

Pat Conover: Jonah

Seekers Church

Pat Conover

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Jonah

It seems a bit strange to be preaching on the book of Jonah during the season of Christmastide. But, since the core truth of Jonah is the core truth of the good news of Jesus, understanding that distinguishes the message of Jesus from the Pharisees and even from John the Baptist, maybe it is more of a Christmas sermon than you think. As a child, Jesus was almost certainly told the story of Jonah and maybe this story was one of the things that opened his heart so wide, maybe it gave him courage and determination.

For the next five weeks we will be working with the Jonah story with our children. Perhaps some of them will find the great truth in it.

Jonah might be called the most famous fish story of all time. That would be unfortunate. The part about the fish only takes 3 out of 48 verses. Instead, you might think of it as one of the world's greatest satiric comedies set as a short story or parable. You can laugh at Jonah all the way through, but you better be careful. The joke might be on you.

Some interpreters still want to hold out the possibility that Jonah could be historic fact. The International Standard Bible Dictionary, revised in 1979, still repeats the story of a whale fisher who was swallowed by a sperm whale, was saved when the whale was later killed and he was cut out of the stomach, bleached white by the whales gastric juices. This report by scholar Eduard Konig was investigated and found to

be groundless. The possibility that Jonah was actually swallowed by a fish and lived is under the heading of, "since God is all powerful God could do anything." The sad part of this kind of distraction is the idea that the truth would somehow be more powerful if it had happened as an historical fact. The truth of the Jonah story is vastly more interesting and important than speculation about the possibility of anyone living in the stomach of a fish.

A far worse interpretation of Jonah, perhaps the one that got it accepted as Hebrew scripture, is that Jonah was an heroic prophet who saved the Ninevites. Horsefeathers! Jonah was a rebellious jerk who resisted God at every turn of the story and may never have gotten the point. If you want to learn how to do everything wrong as a prophet, study Jonah.

God told Jonah to go to Ninevah and preach repentance for their sins. Jonah didn't want to go. Big Time! Jonah really didn't want to go! And who can blame him? Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrians and the Assyrians had raided and committed genocide against the Northern Kingdom of Israel until it was totally destroyed. The Assyrians would have knocked off Jerusalem too except that the hill town was too well fortified.

Was Jonah afraid? Not in this story. Hebrew prophets were supposed to be fearless and the issue of fear never came up.

Did Jonah think it was a dumb assignment to go preach to the last people on earth that were likely to listen? Not in this story. Jonah didn't want to go because he didn't want to succeed. Talk about Chutzpa! I'm Jonah, one preacher. I'm going to walk into Ninevah, do my little preaching thing and they are all going to say, "Oh my goodness. I'm so sorry. Did killing off 10 tribes: men, women and children hurt? When we killed you animals and destroyed your crops was that hard on you?" Jonah definitely did not suffer from a weak ego.

So, instead of walking 550 miles east to Ninevah, Jonah walks half a day to Joppa gets on a boat to sail over a thousand miles west to Tarshish in Spain. Even though Jonah later testifies that Yahweh is the God of land and sea he thinks he can escape God by running away.

God doesn't let go of Jonah. Instead he sends a storm which threatens to sink the ship. All the sailors are afraid. They do what they can to save the ship. They pray to their gods. And what is Jonah doing? He's asleep in the bottom of the ship. Sometimes people try to escape God by going to sleep.

Well the sailors cast lots and figure out that Jonah is the problem. To this day someone who is considered bad luck on a ship may be called a Jonah. So they wake Jonah up. He confesses to the sailors that it is his fault. But does he pray to his god the way the sailors were praying to theirs. Certainly not. This is wrong way Jonah at his best. He tells the sailors to throw him overboard. That way the boat will be saved and he will die and not have to go to Ninevah. Instead the sailors model compassion and try one more time to get to shore. It doesn't work so they ask forgiveness of God, which Jonah did not ask for, and throw him over.

This is where the fish comes in. Like the storm, God uses the fish to thwart Jonah's escape plan. Now God could have let Jonah drown and found someone else to go preach to Ninevah. But that would ruin a good story. So Jonah stews in the belly of the whale and finally cries out to God. What did he cry out? Probably something like, "I don't like the way this fish smells. Get me out of here?" Jonah gave in to the sheer power of God but that doesn't mean that he liked it. It doesn't mean that he changed his mind. It just shows that even great Hebrew prophets have a limit to their stubbornness.

Back on shore, God tells Jonah one more time to go to Ninevah. Jonah goes.

When Jonah gets to Ninevah he starts preaching and it is some of the sorriest preaching you can imagine. He doesn't call for repentance. He doesn't tell about God's mercy for those who have done wrong. He just tells the Ninevites that God is going to destroy them. But, in this story, that is just what is needed. The Ninevites immediately repent, confess their sins, and change their ways. So, not only did Jonah do a rotten job of preaching, the one prediction he makes doesn't come true.

Jonah can't believe it! He is furious. He tried to escape. He did the worst job he could. And still God used him to spare the Ninevites! So he sits down outside the city to see if God is really going to let them off the hook so easily.

At least Jonah is paying attention. So God asks Jonah a question, a real good question. Just the kind of question that Seekers record in their journals when they do their daily disciplines. "Do you do well to be so angry?"

But Jonah isn't in the market for helpful questions. Instead he answers God with his anger. "Damn it! What do you know about being God! It is just as I feared. You're too soft on the bad guys. They come and destroy us, we your chosen people! And you let them off with: "Oh I'm so sorry. We'll do better next time. If you knew anything about being God you'd be destroying them right now. How about a few plagues like you put on the Egyptians?"

Well, God not only doesn't give up on the Ninevites; God doesn't give up on Jonah.

Jonah is sitting and sulking in a little booth, a sort of stick tent. Instead of punishing the Ninevites, God sends a hot wind to punish Jonah for his rebelliousness. Once more, Jonah just wants to die. Against such despair God tries a lighter hand. God sends a plant, maybe a castor oil plant with the big leaves to relieve Jonah's suffering. Jonah likes that. He still has human feeling. Then God kills off the plant with

a worm and leaves Jonah suffering in the heat again.

This time God tries a more indirect question with Jonah, a question arising within Jonah's recent felt experience. "Did you feel sorry for the plant?" Jonah knew the right answer. The plant was his friend. "Yes," says Jonah. Then God says, "Don't you get it? I can feel pity too."

Did Jonah get it? We don't know. The story stops, leaves the question hanging. The author leaves the question for you. Do you get it?

I can tell you one person who got the point. His name was Jesus. He knew the Jonah story. He built out from the message of John the Baptist and preached the good news of Justice AND mercy, of healing and peace.

How about it? Do you want justice and forgiveness just for yourself, maybe your friends and family, maybe your religion, your race, the United States? Or, do you worship a God who wants what is good for everyone, who puts you on an even footing with those you dislike, with those you fear, with the person who has abused you, stolen from you, shamed you, mocked you?

Perhaps Christians and Jews have an inside track with God. Perhaps we are a chosen people. That is not the same as having an insider deal with God, earned by our obedience, by saying the right things in worship, or praying the right prayers in the silence. If we have an inside track it is because we know the love of God, know how precious it is, and are eager to share it with others, even those who hurt us.

Jesus thought that message was worth his life. He preached the whole truth. In the real world it is dangerous business to walk into Ninevah, to walk into Jerusalem, to walk into Washington. Following your calling may not be very rewarding in practical terms. Your destiny may not be the fame, fortune and happiness promised in the TV game shows. All Seekers

promises is that we will try to be companions to each other on the journey.

Nice funny short story, this book of Jonah? Are you sure you want to laugh along with it?

In Seekers we talk about calling as one of the greatest gifts God gives us, individually and collectively. Amen. Sometimes we slide by the part about the hard times in callings, the confusion, the insecurity, the threats, and the losses.

Maybe Jonah is just a curious fish story after all.

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The Story of Jonah: Retold for a Modern Audience

A long time ago there was a city named Ninevah. It was a big city on the shores of the Tigris River. It was a big city of the Assyrian people. Now, the Assyrian people had done terrible things to the Hebrew people. They kept raiding and destroying Israel until the ten Northern tribes were destroyed; only remnants remained. Down in Judah lived a prophet named Jonah, a prophet who knew the will of God. Judah was the Southern Hebrew Kingdom and lasted a while after the Northern Kingdom was destroyed.

God wanted to save the people of Ninevah from their sin, from all their bad behavior. So, God called the prophet Jonah, and told him to go and preach in Ninevah. But, Jonah didn't want to go because he didn't want to help the Ninevites. He wanted revenge on the Ninevites. So Jonah tried to escape from God.

He went to Joppa, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea, and got on a ship to go to Tarshish in Spain, in the opposite direction from Ninevah, about as far as you could go.

But God didn't want Jonah to get away, so God sent a great storm. Soon, the boat was in grave danger. The sailors threw their cargo overboard so that the boat would ride high and not be swamped. But the wind just got worse. Now the sailors were very frightened and started praying to their gods. But Jonah was just sleeping it out in the bottom of the ship. The sailors guessed that the storm had come from some God and were upset that their prayers had not helped. If you think about it, it was kind of strange that all of the sailors who didn't believe in the Hebrew God were praying while the Prophet of God was not.

Finally, the sailors decided to find out what the problem was by casting lots. The lot fell on Jonah, and to this day the word Jonah means bad luck to sailors. The word Jonah actually means dove in Hebrew, which is kind of a joke by the author, since Jonah was filled with revenge and not peace. When the sailors challenged Jonah, he admitted that the storm was his fault, sent by his God. Jonah directed the sailors to throw him in the sea. But the sailors who did not believe in Jonah's God were merciful. They decided to row the boat into shore and ground it, a very dangerous maneuver, instead of throwing him overboard.

Even though Jonah knew the storm was his fault for his disobedience, he would not repent, would not tell God that he was sorry. He let the sailors risk themselves. But God changed the wind and wouldn't let the boat be driven ashore. Finally they threw Jonah overboard. The wind stopped. The sailors offered thanksgiving to Jonah's God, the God of Judah, Yahweh.

Now, God didn't want Jonah to die, just to learn a lesson. So God sent a fish to swallow Jonah, and he lived in the belly of the fish for three days. The author sure had a good

imagination. Still, Jonah did not repent. But he cried to God for help. Hearing him, God told the fish to go and spit Jonah up on the land.

God told Jonah a second time to go to Ninevah. Jonah still didn't want to go. But he realized when he was overmatched, and so he gave in and went to Ninevah. When he got to Ninevah he walked into the city and started preaching. What he said was, "Ninevah is an evil city, and God is going to destroy it." Now Jonah knew that God could also be merciful, but he didn't say anything about that, didn't offer any hope.

But even though Jonah said only words of judgement, that was good enough for Ninevah. Even the king joined in crying out about how sad they were that they were doing wrong, and set about changing their evil ways. Since this is what God wants from every one who does wrong, God decided not to destroy Ninevah.

Now, after Jonah finished his preaching he went and sat outside the city to see what would happen to Ninevah. He wanted to see God's destruction of Ninevah, but it didn't happen. So, Jonah yelled at God.

"See what I told you," he cried. "It is just as I feared, you are a merciful God."

It was very hot where Jonah was sitting and to make things worse God sent a terrible hot wind. Soon, Jonah was feeling really terrible and he cried out to God that he wanted to die. But, instead of killing Jonah, God asked him a question.

"Do you do well to be so angry?"

The next day God caused a gourd plant to grow up very fast and give shade to Jonah. Maybe it was a castor oil plant that has very big leaves. But the very next day, God sent a worm and killed the plant. Now, Jonah was upset again. He didn't like losing the shade, but he pretended like he was sorry for the

plant instead of for himself.

God asked him if he was sorry for the plant and Jonah said yes. Then God gave Jonah one more chance to learn his lesson. God told Jonah,

"You wanted mercy for the plant even though you had nothing to do with growing it. I want mercy for the city of Ninevah, 120,000 people who still haven't learned my ways."

The story doesn't tell us whether Jonah learned about mercy, or learned to tell all of God's truth, or learned that God loves everyone, and not just the people we like. It doesn't say Jonah repented of his revenge. What do you think?

Story retold by Pat Conover based on references from *The Interpreter's Bible*, November 3, 1997

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Teaching Jonah ... a comedy in 4 acts

Introduction

Jonah is only book in the Bible written as comedy, satirical comedy. Though the laughs are there when you know to look for them, this is a book with numerous big spiritual lessons. (Hint: Jonah does almost everything wrong.) Several of the lessons are forerunners to the message of Jesus. They include:

- The universal love of God, a God who loves your enemies. God wants redemption, offers mercy, even when really bad sins have been done.
- The importance of spiritual calling, even in the midst

of personal resistance. We may be called to do things we really do not want to do.

- A calling is not an office but an activity.
- We can learn from people who we are taught to regard as sinners, as impure, as ignorant.

Note

If you read the story in the "Retold for a Modern Audience" version, you will probably find it easier to pick up the humor. (Hint: Ninevah was the "capitol" of the hated Assyrians who crushed and ravaged the 10 northern tribes of Israel for decades.)

Teaching Plan

A lot of fun and improvisation.

There are five class sessions for teaching the book of Jonah, beginning on January 11 and ending on February 15. (Everyone is in worship together for communion on February 1.) Assuming we can work it out we will present a play to Seekers as the "Word" as our last session.

In the first sessions we will improvisationally explore the four acts of Jonah. The kids and the adults will get chances to repeatedly act out the roles to show how they think it should be done.

- Fleeing by ship
- In the fish
- Preaching in Ninevah
- Jonah's Booth

In the first sessions we will also make the following props, one way or another. (Remember. The original Shakespearean theater, the Globe, presented Shakespeare without props. So anything we do improves on the great bard.)

Act 1: boat

Act 2: fish belly

Act 3: city of Ninevah

Act 4: Jonah's booth, plant, worm, hot sun and wind

We can either divide into an acting team and a prop team or into two equal teams, which act out two acts and make props for two acts.

In the last session before we present to Seekers we will get organized for presentation. The presentation will be improvisational.

Note: As homework we will ask each family with children to discuss the book of Jonah at least once a week in between sessions.

Note: If we can find a volunteer writing coach we could have a small third team write a contemporary Jonah story. (Say, preaching at a corporate board of directors that the bottom line is not simply profit for the stockholders.)

Leadership Needed

Producer/Director: Pat Conover

Leader of Second Group:

Prop Maker/Facilitator

Assistant

Session 1

Session 2

Session 3

Session 4

Some Questions from Jonah

1. How do you recognize a calling from God, especially when it is something you don't want to do? What needs that reach out to you have you resisted?
2. Jonah claimed the role of prophet of Israel but didn't want to speak God's word. When he did finally speak out, he did it badly. Have you claimed the name Christian without being willing to do what God wants you to do?
3. When Jonah tried to escape from God he went to sleep in the boat. How do you shut out awareness of God? What habits and activities lower your spiritual awareness?
4. In trying to escape from God, Jonah ended up alone in the dark belly of a fish. When have you felt alone and dark? What did you do? Did it help? What confession might help get you back up on dry land?

Create Your Personal Jonah Story

1. Who would you least like to help?
2. God orders you to help them.
3. You try to escape.
4. God won't let you escape.
5. You decide you have to give in to God, but you don't like it.
6. You do a poor job of helping on purpose.
7. God uses your work anyhow.
8. You see just the change (improvement, growth) you didn't want.
9. Then what?

Embellishments

1. What was Jonah really doing in the hold of the ship?

2. What was Jonah doing in the belly of the fish?
3. What else did Jonah say to the Ninevites?
4. What was Jonah doing while he waited by Ninevah? Why didn't he just go home?
5. What about the people Jonah left behind? How did they feel about being left? Why didn't anyone go with Jonah?