

The Sign of Jonah or Why Prophets Fail

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Jonah 4 and Luke 11
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
June 20, 1998

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Jonah 4

The book of Jonah is not a very popular book. It immediately brings to mind controversies about whether it is history or fable, or even about whether Jonah was swallowed by a whale or by a great fish. Many who can't swallow the story about the fish dismiss the book altogether.

In passing, it may be interesting to note that this book has been controversial since ancient times, although for different reasons. Back in the fourth century AD, Jerome decided to translate the Bible into the Latin that was in common usage in this time. This is what we now know as the "Vulgate." When he came to the passage in the fourth chapter of Jonah in which we are told that God caused a plant to grow and shelter the prophet, he translated the name of the plant as "an ivy." The traditional translation, however, said that it was "a gourd." We are told that when the bishop of a certain church in North Africa was reading Jerome's text, some protested that there was a mistake in the reading, for the plant was a gourd, not an ivy. The controversy became bitter. Letters flowed back and forth between North Africa, Rome, and Palestine, where Jerome was then residing. Soon there were two parties, one standing firm on

the old translation, and the defending Jerome's version. I suppose we could call one party the “gourdites,” and the other the “ivyites.” Jerome himself became exceedingly angry – which was not difficult for him to do – and declared that his opponents were drunkards, and that the reason why they insisted on a gourd was that they wished to have a place to hide their liquor. Today, scholars tell us that the best translation is probably neither a gourd nor an ivy, but a castor bean!

It would be simply funny, were it not that it is so tragic. Because, the point of the controversy is that they missed the point of the book. And that is the first point for us, who so often hide behind irrelevant questions in order not to allow the text of Scripture to speak to us.

When we read the book as a whole, the most surprising thing in the entire book of Jonah is not the big fish, nor the little worm, nor the mighty storm, nor the dry wind. It is rather the success of this very reluctant prophet, and the repentance of Nineveh. A repentance so astounding, that even the animals are said to be part of it.

I was saying earlier that in discussing whether the plant was an ivy or a gourd, those Christians in the fourth century missed the point of the entire book. For the book is not about an ivy or a gourd or a castor bean. The book is not about a whale or a big fish. The book is about God's care for the Ninevites.

The Ninevites, who were famous for their cruelty. The Ninevites, who did not know God. The Ninevites, who had no idea whether Jonah had come by camel or by whale. The Ninevites, whom one would expect to be the last people on earth to repent. The Ninevites, who were the cruel enemies of Israel, and whose destruction should have caused any good Israelite to gloat and rejoice. The Ninevites, who did not even know enough to be either liberal or fundamentalist.

But the book is not only about the Ninevites. It is also about Jonah. It is about a prophet who knows and understands about the grace of God, but wishes to limit that grace. It is about a prophet who rejoices in God's salvation, but who wishes to die when that salvation is offered to the wrong kind of people.

The book of Jonah is not about a whale or a fish or a gourd or a worm. The book of Jonah is about this strange God of ours who appoints Jonah, and appoints a storm, and appoints a great fish, all so that Nineveh might not perish.

And it is about the prophet who knows full well the extent of God's mercy, and does not like it.

“Lord,” he finally says in the fourth chapter, “I wish I could die. This is why when I was in my land I did not wish to come. For I know that you are a gracious God who repents from evil.”

Jonah did not refuse to go to Nineveh because he was afraid. He was no coward. Actually, when the storm threatened the ship it was he who suggested to the sailors that he be thrown overboard. Nor did he refuse to go to Nineveh because he did not like the usually unsuccessful role of a prophet or because he did not understand the purposes of God. On the contrary, he understood too well. He knew that God is a gracious God. He knew that God wanted to save Nineveh. He understood that God's mercy is such that he could well be successful and save Nineveh. He understood, and he didn't like it.

Jonah is the prophet, a member of the household of God, who knows God's mercy but wishes

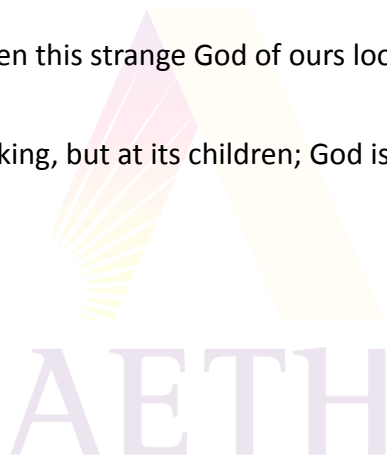
to circumscribe it to those whom he likes. The same sign appears at the time of Jesus, in the Pharisees and the scribes who also know that mercy but wish to control it and therefore reject Jesus and plot against him. Jonah is the seminary graduate who knows all about God's grace but does not like it; or at least wishes to circumscribe it. Jonah is each one of us who feels more comfortable with people like us, who look like us, who speak like us, who think like us, who act like us.

But above all, the book of Jonah is about this strange God whose servants may have to be tossed by wind and storm, robbed of all security, and even thrown to the depths of the ocean, all so that far-away Nineveh, enemy Nineveh, might be brought under the wings of God's gracious love.

And if this seems strange, just look at the last verse of the book, and you will come to the conclusion that God's priorities are really mixed up: "Should I not pity 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 much cattle?"

We could easily understand a God who would not wish to destroy a city that had become a center of civilization, whose king ruled over millions of people, whose architectural wonders would awe archaeologists for centuries to come, and whose roads spread in every direction.

But those are not the reasons why God wishes to spare Nineveh. The reasons are, quite simply, the 120,000 infants who are not yet old enough to know their right hand from their left, and the many animals in the city. When this strange God of ours looks at Nineveh and decides to spare it, God is not looking at its king, but at its children; God is not looking at its armies, but at its animals.

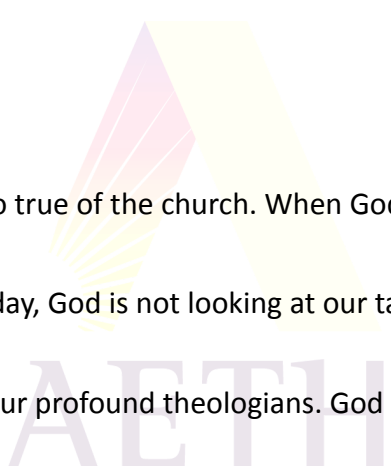


Those who do not know this strange God of Jonah will most likely believe that the security of Nineveh lies in its armies, in its treasury, in its leadership, and in its king. But God tells Jonah otherwise. Nineveh has been spared because of its children and its animals.

The God who spared Nineveh, the God who in Jesus Christ told us that the last shall be first, has more respect for children than for armies, for animals than for buildings, for the poor whose

lives are ruled by others than for the powerful who lord it over them.

If this passage truly depicts the nature of God, it follows that each morning, when God decides to let this nation of ours, when God decides to let any nation, stand one more day, God is not looking at our great achievements or at our advancements in computer technology, but at our children, at our animals, at the last and the least.



And what is true of nations is also true of the church. When God looks at our church today, and decides to let it stand one more day, God is not looking at our tall spires, at our balance sheets, at our eloquent preachers or at our profound theologians. God is not even looking at our seminaries. God is looking at the thousands upon thousands, many as far from the church as Tarshish was from Nineveh, who still need this message of ours, who still labor under the burden of their sin and under the burdens laid on them by the sin of others.

Actually, this is how Jesus interprets the story of Jonah. It is well known that he declared that “this wicked generation asks for a sign; yet no sign will be given it but the sign of Jonah” (Lk.

11:29).

When we hear those words of Jesus, we immediately think of the three days in the belly of the whale, and of the parallelism with the time Jesus lay in the grave. And that is part of what the Gospel says about the sign of Jonah. At least, that is what the Gospel of Matthew says. But we forget that there is more than this to the sign of Jonah. Matthew and Luke both offer more clarification as to the meaning of this sign of Jonah:

For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them; for she came from ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon is here. The people of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Lk. 11:30-32).

The sign of Jonah is the Ninevites repenting and calling on the mercy of a God whom they do not know, while the prophet who does know God bemoans that mercy. The sign of Jonah is in the Queen of Sheba coming from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, when the king's very sons refuse to follow the wisdom. The sign of Jonah is in the harlots and the publicans going into the Kingdom ahead of the religious leaders of their time. The sign of Jonah is in One who was rejected as a blasphemer by the religious leaders of his time and condemned

to death as a criminal by the political leaders, rising up from the dead, and sitting at the right hand of God, and being given a name that is above every other name, so that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10).

Today, people are again asking for signs. Even within the church we are asking for signs. We want signs that the church is truly the Church of God. So we look at our statistics: Is the church growing? Is our membership declining? Is giving up? Where are some successful churches? And we deceive ourselves into believing that the sign of God's presence is in our bright statistical spots. Or we admire our own theological acuteness, or our plans for evangelism, or our organizational ability, or some thing or another at which we consider ourselves particularly adept.

But it may well be that no sign will be given to us but the sign of Jonah. It may well be that the sign of a church in which the Spirit of God is at work is precisely that the most unlikely folk are brought in, like the Ninevites at the time of Jonah, or like the Queen of Sheba in the days of Solomon, or like the publicans and sinners in the time of Jesus. The sign of Jonah may well be

that barriers of race and class that close and divide so many other communities are torn down in this community of the Spirit.

At any rate, the sign of Jonah is never a comfortable thing. The text tells us that when Jonah saw Nineveh repenting, he wished he would die. Jonah was a good, religious man. He was part of the people of God, and he knew where that people began, and where it ended. So are we, and so do we. Those of you who are graduating today, and those of us who have spent years in theological education, we are religious people, church people. We are serious enough about church to have spent years preparing to serve in it. We know where the church begins and where it ends. We know the creeds, and we can name any doctrinal error the moment it appears. We know how to be prophets within the confines of Israel...

But God's mission and God's purposes extend well beyond the confines of Israel. They extend well beyond any ethnic group or culture. Right now, in this very city, the population is changing radically. A few days ago, the President of the United States stated what we should all know by simply looking around us: that very soon in this nation there will be no majority race. This is

part of God's calling to the church for the twenty-first century. A church that does not heed this calling but flees to the comforts of its own inner security, is like Jonah fleeing to Tarshish. And just as Jonah imperiled those who sailed with him, such a church should not be surprised if society at large tosses it overboard.

As this century comes to a close, and a new millennium looms over the horizon, this generation, and the coming generation, are looking for a sign. Millions around the world, and hundreds around the corner, are awaiting for a sign from the church. Not a sign of power. Not a sign of wealth. Not a sign of knowledge. But a sign of Jonah.

The logo for AETH features a stylized, multi-colored triangle (yellow, pink, and purple) with a sunburst effect at its base. Below the triangle, the letters "AETH" are written in a large, light purple, serif font.

Will we, will this rising generation of prophets, be courageous enough, be obedient enough, be humble enough, to provide such a sign? May God so will it!