

The Sign of Jonah

Dr. Justo L. González



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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" (Jonah 1:1-2).

After much debate with myself, and at the urging of some friends with whom with whom I had shared a Bible study on Jonah. I have decided to focus our Bible study on the book of Jonah.

It is not a very popular book, one which immediately brings to memory 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 A.D., Jerome decided to translate the Bible into the Latin that was in common usage in his 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, the "gourdites"

defending the old translation, and the "ivyites" defending Jerome's version. 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 funny were it not that it is so tragic. Because, you see, 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 questions in order not to allow the text of Scripture to speak to us.

Let us look again at the setting of the story. The main character is the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, who is mentioned in II Kings 14:25. If that is not the actual historical setting, it is at least the setting the later author of the story intends us to imagine. Israel is at the zenith of her power as a nation. As other prophets of that time made clear, all was not well. A sense of national power and well-being was paramount and in the nationalistic euphoria, justice and righteousness had been set aside.

Most scholars believe that the story of Jonah was written at the time of Ezra. At that time, a narrow nationalism had again taken hold among those who returned from exile and tried to rebuild the nation and the author sets the story at another time when similar views were paramount.

In any case, Nineveh, the city to which Jonah is sent, was the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire—an empire so powerful that at its height it even held sway over Egypt. It was an empire built on conquest, blood, and pillage. In their own inscriptions, some of which have survived to this day, the Assyrians boasted of their cruelty and of their harshness towards their enemies, deporting them en masse into slavery, mutilating or impaling their leaders, sacking and destroying their cities, and in general crushing any who could cast the slightest shadow on their power and supposed glory.

It is one of many such episodes that is told in II Kings 17: 6 and 24: "In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in Halah, and on the harbor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. . . The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities."

If there was an evil empire in the Old Testament, Assyria was its name, and Nineveh was its capital.

At the time in which the author places the call and work of Jonah, the fall of Samaria had not taken place yet. But many similar calamities had already been brought upon the neighboring countries by the rising Assyrian power. Therefore, it is not surprising that God tells Jonah that

the wickedness of Nineveh has reached to heaven. Nor is it surprising that the prophet would rather not go to Nineveh—although, as we shall see later, not for the reasons that one might most readily assume. “But Jonah 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” (Jonah 1:3).

So the prophet goes to Joppa, not on his way to Nineveh, but on the contrary, He is called to go East and he proposes to take a ship to the westernmost corner of the known world. It is to find such a ship that he goes to Joppa.

The city of Joppa, now Jaffa, plays an important role in another biblical episode. In Acts 9 and 10 we are told that Simon Peter was at Joppa when he had a strange vision and a strange call.

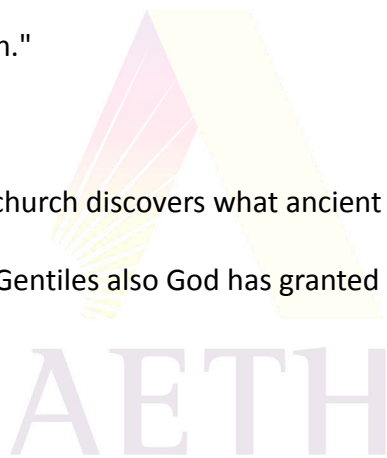
He was a Jew; but not a regular Jew. He was a Galilean and as such already suspect of not keeping to Jewish tradition as those in Jerusalem. In recent times he had followed another Galilean and he and those others who had followed Jesus were now under threat of persecution. If there was anything further he would rather not do, it was to antagonize any further those who watched over the religious purity of Israel.

And now he is called to go visit a centurion, an officer of the evil empire whose general had desecrated the Temple by riding his horse into the Holy of Holies, and an officer who had the

right to demand various forms of service from any Jew, and an officer of the empire that had crucified Jesus.

But, instead of seeking a ship for Tarshish, Peter invited in the messengers who brought the call from Cornelius and the next day he rose and went off with them. When he met Cornelius he declared himself ready to break the law for the sake of obedience to God and he said: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection."

And the result is that the young church discovers what ancient Israel had already been told in the book of Jonah: "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).



But it was not so with Jonah. He had no wish to be a prophet. At least he had no wish to be a prophet to that evil Assyrian Empire. So, he went in the opposite direction, hoping to escape the calling and the presence of the Lord. (Apparently, he did not know the 139th Psalm, "whither shall I flee from thy presence?")

But, if he did not know the Psalm, soon he came to know the experience.

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 sailors 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 as 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 us." 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 eased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. (Jonah 1:4-16)

This is very interesting narrative. Without dwelling too much on detail, several points stand out:

First, Jonah is no coward. We often think that he did not wish to go to Nineveh because he was afraid. But here he openly tells the sailors that the storm is his fault, and that they should cast him into the sea.

Secondly, through Jonah's unfaithfulness and disobedience the entire ship is imperilled. It was not these sailors' fault that Jonah was supposed to be on his way to Nineveh and had decided to

disobey the Lord. Yet, his disobedience threatens all of them. It is a strange situation, and one is reminded of the opposite situation, when God tells Abraham that were there only ten just people in Sodom and Gomorrah, God would save the cities for the sake of those ten. Or that other story in Acts 27, where God saves the entire ship's company for the sake of Paul and his companions. This is significant, for we often think that the church's disobedience threatens only the church. Not so. A disobedient Church is a menace to the entire world, just as Jonah is a menace to the ship.

We all know the situation. There was a time, and still is, in this part of the world, when the name "Christian academy" is an almost certain indication that it isn't. And much of the church stood for it. This is a time when people who illegally murder others are legally murdered by the state—especially if they also happen to be black and poor. And much of the church stands for it. This is a time when our tax dollars are being employed to murder children in Nicaragua. And we take a ship to Tarshish. This is a time when United Methodist churches are launching million-dollar building campaigns in cities where people are hungry and homeless. This is a time when much of our leadership is concerned about the growth of the church when we ought to be concerned about its faithfulness, lest the world cast it out, and cast it out justly.

Finally, still in this second chapter of the book, something remarkable happens. When Jonah finally owns up to his disobedience and gives witness, not to his own sanctity or his own faith, but to the God whom he has disobeyed, the pagan sailors pray to the God of Israel. Poor Jonah!

He has no wish to be a witness. And here, at the very moment when he faces death, he finds himself a successful witness to the God of Israel.

We too are called to be witnesses. We too are often unfaithful to our task. In that case, the proper course is not to hide our unfaithfulness, but to acknowledge our disobedience.

We may be astonished to find that our acknowledgement of disobedience can also be a witness to many.

But on with our story. You will note that the famous fish appears in only two verses: “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 1:17), and then after the psalm in chapter two, “Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land” (Jonah 2:10). We shall not dwell on the psalm, which would be sufficient for another entire study and which in any case comes almost as an interruption in the narrative.

In chapter three we come up with another peculiarity of the book of Jonah. Here is a successful prophet. More often than not, the prophets of the Bible were rejected by the people to whom they were sent. Jesus Himself spoke of Jerusalem stoning the prophets sent to her and saw his own rejection and crucifixion as part of that continuing story.

But here we have exactly the opposite. The text seems to indicate that the city had forty days in which to repent. And yet, after the first day of Jonah's preaching, the people of Nineveh believed God. This does not mean that they they became believers in God, or that they were converted to Judaism. It means rather that they gave credence to the message that God had given the prophet. They proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth. They did this "from the greatest to the least of them." From the king, who proclaimed the fast, to the beasts who also fasted and wore sackcloth!

(Here is material for another entire study on the relationship between humans and the rest of creation, between human sin and the corruption of nature, between our hope of redemption and the hope of all creation. See Paul in Romans 8.)

Back to our story. In some ways, 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 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 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 even more importantly, 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.

The book only has four chapters and tells us nothing about Jonah's return home. But imagine a fifth chapter in which Jonah returns home. Can you imagine what it would be like for Jonah to return home and have to tell his neighbors where he had been and that he had actually saved their most dangerous enemy?

So, the book of Jonah is about this strange God whose chosen ones 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.

Actually, this is how Jesus interprets the text. 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" (Luke 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 the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than 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! (Luke 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 that 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" (Philippians 2:10), and even those of the religious and political leaders who condemned him. (In a way, this gives deeper meaning to the connection between the sign of Jonah and the three days in the belly of the whale, for the connection is not simply in the numeric parallelism of the

number of days, but even more in that Jonah, after sinking to the depths of the ocean, rose again to call the mighty city of Nineveh to repentance.)

And, we might add, the sign of Jonah is in Cornelius, the military officer of the Empire that killed Jesus, becoming the occasion for Peter and the early church, like so many reluctant Jonahs, to discover the wideness of God's mercy.

And this sign of Jonah may well be in us, an unlikely crowd of different origins and races, in us, who were once "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12), in us being brought together under this one roof, into this one body, under this one promise of our salvation. Just as the sign of Jonah was in Jesus being raised from the dead, so is the sign of Jonah in our being born again through the waters of baptism, and through those waters rising to new life-in Christ.

Today, people are again 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? Are our offerings increasing? Why is our membership declining? And we deceive ourselves into believing that the sign of God's presence is in our bright statistical spots, in our growing suburban churches—although we know full well the reason why most of them are growing is simply that they are receiving members from other churches. 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 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 broken down in this community of the Spirit.

We may look for signs in our tall steeples, in our organizational charts, or in our quadrennial plans. But if the sign of Jonah is lacking every other sign is in vain. This is what the book of Jonah is all about. And, when seen from this perspective, it is a very important book for our total understanding of the biblical message.

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.

In this sense, there is a negative side to the sign of Jonah. 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 the plot against him. The sign of Jonah has repeatedly appeared in the church with all its talk about love and openness, in contrast to its racism, classism, and private club mentality.

It may well be that on this point too we shall be given the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah may well be a call to obedience to a church that is full of evangelistic talk, but knows its complacency would be shattered if that talk ever resulted in action. It may be in a church that is willing to accept all kinds of people, as long as they play by the rules of the right kind of people.

If such is our church when God's is made manifest in our midst we too will be angry, perhaps even to the point that we will wish to die. Perhaps members who feel about ethnic minorities the way Jonah felt about the Ninevites will leave the church, or will withhold their funds. In any case, it will be a painful process, just as Jonah's process was painful. But, again, painful. But, again, no sign will be given to us but the sign of Jonah.

You see, the message of the book of Jonah—indeed, the message of the entirety of Scripture—is about a God who has a strange set of priorities—a set of priorities that do not always agree with the priorities we as individuals or as the United Methodist Church set for

ourselves. The entire book of Jonah is about a God who appoints a prophet to go and save a people who do not even believe in God.

But, if you think that is 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?"

Any of us could 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 quite simply, are, 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 God of Jonah will most likely believe that the security of Nineveh lies in 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 those who boast of their power.

If this passage truly depicts the nature of God, it follows that each morning, when God decides to let this nation of ours stand one more day, God is not looking at the Pentagon, but at the Washington Zoo; not at Wall Street, but at Harlem; not at the missile silos in the desert of the Southwest, but at those who pass by those silos as they seek in this country a safe haven from oppressive regimes. And it follows also that each morning, when God decides to grant the Soviet Union one more day, God is not looking at the Kremlin, or at the Russian missiles, but at the babushkas and their grandchildren.

And what is true of nations is also true of the church. When God looks at this United Methodist Church of ours, and decides to let it stand for one more day, God is not looking at our tall spires, at our balance sheets, or at our eloquent preachers. God is looking at those thousands of small churches, spread over the face of this nation, churches that our planners would call "non-viable," but churches where the poor hear a word of hope, and where poor, lonely

children once again hear that Jesus loves them, for the Bible tells them so. And there are people in our denomination who want to close those churches!

But, thanks be to God, the church does not stand or fall on what bishops and their cabinets might decide—important though that is. The church does not stand or fall on the plans and pronouncements of the General Conference —important though they may be. The church stands on the stone that the builders rejected, but has been made the cornerstone of the entire building—a sign of Jonah indeed! The church either stands on that foundation or it falls.

If this is a building built on that Cornerstone who, being in the form of God, took the form of a slave (Philippians. 2:7), it follows that there must be a very special place in this building for those who come out of an experience of slavery.

If this is a building built on that Cornerstone who had nowhere to lay His head, it follows that this building must be first and foremost a home for the homeless and a sanctuary for the refugee.

If this is a building of the God of Jonah and the God of Jesus Christ, whose priorities, strange though they may seem to us, are crystal clear, it follows that there must be a special place in this building for those who bring to it the experience of a reservation, the experience of an internment camp, the experience of a ghetto, the experience of a barrio, the experience of

being last, and forgotten, and hungry, and oppressed, and persecuted.

And, let me add, there must also be a place in this building for those from the white ghetto, for those who have grown up with blinders. They did not choose, for those who have been deprived of seeing God at work in the multicolored multiplicity of God's creation, for those who must go through the painful, tearing, stinging experience of discovering that their privilege is based on the suffering of others.

No sign will be given to us, but the sign of Jonah, the sign of Jesus, that the blind see, that the poor have good news, that the unlikely are brought in. This we cannot change, for this is God's work. The question for us is, as this sign is given, what role will we play, what stance will we take? Will we, like Jonah, wish we could die because we deplore God's mercy? Or will we remember that we also live by that mercy, and join God's gracious work, and rejoice in it?

