

## After the Whale

Before we hear our scripture reading for this morning, I'm curious what you remember about the story of Jonah. Why did Jonah run away from God? What happened when Jonah finally went to Nineveh? How does the story end?

### Prayer of Illumination

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### Jonah 3:10-4:5

*Our scripture reading this morning comes from the end of the book of Jonah, after Jonah has finally gone to Nineveh and preached there. It doesn't take us all the way to the end of the story, but it gets us pretty close. So let us listen for God's word to us in this time and in this place:*

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

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

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.

The Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

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### After the Whale

Everyone knows the story of Jonah. It's in every Children's Bible. There are songs about it. It is one of those stories that has worked its way into our cultural landscape so that even people who have never opened a Bible have heard of Jonah and the whale.

Which makes sense—it's a memorable story with broad appeal. Who doesn't want to read about a prophet who tries to run away from God only to be thrown overboard by a bunch of sailors and swallowed up by a big fish? The problem is that most people are hard-pressed to tell you what happens after Jonah is spit out by said fish. And that—if you're over the age of five or

six and capable of being fascinated by more than just large sea creatures—is when the story actually starts to get quite interesting.

Because Jonah does go to Nineveh. And Jonah's preaching is a success—the Ninevites repent and turn from their evil ways, and God spares the city. But Jonah, far from being proud of his effective preaching, is furious: "I knew you would do this!" Jonah prays. "I knew you'd make me come all this way and in the end you'd just forgive these people. I knew you were merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I knew it." And can I just say that I love that the Bible calls this temper tantrum a prayer—what a wonderful reminder that prayer happens every time we turn to God, no matter what comes out of our mouth. And also, only Jonah could make God's mercy and steadfast love seem like character flaws.

To be fair, Jonah's assignment is an unpleasant one. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the empire that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people into exile. For the people hearing this story, Jonah was being sent into the belly of the beast (pun intended), the heart of enemy territory, to warn them that judgment was coming—to extend the possibility of mercy to the very people who had shown Israel none.

And Jonah knows—he knows—the kind of God he serves. He knows God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Which means he knows that there is every possibility that God will relent, that these people will be spared, even though, as far as Jonah is concerned, they will never deserve it. Jonah's problem isn't that he doesn't know who God is. His problem is that he does.

But that is not the Jonah story most of us remember. I suspect because few of us have returned to the story of Jonah since we were children and fascinated by large sea creatures.

With Caleb starting Confirmation, I've been thinking about my own Confirmation experience. In the church I grew up in, everyone did Confirmation in ninth grade. It was a year of Tuesday evening classes with our youth pastor and an adult mentor, at the end of which we went on a retreat and wrote our faith statements. I don't remember a lot about that year, but I remember the retreat and the challenge of writing my faith statement.

I don't know what happened to that faith statement. It's possible it's in a box somewhere. But I'm here to tell you that I am not going looking for it because in my memory, that faith statement was fantastic. I had no idea what I wanted to do when I was in 9th grade, but I'm confident that anyone who read that faith statement would have known that I was destined to be a pastor. Never mind that no one who actually read it ever said that. It doesn't matter. I remember. That faith statement was profound and wise beyond my teenage years.

And maybe it was. I'm certain it was sincere, and I know it reflected what I believed when I was fourteen years old. I'm also fairly certain that, were I to find it and read it, I would discover it no longer reflects all that I believe and understand to be true. Honestly, I hope I never find it because without it, it can live on in my imagination as both wise beyond its years and something I have outgrown.

I worry that one of the mistakes the church has made over the years is treating faith as though it were a subject to be learned rather than a life to be lived and explored. We send children to Sunday School. We teach them Bible stories and prayers and what Christians believe. We confirm them. And then, without ever quite saying so, we give the impression that they have learned what they need to know. Which means that a lot of us end up carrying around understandings of God and scripture that were formed when we were young—understandings that were faithful and made sense when we were five or six or sixteen, but were never meant to be the last word.

And we compound that problem every time we treat certainty as a sign of strong faith—when we give the impression that changing our minds somehow discredits what we believed before, or that questioning means we don't believe strongly enough. When, in fact, a living faith ought to be able to encounter new experiences, new knowledge, new suffering, new people—and become deeper because of them.

Jonah, of course, has no shortage of certainty. He knows who God is. He knows what God is like. And he knows what the Ninevites deserve. Even after God's mercy crosses the boundaries Jonah wants to put around it, Jonah does not reconsider. He doubles down. He argues. He complains. He throws God's own character back in God's face: I knew you were merciful. I knew you were slow to anger. I knew you would forgive them.

But certainty isn't the same thing as faithfulness.

The book of Jonah ends with Jonah encamped outside the city, waiting to see if God will come around to his way of seeing things. God does not. God does, however, try to help Jonah see things differently, eventually leaving him with the question: should I not be concerned about Nineveh?

And that's where the book ends. We never hear Jonah's answer.

At the end of Confirmation, we ask our youth to write a faith statement. It's an important exercise that helps pull together what they've been learning and thinking about all year long. But it is not meant to be the last word. It is meant to be a marker in time—one moment in a life of faith that we hope will keep growing and changing as they keep encountering God, scripture, other people, and the world.

And what is true for them is true for us as well. Most of us learned the story of Jonah when we were children. And perhaps we believed we knew what Jonah was about. But if we never came back, we would miss the part where Jonah's problem isn't disobedience so much as the limits he wants to put around God's mercy.

And the story of Jonah is not unique. What else might we have missed because someone explained it to us when we were nine? Who have we decided that Jesus is? What have we decided salvation means? How often have we learned something true when we were seven or fourteen or forty-seven and then assumed it was everything there was to know?

The book of Jonah leaves its prophet sitting outside the city with a question. Maybe that isn't such a bad place for a story of faith to end, or at least pause. Because mature faith may have less to do with finally having all the right answers and more to do with being willing to let God ask us new questions.