/ Their 6th Question.

8 Then they said to him, "Tell us, on whose account this evil has come upon us?
What is your occupation? And whence do you come? Where is your country?
And of what people are you?" **Polytheism Is Very Complicated**
Not A Local But A Cosmic Deity, A Great God!
9 And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, **Jonah's Orthodox Creed**
the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." **Believes, Does Not Obey!**
Jonah's First Words, Incongruity, Disconnection
10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him,
10 Q7 "What is this that you have done?" **Moral Outrage! Why Is Your God So Angry?**

a') v.10b Jonah Self-Identified As A Rebel.

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. **//v.3 (2x)**

2') vv.11-13 DIALOG II: QUESTION AND ANSWER: JONAH'S SUICIDAL SOLUTION.

Events Orchestrated To Make All Depend On God's Mercy

a) v.11 8th Question: Tempestuous Sea.

11 Q8 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down *for us*?"
For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. **Chaos, LORD Uses Nations To Discipline His People**
Rather Die Than Obey (1:12, 4:3, 8, 9)

b) v.12 Answer: Jonah's Despair: A Suicidal Solution.

12 He said to them, "Take me up and **throw (hetil)** me into the sea; **Mariners Pray, Not Jonah**
and the sea will quieten down for you; **I Am Guilty! Jonah's True Prophecy**
for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." **Truth**
Rather Die Than Obey! Still A Rebel?

a') v.13 Tempestuous Sea Increases As God Pursues Jonah.

13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, **Exemplary, Prevented**
for the sea grew more and more tempestuous *against them*. **Limited Options, Increasing Threat**
God Uses Jonah For Mercy Against His Will

1') vv.14-16 PRAYER, LORD ENDS STORM: THREW/PERISH. **Converts: Many Gods To One God**

14 b' Therefore they **CRIED TO THE LORD**. **Conversion = They Address Jonah's God, LORD (4x)**
1 "We beseech you, O LORD, **Pagans Can Fear God, Be Converted, Chap. 3**
2 let us not **PERISH** for this man's life, **They Appear Noble And Pious; Jonah Is Stubborn And Selfish**
2' and lay not on us innocent blood, **Piety: Pray, Sacrifice, Vow To YHWH**
1' for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee." **Recognition Of Sovereign Freedom, Divine Providence**
15 a' So they took up Jonah and **threw (hetil)** him into the sea, and the sea ceased from raging. **DOWN INTO THE SEA**
16 Then the men **FEARED** the LORD exceedingly, and they sacrificed a sacrifice to the LORD and vowed vows.

NOWHERE TO HIDE

"But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord."

Jonah's compass is 180 degrees off.

J O N A H 1 : 3

Long ago the Lord decided to select a nation to be his chosen. The Greeks were interviewed first. "If I was to be your God and you my people, what could you do for me?"

"O Ground of Being and First Cause of all that exists," they replied, "we would honor you with the finest art, architecture, and the loftiest philosophy."

Next God visited the Romans, "If I was to be your God and you my people, what could you do for me?"

"Great Emperor of the universe," the Romans said, "we are builders. We would erect great basilicas and build great road systems in your name." The Lord nodded and went on to other nations. Each had its offer, but none was taken.

Finally, a small Mideastern groups, the Jews, were interviewed, a people with a reputation for shrewd negotiations. Again the Lord asked, "If I was to be your God and you my people, what could you do for me?"

"Lord," the Jews replied, "we are not known for art or philosophy or our power to build. We are a nation of storytellers. If you were our God and we your people, your story would be told throughout the world."

God, who also had a reputation for shrewd negotiations, replied, "It's a deal!"¹

That, brothers and sisters, is the Book of Jonah.² Not the great fish and the

¹ Adapted from William White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 31-32.

² On introductory and literary issues, see Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 21-46; for a theological exposition, Rosemary Nixon, *The Message of Jonah* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003). The entire Book of Jonah is read among the Jews on the great Day of Atonement.

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three-day journey in the deep, but will the story of God's justice and mercy be told to *outsiders and enemies*? Will God's people keep it to themselves as a family secret? Jonah is a brief book about evangelism and missions. God wants a relationship with all peoples and uses his agents- his people and prophets- to build bridges.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus announced to his disciples a vision of their worldwide influence, "You are the salt *of the earth*.... You are the light *of the world*."³ To communicate that same message, Jonah was included in the Old Testament. It's a reminder that to be God's chosen, whether Israel or church, is not only privilege but also a responsibility that starts locally and expands globally. We are the custodians of the revelation of God's mercy and love for the whole world. A century ago William Temple made a comment that stuck, "The church is the only society in the world which exists for the benefit of those *outside its membership*."⁴

Jonah is a gem of Jewish storytelling. It's irreverent and satirical. It makes fun of a preacher who doesn't want to come out of retirement for a dangerous assignment. James Bond he is not. So he goes AWOL and ends up being belched out on the beach from the belly of a great fish, and it leaves us with the insight that God has as many problems with his chosen people and designated prophets as with a lost, misguided world that does not know the true and living God who rescued his people from Egypt and will eventually raise Jesus from the dead. God's mercy for the outsider and patience with his own are major themes of this remarkable little tract. It also demonstrates what repentance looks like: for the non-Hebrew mariners, for Jonah in the belly of the fish, for the Ninevites forty days from judgment, and even for God.

God repenting? Not of sin, but a change in direction, a reversal of course. What we have in the Bible is a God who is genuinely responsive and modifies possible plans based on how humans respond. Prophecies of judgment are conditional. What *might have been* does not have to be if we respond rightly. This relational God plays chess with us. Always wins- to be sure- but also responds to our moves since all the various combinations are always seen so God is never surprised.⁵

³ Mt. 5:13a, 14a.

⁴ Albert Wells, Jr. *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988). 42.

⁵ John R. Kohlenberger, *Jonah and Nahum* (Chicago, ILL: Moody Press, 1984), 16-18. For a treatment of this theme by an advocate of open theism, see Gregory Boyd, *Satan And The Problem Of Evil* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2001), 94-99; also his *Is*

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God has a sure purpose and all the power necessary to bring his ends about because God is sovereign, but God does not require a detailed blueprint with all the moves guaranteed ahead of time. There is flex and freedom and even persistent resistance on our part, but determinism is out. God knows all the possibilities and all the permutations of all the combinations of an incredibly complex and interactive creation. And in this system of life our freedom and its consequences are not an illusion. Sin has clouded our minds and put us in a cruel bondage from which we cannot free ourselves, but everyone still decides all the time; it's a capacity from which you cannot escape as decisions are encoded in habits which shape your character and point to a destiny. To say Yes to one thing is to say No to another. Every moment is a fork in the road. You are not a robot but a graced creature with choices, and God sees in depth the possibilities each decision opens in the maze of your life, and this God is plotting to become your central loyalty in order to save you for himself and use you in his world, and of this Jonah is a prime example. For every free move of the angry prophet, God has a counter-move to bend Jonah back in the right direction, and in the end what will not be bent towards the kingdom of God will move to the discard pile. God's relationship with each of us is personal, highly interactive and chock full of drama and high stakes. It's the only life you have!

Jonah is far from a hero. He's an unattractive man, but he remains God's prophet. Throughout the story the pagans look better than the prophet. Jonah is rebellious, bigoted, sullen, depressed, suicidal, prayerful only when in trouble, begrudgingly obedient, and finally petty. He's also used by God in spite of his constricted vision and small heart. The situation is grave. Nineveh is balanced on a knife's edge, and God's prophet has just turned in his ordination papers and fled to a premature retirement on the Costa del Sol in Spain. Jonah has the money to do this; there's a good chance he leased the whole ship for one passenger- himself!⁶ God loves them all- Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites- and uses all the tricks in the divine bag to get them together for the good of each. That's the Book of Jonah.

Scholars differ as to when it was written and who wrote it. Conservatives place it in the eighth century BC and read it as literal history. There really was a great fish that swallowed Jonah, and there are good reasons he was not suffocated or dissolved by digestive juices. Others place it as late as the fourth century BC and read it as an

God To Blame? (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003). On the debate, see James K. Keilgy, R. Eddy, editors, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2001).

⁶ Youngblood, *Jonah*: 59.

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historical tale or parable.⁷ To waste a lot of energy here is a mistake. Either way, it's Holy Scripture with truth for God's historical people- Israel, and for God's adopted people- the church. Take ten minutes to read Jonah. Laugh at his silly antics and puzzle over God's wise providence and tremendous mercy.

There's only one other mention of Jonah in the Bible. II Kings 14:25 informs us that it was through Jonah's prophecy that Jeroboam II, the wicked ruler of the northern kingdom, made a land grab that restored the old borders:

"He (the king) restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, *according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amitai, the prophet, who was from Gathheper.*"

Those are not shabby credentials. *Hearing* the word of the Lord. *Advisor* to a wicked Jewish king. *Successful* campaign, *good* for the country. Jonah had a track record as a successful, high-level national prophet. But then God spoke again and rattled Jonah's cage, which is where our story begins. Chapter 1, verse 1: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amitai, saying...." Prophets were understood to stand within the divine council to await assignments. Think of Jonah as an ambassador in the employment of God's State Department receiving an envelope marked *Top Secret*. Now think insubordination; think disobedience to a direct order from a superior. In wartime you get shot; in God's world you get cornered.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

IA. Running From God (vv.1-3)

The first two verses rehearse an encounter between *Yahweh* (God's proper Hebrew name, *LORD* in English) and his servant. We serve a *speaking God* who uses various avenues. Was it a dream, a vision, or a voice? Did Jonah see something as well as hear something? We don't know. What we know is that Jonah knew the source. There was no long explanation, just three sharp commands and a reason as the punch line. Jonah is to get on his feet, make the trek northeast to Nineveh (modern Mosul

⁷ Freidman Golka, *The Song of Songs and Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1988), 70-72. James Limburg offers a composite summary, "The book of Jonah may be described as a *fictional* story developed around a *historical* figure for *didactic* purposes" (*Jonah: A Commentary*, [Louisville, KY: WJK, 1993]), 24). I like *historical parable*.

in Iraq, now under the control of ISIS, another brutal regime), and cry out against its evils. The city is a great lump of sin and sensuality, violence and cruelty, and God can no longer abide their behavior. Nineveh covered 1800 acres and was surrounded by an eight mile brick wall.⁸ It was, as God said, *a great city, a wicked one*, and ripe for judgment.⁹ The Assyrians would eventually conquer the Hebrews and were renowned for their brutality.¹⁰ Jacques Ellul compares it to a Frenchman going to preach repentance in Berlin in 1941: "The people to whom Jonah was to preach were the most martial and cruel people of antiquity. It was the people which scorched its enemies alive to decorate its walls and pyramids with their skin."¹¹

As Methodists say, Nineveh was not a good appointment. The word *Nineveh* made his heart sink and head spin. It would be like telling me to fly to Mosul tomorrow and invite the leaders of ISIS to leave radical Islam to become peace-loving disciples of Jesus Christ. To learn God loves those we hate is the end of one world and the beginning of another. Jonah had been faithful as prophet to a corrupt royal household. Could he now become an evangelist to ancient Nazis? Would he obey God in the face of learned hatred and long religious and racial prejudice? He said No.

An insight here is that there's a limit past which God's patience will not go. The little phrase, "their wickedness has come up before me" means Nineveh stinks to high heaven. It's the new Sodom; God's patience is about maxed out. While all sin and cruelty offends God because it damages the good creation and further mars the image of God in us, in this fallen world God withholds judgment for the sake of mercy. Every offense is not immediately addressed, else our lives would be constantly interrupted. So it piles up and eventually stinks to high heaven. Eventually corrupt lives and evil governments crumble. People die. Empires rise and fall. In early 1942 Nazi Germany ruled Europe and seemed invincible. Three years later its leader was torched in a Berlin bunker. The horror ended, at least until the next time concentrated evil reared its ugly political head and flashed its fangs like

⁸ See "Nineveh," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1985), 707.

⁹ On the use of consistent hyperbole in Jonah, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Exaggerated God of Jonah*, *Word & World*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring 2007, 125-134.

¹⁰ See Erika Belibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *BAR* 17:01, Jan./Feb. 1991.

¹¹ *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1971), 26.

some ancient serpent. Such regimes will be with us till the end. The quick rise of ISIS as Al Queda on steroids is a prime example. Cancers can sometime appear quickly, and evil always morphs into something new. It's a tough neighborhood.

As an American Christian I sometimes wonder: for all our rich national heritage and achievements, how do we smell to God these days? I love our nation, but when I wonder I tremble. How about our now four-decade-long violence against the unborn silencing fifty million voices? How has it changed the national character and made us deaf to God's warnings about innocent blood? The pagan mariners prayed not to take innocent blood, Do they know more about God's justice that we do? What about our seeming unending wars in the Middle East which drains our treasury and cripples many, including both my brothers? Is God deliberately miring us down to see if we notice? Or what of the plague of drugs and addiction which grips our citizenry? Or states increasingly embracing marijuana for tax revenues? Wouldn't it be just like God to give us over to a 1960's counter-culture mindset and watch the final triumph of Cheech and Chong? Shall we become a nation of escapists and fitter away this noble experiment and the religious foundations that undergirds it? But most of all how hard it is these days to win people to Jesus Christ.

Some of the criticisms of the Muslim world against a supposedly Christian America are valid, particularly our exporting of sexual immorality and violence through our domination of films and television. Our cultural products undermine modesty and traditional families around the world. Yes, I believe in American exceptionalism. I just finished an audio course on the founding fathers, the revolutionary generation: Adams and Jefferson, Washington and Franklin. I believe ours is a new kind of nation founded with a destiny from Providence for good; I also believe we are nearly at the bottom of its reserves of accumulated moral capital. We are floundering in threatening waters and have misplaced our moral compass. How dangerous is our world; how quickly our wound could come. And if I had to put it bluntly it would be, *Are we another Nineveh?* And secondly, *Where are the prophets?* If I have any refuge, it's that I am a pastor reasoning from Scripture and observation, not a prophet with sure word from on high. "Cry against it" was Jonah's job description. Prophets have lonely jobs, sometimes short life spans. Jonah could die in Nineveh, be flayed of his skin, beheaded and stuck on a pole.

And what was Jonah's response? He refuses direct orders and heads 180 degrees in the opposite direction; he went AWOL. He fled from his prophetic calling. God said *northeast*; Jonah went *southwest*. Jonah did not speak; he took action. Outside Hebrew territory down to the port at Joppa, booking a one way passage on

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a Phoenician ship across the Mediterranean, past Gibraltar to an idealized city on the coast of Spain, *Tarshish*, the place from which King Solomon's fleet fetched gold, silver, ivory, monkeys, and peacocks.¹² "I quit," thought Jonah, "let some other fool be God's ambassador. God is asking way too much this time."

Tarshish was the edge of the world, an exotic escape far *away from the presence of the Lord*. Jonah knew of God's omnipresence (i.e. the truth that God is present to all the creation because he made it all); it's just that he wanted to get away *from Israel*, away from the identity of God's people and his prophetic job description. Jonah didn't quit believing in God; he just thought God had gone way too far this time. It's offensive to learn God doesn't share my prejudices and loves people I'd rather see dead. Nineveh is about to be destroyed, and God has a runaway prophet.

Oh, before I forget. Running away from the presence is not a horizontal. *Away* is actually *down*. We follow Jonah *down* to Joppa. *Down* on board. *Down* to the inner part of the ship. *Down* into the ocean. *Down* into the belly of the fish. *Down* to the roots of the mountains. "Away from the presence of the Lord" is not away; it's *down* till you hit bottom and have to deal with yourself and God's call. As Jonah learned, you can run, but you can't hide. We are each God-called, God-haunted and God-pursued. Either you reach bottom or else God arranges to bring the bottom up to where you are. God said "Go." Jonah said "No," and so God waited till Jonah was out on the sea. Jonah the landlubber was about to meet the terror of a seafaring God who rules the wind and waves and whose hand gets a vote when lots are cast.

IIA. Salvation Of The Mariners, Jonah In The Drink (vv.4-16)

Picture Jonah and the crew on deck as they leave Port Joppa, oars lapping rhythmically, keel slicing through the blue-green waters, porpoises breaking the surface, Joppa receding into the horizon. Jonah perhaps consoles himself with the thought the Lord will now have to find someone else to do his work.

Now picture the Lord calling winds from the north, south, east, and west, spinning them into a vortex with a finger, then hurling them like a stone skipping across the waters straight at Jonah. Divine bowling with Jonah and his companions as the pins! That is the scene before us. All nature is at the Creator's disposal. It's an open system which God continually supports and injects energy where necessary.

¹² I Kgs. 10:22.

Verse 4, "But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest upon the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up."

It takes a lot to frighten a mariner, and in the terror of the waves each cried to his own god. These men were polytheists, not monotheistic Jews. Cries went up to Baal and Melqart, Phoenician gods of rain and thunder, whom they perceived as master of Byamm, god of the sea.¹ So sudden was the storm they knew the wrath of someone's god was upon them. But when there are so many gods and goddesses to consider, how do you know which one you've offended? Monotheism is religiously much simpler in this regard.¹³ There is the one God, and then there is everything God created, so only two realities. They call to their deities, but no one answers because no one's at home. Polytheism is an error. It mistakes the energies and powers within creation for an abundance of deities: a fire God, a wind God, a fertility goddess, one god of land, another of the sea, one of my tribe and another of yours, and once you go beyond one, there is literally no reason to stop, thus the millions of deities of Hinduism. There is only one God, the Creator who is the LORD of the Jews, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is with us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

At some point you will come to a conviction and a decision, and it is a fateful one. Is there a God, and has the one God revealed himself in the singular history of the Jews and in the human face of Jesus all the way through to resurrection and ascension? And, as a second question, Did the first followers of Jesus and the church immediately after them get the story straight? In other words, Is God Triune? Is the Bible a faithful testimony? Is Jesus still alive and knowable? At this point some complain we are arrogant and that a more humble position is that the Christian faith is just one of a number of viable religious options, the one most of us follow because it's the faith in which we were raised. I admit that arrogance and triumphalism can be a problem. I freely admit the church across the ages has been a frail and sometimes even corrupt carrier of its treasures, a fact about which both the Bible and church history are frank and honest. How could it be otherwise when God has such fragile and compromised raw materials to work with? Me and you!

But if the only, true, and living God is self-revealed to Jews initially and then in Jesus more fully, then *we do know who God is*, not because of our smarts or moral superiority but because of his consistent self-testimony, and this is humbling. To

¹³ On monotheism, see the treatment of Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions And The Evolution Of Belief* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007), especially Chapter 4, "The Rebirth of Monotheism," 156-209.

know God as sealed in Jesus' resurrection is a huge burden, because you cannot escape into professed ignorance or into one of the popular forms of pluralism which ends up with no truth at all, just preferences.¹⁴ Through Jesus' life and in the light the Holy Spirit provides we know God as holy love active in history. God has deposited the treasures of his revelation in the frail container of his people, and it is our job to receive, to guard, to share and defend the same with the whole world as we pray for God's personal confirmations with us and among them. We are witnesses to realities only God can validate, and it's not up to us to *make something happen* or bludgeon people with our arguments. We worship God, and we are in mission with God.

Confident in the truths of the revelation and humbled by our inability to live up to it, we seek the God who first sought us, and we do not apologize for the church's Savior or the church's faith, and in our life together we find this faith deepened.¹⁵ We have the medicine that heals the breach between human beings and their Creator. This does not mean there is not much that is good or true or noble in other faiths and the people they produce; it does mean that what we affirm in them is compatible with what we know of God. As a world religion marching through time with all the limits of embodiment and institutions, we are not superior, but - and here is the pinch - we do claim a superior, true revelation of the one God who has touched and claimed us, and if you are not convinced of this, it's hard to sustain a witness, and many in our day have lost their intellectual nerve and thus their missional confidence. Is this faith a true reading of God because of divine revelation, or just one among others flailing around the darkness? Even in his rebellion, Jonah confessed that the faith was true, and he did it in an abbreviated Jewish creed. If I was Jonah, it would be the Apostles' or Nicene Creed I would have recited there on the ship. It's not just about preference; it's a robust claim to truth about God.

It's easy to sympathize with the mariners; they're caught in the line of fire between God and his backslidden prophet. That Jonah was fast asleep in the lower decks is not a sign of his trust in God but just how out of touch he is with reality.

¹⁴ For a defense of the reliability of spiritual knowledge as *true knowing*, see Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009).

¹⁵ See my recent article, "What About Divine Appointments," *Index Journal* (Greenwood), Saturday, Nov. 15.

Martin Luther wrote of Jonah, "There he lies and snores in his sins."¹⁶

Remember the spiritual principle we touched on earlier: *away* from God is always *down*, more and more out of touch with reality. It is part of the mockery of Jonah that the pagan captain of the ship is the one who calls him to prayer to cover all the divine bases. He speaks more than he knows in verse 6, "Arise, cry out to your God! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish." The Jonah who refused to identify with the Ninevites now finds himself in solidarity with other pagans who are about to perish. How clever of God to reproduce the situation to which the prophet was originally called! The church and the world are in the same boat. And when the wrath of God threatens to swamp this American boat, as it will unless we turn, Christians will not be exempted. There is no rapture of the church.¹⁷ It's an escapist doctrine not found in Scripture. We are here as salt and light, as yeast, as God's minority report and alternative, and if we reject our calling, as Jonah did, we will feel the pressure and pain of divine pursuit; God will have us interrogated.

A little Scottish boy wouldn't eat his prunes, so his mother sent him off to bed saying, "God is angry with you." Soon afterward a violent storm broke out. Amidst flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, the mother looked in, worried he would be terrified. When she opened the door she found him looking out the window muttering, "My, such a fuss over a few prunes."¹⁸ But the Jonah story is not about a mother using God as backup for a proper diet; it's about God hunting down an angry man with ruthless perseverance. C.S. Lewis wrote similarly of God's pursuit:

"I never had the experience of looking for God. It was the other way round: He was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer. He stalked me like a redskin, took unerring aim, and fired. And I am very thankful that this is how the first (conscious) meeting occurred. It

¹⁶ Terence Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Minneapolis, MINN: Augsburg, 1977), 84.

¹⁷ On the historical origins of these false doctrines in the early 19th century and their misreading of the Bible's last book, see James M. Efird, *End-Times: Rapture, Antichrist, Millennium* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1986); Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

¹⁸ Michael Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 173.

forearms one against subsequent fears that the whole thing was only wish fulfillment. Something one didn't wish for can hardly be that."¹⁹

The Lord who sent the wind and the waves also controls the lot, which when cast fell upon Jonah, perhaps more than once just to make sure.²⁰ You can run, but you can't hide. In the middle of the storm, amidst the crashing of the waves and the creaking of timbers, Jonah is interrogated with eight questions. Note that he did not answer the occupational question. It was too embarrassing, "I am a prophet on the run from God." Jonah's answer is to quote his version of the Apostle's Creed, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord (right!), the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." It's doctrinally correct, but spoken by a man whose heart is far from God. Jonah is not an atheist who denies there is a God or an agnostic who protests a lack of evidence; he knows there's a God and has plenty of evidence what his character is; *he just doesn't like the God he knows*, which I find is true of many Christians. They know the Creeds; they just don't like a God who messes with their prejudices at ground level. Jonah doesn't want there to be a God who reaches out to the sworn enemies of his people. The Lord is not just the next tribal deity but the only, true, and living God of all peoples who loves to show mercy.

I know the truth of this terrible contradiction. Often I preach biblical truth on Sunday morning all the while fighting with God over some matter of obedience. Truth on your lips, but a lie in your heart. It's a horrible feeling. But Jonah's words, true as they were in pointing to God, did not comfort the sailors. It terrified them all the more to know they were in the line of fire between this strange passenger and the God who sent the storm. Earlier they were afraid of the storm; now they were "exceedingly afraid, and said *to him*, 'What is this that you have done?'" That was not just the sailor's question. It was also God's question, "Jonah, what is this that you have done? I called you to be a prophet. Sin in the life of a preacher may make them the object of scorn and ridicule to insiders and outsiders, but it does not undo the call of God. As Paul said in Romans "For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable."²¹

If Jonah was the cause of the crisis, then perhaps he has the answer as well. The sailors ask in verse 11, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down

¹⁹ *Christian Reflections* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1956), 169.

²⁰ Nixon, *Jonah*: 91.

²¹ Romans 11:29.

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for us?" And with each passing moment the sea grew more and more violent as if God were growing impatient with the whole process and about to swamp them all for the sake of one. It was the captain's anger that called Jonah to prayer. It was the crew's interrogations that forced his confession of classic Hebrew faith. It is these pagans whom God uses to draw Jonah back into reality. Jonah prophesies not the doom of Nineveh but his own death in verse 12, "Take me up and throw me into the sea; and the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Sounds noble, but I'm not so sure. Would Jonah really rather die than obey God? Looks like it to me. To invite them to cast him overboard may be a last act of rebellion, "I choose to die rather than obey!"

Though despairing and suicidal, Jonah - by God's strange and wonderful providence - has come to a place of identification with those to whom he is sent even in his rebellion. It is a tribute to these men of the sea that they try to row to shore to save their mysterious human cargo, but God will not allow it. The last three verses of this scene are among the most poignant in the Bible. It's a conversion story from the many gods of pagan polytheism to the one true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land and who sends prophets where he wishes.

When the storm began, each cried to *his own god*; now with one voice they cry *to the Lord*. Verse 14, "We beseech you, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee." When Jonah's body went over the rails and hit the water, the waves lost power and the wind its fury. It was quiet and still round the becalmed vessel, but within the breast of each sailor a new fear was birthed; they had encountered the holy and powerful presence from which Jonah fled. Could this be the one God behind all the powers of the world? Are the Jews right about God? The ship which was almost a tomb became a temple. Verse 16, "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they sacrificed a sacrifice to the Lord and vowed vows." This sovereign God of fury and clever strategy is also a Savior who desires that none should perish and all come to a knowledge of the truth.²² You can run, but you can't hide. All will face this God.

CONCLUSION

For years Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho was pastor of the largest church in the world in Seoul, Korea. As his ministry was becoming international in scope, he told God, "I will go

²² I Timothy 2:4.

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anywhere to preach the gospel, *except Japan.*" Yonggi Cho hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what their troops had done to the Korean people and members of his own family during WWII. The Japanese were his Ninevites.

Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor's conference of 1,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood, and what came out of his mouth was this: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." He then broke and wept; he was both brimming and desolate with hatred.

At first one, then all 1,000 pastors stood. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: "I love you. I love you. I love you."²³

God sometimes calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal our hearts. In Jonah and Cho it was ethnic hatred and war wounds. Can Christ turn enemies into friends? Yes, but only if we do not block his inward working. Jonah is in the Bible because a prophet is meant to reflect not only the truth but also the heart of God. And when we see that heart of mercy, and when see other through it, we will live again and have the conviction to believe this faith is true enough to share.

We are called to be fishers of men and women, not just keepers of the aquarium. If God asked Jonah to do the unimaginable, then perhaps God will call us to do the merely difficult, a circle or two beyond our well-buffered comfort zones. Who will go across the street and around the world? Who will reach across all the barriers the world erects to tell the story of the one God's great mercy? It's why we exist as church, first to worship and know this great God, secondly to risk spreading his name and his fame. Apparently, according to the Book of Jonah, God has as much trouble getting his people to go as he does getting outsiders to listen. Do you know this God? Do you care about his reputation? Then run towards your calling.

²³ Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 47.