

God's Reach

Come listen to my tale / Of Jonah and the whale / Way
down in the middle of the ocean! That's how the children's song
begins.

There are several children's songs about Jonah and the
whale. You probably heard at least one of them when you were a
kid. And ever since you were a kid, you've probably known
about the whale—or the large fish—that swallowed Jonah,
according to the Bible. But today's appointed Scripture covers a
part of Jonah's story—with its twists and turns—that may not be
as familiar to you. So let's start at the beginning.

When we first encounter Jonah, he's hearing a command
from none other than God. *Get up, Jonah. Be on your way. I'm
sending you to the big city of Nineveh. Something's got to be
done about that den of iniquity, Nineveh.*

Now, my sisters and brothers, most prophets would
obediently set out for Nineveh, right? Not *this* prophet. Not
Jonah. What does Jonah do? He heads right down to the nearest

seaport and books passage on a ship bound for *Tarshish*, of all places.

Tarshish is in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh, which is in modern-day Iraq—*east* of Israel, where Jonah lives. Tarshish is believed to have been on the coast of Spain, to the *west*, at the farthest edge of what was then the known world.

Jonah's trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and this God who is calling him to do something he really doesn't want to do. So Jonah boards the ship and sets sail for Tarshish.

But God isn't finished with Jonah. Not by a long shot! God sends a raging storm that threatens to break the ship apart. And the sailors, who know that Jonah's running away from his God, fear for their lives. Believing Jonah's presence on the ship to be the cause of the storm, they throw him overboard. Cast him into the sea!

And here's the part we know best. God puts a great big fish in just the right place at just the right time to save Jonah from drowning by swallowing him up. Jonah descends into the darkness of the fish belly, where he remains for three days. A

time for Jonah to reflect. A time for Jonah to pray. A time to turn his life around. A time to change direction.

After three days, this humongous fish spews Jonah back up again, onto dry land. And that's where the first, more familiar part of the story ends. But this narrative of Jonah is more than just a fish story. Much more. And this Sunday we read the *rest* of the story and consider what it's saying to the church today.

This is where the part of the story you heard earlier picks up. With Jonah on the same shore where his journey began. Trying to run and hide and flee from God didn't get Jonah anywhere at all. He's right back where he started from. And in that place, God speaks to Jonah again. Says: *Get going. Be on your way. Proclaim my message in Nineveh.*

Now there's one thing today's Scripture doesn't tell us: Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. Centuries earlier, Assyria has invaded and occupied Jonah's homeland. Israel and Assyria are ancient enemies. Mortal enemies. If you want to know how Jonah feels when he's called to go and prophesy to Nineveh, imagine how you would react if you were commanded to go in ministry and mission to the capital of one of the rogue nations that make headlines in today's world.

But even so, Jonah realizes that this time there's no getting out of it. So he sets out. And when he finally gets to the great city of Nineveh, he proclaims his message. It's one of the world's shortest sermons. And it makes us wonder if maybe Jonah could be the granddaddy of every hellfire and brimstone preacher. Because his sermon—loosely translated—is: *Hey Nineveh! In forty days, you're gonna be blown to bits. Blasted off the map!*

And then an amazing thing happens. Nineveh actually turns from its wicked ways. As a sign of repentance, Nineveh puts on sackcloth. And not just the people. Even the innocent animals! Can't you just see all the cows and sheep with burlap on their backs? The author of this book of Jonah probably envisioned that image and had a good laugh.

But when Nineveh repents, God relents. God changes God's mind about pouring down wrath on Nineveh. Nineveh is spared. Saved from destruction. God is pleased. Jonah's message has been successful. Jonah is overjoyed, right?

Wrong.

Jonah prays: *you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.* That sounds like praise—doesn't it?

But it's not! Jonah's *complaining*. Jonah's burning with anger. The people of Nineveh aren't supposed to get off scot-free. God has forgiven people that Jonah doesn't want forgiven. Has shown mercy to people that Jonah doesn't want mercy shown to. Has delivered people that Jonah wants punished. God—in Jonah's view—has reached out to the wrong people.

This God of overflowing grace keeps reaching out, even to Nineveh. Even to Tarshish. Even to the ends of the earth. This story of Jonah reminds us of the many ways God reaches fallen human creatures, and of the many kinds of instruments God uses in this reaching out. Like a storm. Like a large fish. Like a bush or a worm or a sultry east wind. No instrument is too great or too small for God to use in accomplishing God's saving purposes. God stops at nothing!

And God uses *people* as God's instruments, too. Not just holy, seemingly perfect people. More frequently, God uses ordinary human beings with flaws and foibles and fears. People

like Jacob. Like Rahab. Like David. Like Mary Magdalene. Like Simon Peter. Like you and me. And like Jonah.

Have you ever wondered whether this narrative of Jonah is historical? Have you wondered if it actually happened? I think the most important thing about this story is that its truth resonates in your life and mine. And I invite you to reflect on some questions with me.

What instruments has God used in *your* life? What—or whom—have you looked back on and understood as more than a coincidence, understood as being God-sent? What—or whom—has God used to reach *you*?

Even if you started out running from God. Where were you running *to*? Where is the Tarshish *your* ship was sailing toward? Have you been brought to the realization that even if you run to the ends of the earth, God pursues you, is always near you, always reaching out to you? No matter whether your “ship” is a career, or a relationship, or an addiction? No matter what means you may have used to run from God?

When you’re on this “ship,” sooner or later there’s a storm—one of the storms that come to each of us. And the storm

threatens to wreck your ship. Doubt and anxiety and fear fill you. The chaos of your storm swirls around you.

And then you're in the water. Towering waves crash over your head. This is it. You're drowning. It's over.

But suddenly, something—somehow—catches you up. It's dark. It's dank. It's uncomfortable. But you're alive! You're safe. You contemplate. You pray. And you come to the awareness that if you ever emerge from this place, your life is going to change. Diametrically. You're going to journey, not the way you were headed before, but in a totally opposite direction.

In what fish belly has God placed *you*? Has being there prepared you to respond with trust? Are you ready to respond in obedience? Are you ready to go to Nineveh?

Where is Nineveh for you? Jonah wants his enemies in Nineveh to get what's coming to them. When they don't, Jonah gets angry. Really angry. In his words, *angry enough to die*. And Jonah causes us to take a long, hard look at ourselves. Is Jonah's anger emblematic of our human condition?

We desire God's compassion and pardon, God's love and grace for ourselves. But don't we sometimes feel resentful when others receive it—especially when we believe those "others" to

be our enemies? Don't we want our enemies to get theirs? Don't we want to be able to tell them: *God'll get you for that!* And then watch it happen?

When we see others who seem deserving of judgment and sentencing and punishment—and they don't get it—do we get angry? Do we, at times, choose the living death of anger over the new life of mercy and forgiveness? Do we get angry when God pours out grace on others?

Is my memory conveniently short? When I see someone else getting a second chance, am I inclined to forget all about the undeserved second and third and fourth chances God has given *me*?

Because there are no limits to God's grace and the length of God's reach. Deep down in our hearts, we know this. What we're not always so sure about is whether we *want* there to be limits. If we do, can we truly be a church of open hearts, open minds, and open doors? Can we faithfully worship and serve this One who is love?

One of our best-known gospel texts proclaims that *God so loved the world*. It doesn't say that God loves just the church. It

doesn't say that God loves just the United States of America. John three sixteen says that *God so loved the world*.

God so loved the world that God sent God's only Son. Who prays for enemies and teaches us to follow him by doing the same. Who keeps reaching out to sinners everywhere until angry people nail him to a cross.

Jonah is still angry with God when we come to the final scene. Jonah has left the city and gone off by himself. But, beloved, God has not abandoned Jonah. God is still in loving relationship with Jonah. God is still communicating with Jonah.

God puts a question to Jonah—and puts that same question to all of us Jonahs in the church. For the story of Jonah isn't over. It continues with you and me. God's question is this: *Should I not care about Nineveh? Should I not reach out to all the Ninevehs of this world?*

How will *you* answer God's question today?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.