

Jonah

or ...

Many of us are familiar with the story of “Jonah and the Whale” – either from our childhood or just from society in general. We’ll look at the familiar story line, but we’ll also look closely at the kind of guy Jonah was. Jonah wasn’t exactly an easy-going guy. In fact, he had a “curmudgeon” side to him. He was a little cranky when things didn’t go his way. So, I think we could subtitle this book as ...

Grumpy Old Man

The Prequel



Yes, Jonah was the original “Grumpy Old Man.” Some of you may recognize Walter Matthau’s character Max Goldman from the “Grumpy Old Men” and “Grumpier Old Men” movies. I’m using Max as a symbol of Jonah, because Jonah was a lot like Max – gruff, grumpy, and cranky.

Now the word of the Lord came to
Jonah ...

Jonah ... go to Nineveh

The people there are doing terrible things

And **you** need to tell them they are wrong!

The story begins like an Ernest Hemingway short story – it drops you right into the middle of the action with minimal character development! Who is this Jonah anyway? A prophet? A businessman? A walleye fishin' guy from Minnesota? If we only look at this story, we'd never know; but, Jonah, son of Amittai, is mentioned in 2 Kings Chapter 14 as a Galilean prophet who predicted a national expansion for Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE). This was a time when Assyria was a rising power in the Middle East and, in 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel would fall to the Assyrians and begin the first stage of the exile (the second stage happened in 587 BCE when Judah, the southern kingdom, fell to the Babylonians).

So, this Galilean prophet is told by God, "Go to Nineveh – that great city where bad stuff is going down and the people are doing terrible things. Jonah, you're the man, you get to tell them that they are sinning and I am angry with them!"

And Jonah replied ...

“Nineveh? Is he kidding? The muskie are running in Tarshish ... I’m outta here!”



OK ... he probably didn't exactly say that!

Or that ... but he was probably thinking something like that! The bottom line was that there was no way he was going to Nineveh, not now, not ever. Which, being a parent, looks like a case of “willful disobedience” to me! What kind of a prophet disobeys God? Compare Jonah’s response to Isaiah’s when he said, “Here I am send me.” Either Jonah had a major problem with God, or the people of Nineveh. Which was it?

What's up with Nineveh?

- Where is it? In modern Iraq – across the Tigris River from Mosul



- Capital of Assyrian Empire
- Reputation for great brutality and violence

Map courtesy of Nineveh.com

Nineveh wasn't exactly the kind of place you wanted to go and tell the folks they are making God mad! It is the capital of the ancient Assyrian empire and it has a reputation for being a really rough town. Imagine Max being told to go into the roughest part of New York City and taking on a group of drug dealers to tell them to stop doing what they are doing because it angers God. What do you think their reaction would be? Well, that's about the kind of reaction that Jonah was looking forward to in Nineveh.

The other thing that was troubling about Nineveh is that the Assyrians were not God's "chosen people." Why on earth would the God of Israel want to communicate with these heathen?

So, rather than do what God asked, Jonah figures it's all a big misunderstanding and God won't mind if he heads off to ...

Tarshish

- Traditionally thought to be a coastal town in Spain
 - Tartessus was a Phoenician settlement in Spain
- Some theories put Tarshish on the Gulf of Aqaba

There are many theories on where “Tarshish” is. There are references to the ships of Tarshish in Isaiah. The Phoenicians founded a settlement that is in modern day Spain called “Tartessus” which could be the biblical Tarshish. Other theories put it somewhere on the Gulf of Aqaba which is the northeastern tributary of the Red Sea. The fact is, we just don’t know exactly where Tarshish is – but we know it is NOT Nineveh.

And God sent a great storm...

The passengers tried to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard ...



And they cried to their gods to save them ...

And then they cast lots to find out who caused this disaster ...



And the lot fell on ...



Jonah!



“This is all my fault! Throw me into the sea and you’ll be saved!”

Well, at least Jonah admits this mess is his fault. He knows they are all doomed if he doesn’t do something. So he is thrown into the sea.

And God caused a great fish to rise up and swallow Jonah ...

OK ... maybe it wasn't a tuna, but it was a great fish (prepared by God nonetheless!). Jonah spends 3 days in the fish's belly and prays a desperate prayer to God. There are truly no atheists in foxholes ... or in fish bellies!

And after 3 days in the fish ...



God hears Jonah's cry and the fish barfs up Jonah onto dry land (OK ... the Bible uses the word "vomit", but that's not much better!).

Now the word of the Lord came to
Jonah ... again ...

Jonah ... go to Nineveh

and tell them what I told you to tell them!

And Jonah replied ...

“Hey! I thought I qualified for non-prophet status!”

“Oh all right!”



OK ... he probably didn't exactly say that!

But he did say that ...

So Jonah went into Nineveh ...

“Nineveh will be
destroyed in 40 days!”

“Thank you ... and good
night!”



And ... the Assyrians listened to him and repented of their ways. Even the king put on sackcloth and ashes and ordered a fast of repentance. But why? By all appearances, the Assyrians should have let Jonah have it! Why did they listen to him?

One theory is that the Assyrians worshiped a deity named “Dagon.” Dagon is mentioned in the Bible 1 Samuel. Archaeological evidence from the area suggests that Dagon was depicted as half man and half ...

Fish!

Now follow the logic:

You worship a fish god

Yahweh is a different god that does not need idols

Yahweh's prophet gets swallowed up by a fish (god?)

But ... Yahweh saves his prophet from the fish to deliver an important message of destruction

Final Score: Yahweh 1 / Dagon 0

This Yahweh god is no ordinary god you're dealing with. He already whooped on your fish god and made him look really bad. And, if he can rescue a prophet of his from certain death and is now promising to rain down destruction on you, you had better listen!

And God decides to spare them!

Good news ... right???

Not if you're a Grumpy Old Man!

So Nineveh listens to Jonah and repents. In response to Nineveh's repentance, God changes his mind and decides to spare the people of Nineveh from annihilation. That's all good news, right? Well ... not according to Jonah!

It displeased Jonah greatly...



“Just kill me
now! I’d rather
die than live!”

Jonah couldn't believe it! God should have wiped those awful people off the face of the Earth, but He didn't. What kind of God was this? It sure cheesed Jonah off!

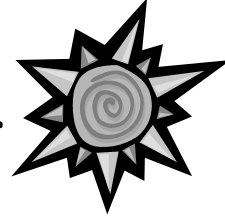
And God said ...

“How’s that
anger working
for you, Jonah?”

OK ... he didn’t exactly say that, but he did ask Jonah if he was right to be angry. But, Jonah went to sit down east of town and sulk – and he hoped that God would eventually see things his way and wipe Nineveh out!

So, God decided to teach Jonah a little lesson about His priorities.

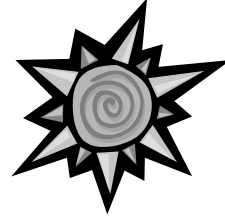
God made a vine sprout ...



It shaded Jonah
from the blazing
sun

So, as Jonah sulked, God made a vine grow up to shade him from the hot sun.
That made Jonah happy.

Then God sent a worm ...



And the sun blazed down on
Jonah's head



But ... He sent the worm too! And now Jonah had to live with the blazing sun beating down on his head. This only added to his grumpy attitude.

And Jonah said ...



“Just kill me
now! I’d rather
die than live!”

And God said ...

“Is it right for you to be
angry about that vine?”

And Jonah said ...

**“YES!! So just
kill me ok??!!”**



Wow! What a crank! You'd think 3 days in the fish would have softened him up a bit. But no, Jonah's got his attitude back.

And God said ...

“So, you care about a vine that you didn’t plant or care for, that only lives a short time, eh? Shouldn’t I have concern for all those people in Nineveh?”

The End. That’s it. God just leaves us with his question to Jonah. Just like a Hemingway short story, we’re left to wonder what happened next! But, there are some points to this little book.

So ... what's the point?

- Jonah was a regular guy – a prophet, but not a “holy Joe”
- Jonah’s rebelliousness did not disqualify him in God’s eyes
- God works through regular people to accomplish His plan

What’s the point? Well, first it’s that Jonah was a regular guy. We often have images of prophets being especially holy, pious, spiritual people. Jonah wasn’t quite like that, was he? He was cranky, rebellious, and even nationalistic to the point of not believing that God would take an interest in foreigners.

Jonah’s rebelliousness didn’t break his relationship with God. Even though he thought he could run away, God had other ideas. God doesn’t quit on us, even when we sometimes want to quit on Him.

This is probably the most hopeful, but perhaps the most intimidating thing – God works through people like you and me. That can be scary, but remember that God does not call the qualified, He qualifies the called.

The End

