

Fishing for a Way Out
Jonah 3:1-5,10
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Hi. I'm Jonah. You would think, if someone wrote a book with your name as the title, then the book would be all about you, right? Well..., in my case, it's not. But I will get to that later. Do you know my story? I mean the story I am in? I bet you know about the fish, don't you?

Well, let me start at the beginning. I am a prophet. God lets me know a message. Then I go share the message with God's people. It's a glamorous job. (Rubbing my fist on my shirt and putting my nose in the air.) Now in my time, People began to trust me. I had an "in" with God. They always wanted to know what God had to say, and they listened to me. It was a great gig.

And then God gave me the worst assignment. He said, "go to Ninevah." We all knew about Ninevah. You stayed away from Ninevah unless you wanted to get beaten up, stolen from, or swindled. God wanted me to go there and tell them that their behaviors had not escaped his attention. I couldn't go to Ninevah! They would kill me just for walking in the gates. If they waited long enough to kill me to hear my message, then they would laugh and then they would kill me. NO. I was not going to do that. And yet, I knew

God would not take no for an answer. I thought, you know what I will die if I go, I will die if I don't... I was doomed. I might as well try to get away, so I headed to Tarshish (Joppa) on a boat.

While we were on the boat to Tarshish, me and the crew, there was a storm. I could feel the presence of God calling me out for turning away from the assignment God had given me. We cast lots to see whose fault it was, and it fell on me. I could not escape. I told them to throw me overboard and the storm died down. I heard later all the sailors ended up believing in God. That feels like the kind of thing God would do to show God's power. I told you, I knew God would be after me. I kept saying to myself, I was better off dead...because I knew that was how I would end up anyways.

Okay, okay, I was in the water. I thought I was going to drown, that that would be how my story ended. You all know the next part, right? I don't need to tell it? Fine, everyone loves a big fish. Again, GOD provided a sign that God would pursue me so I could accomplish the task I was given. A big fish swallowed me. I just could not get away from God. I wasn't sure...was God punishing me or pursuing me? Well at that point, it didn't matter because I was in a big fish. It was perhaps the worst thing that had

happened to me. The smell... the hot humid air...the acid stinging my skin...I have to say to you now...there is no better way to help convert a person's way of thinking about disobeying God than being stuck in a big fish. That's why I thought of all these different Psalms I had learned from the Torah and cried out to God knowing that God would hear these words, the same words from faithful followers.

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³ You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁷ As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

⁹ But I with the voice of
thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the
LORD!”

And just like that, I was no longer sea food. The fish spat me on dry land. And this time I think I understood. I

wasn't going to run from God anymore...it was a difficult task, and maybe I would die at the hands of the Ninevites...but not even that was worse than being in the belly of the fish. So, I took three days and I walked from one side of the city to the other. Everyone heard my message and guess what? They didn't beat me up...in fact they took me seriously. After I made sure I got the message out to all of Ninevah that they were evil and the wrath of God was going to come and punish them, I went to watch the fireworks (you know God promised the destruction of Ninevah. That should be something to see!). I found a nice hill, built a little shade structure, and waited. Day after day nothing. I watched the city people tear their hair and clothes and wear sack clothes. They even made the animals do some of those things. It was pretty pathetic...but kind of awesome too. Can something be both pathetic and awesome? The Ninevites really wanted to change. They had a new faith in God. They didn't even need to be in the belly of a fish to come to that kind of conversion! They just needed my words...Well God's words.

The only problem was that God was not holding up God's side of the prophecy. The deal had been...I was going to tell the Ninevites about their impending doom and how bad they had been, and then GOD was

supposed to reign down fireballs from heaven to destroy them.

But... no... (Very exaggerated)

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and God did not do it.

“Death would be better...” I thought. Honestly, God was making things so difficult on me. He wanted me to do this impossible task, then when I agree to do it, he wants to discredit me in front of Ninevah and all of my friends from home. No one will ever listen to me again. They will not believe in what I say. It is another death sentence!!!

So, God makes a shade bush. I feel relieved and then a bug eats it. Who wouldn't be upset? It was nice and no one asked me if I wanted a bug to come eat the shade bush. No one asked me if I wanted to be a prophet, or if I wanted to go to Ninevah, or if I wanted to show mercy to the people in the Great City. No! ...That's because...the story isn't ... wasn't about me. I may be a main

character...but it hasn't been about me this whole time. It's about God, it always has been. It's about God's mercy. God could have wiped me out several times...but God didn't. God could have taken out Ninevah...but God didn't. God is powerful, but God loves us too. God loves us as individuals and as communities and God really wants us to know that. This was a hard lesson. A lesson I don't think a lot of people get, even some of the other story writers in that collection of holy texts you read.

It can be hard ...but it's okay we don't get our own way all the time. And some things are better than being right. Being loving is better.

The Ninevites were evil people. The worst. They deserved the wrath God had planned for them. But God changed God's mind. God showed mercy. God forgave. And if we can learn anything from this story ...this story about God ...it's that we should and can change our minds about people, we can be merciful and forgiving too.

Thank you and Amen.