

Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah.

The story begins when the word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying: *Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer.*” But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from GOD. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from GOD as he could get. (Jonah 1:1-3, The Message)

What a way to start a story! The word of the Lord comes to Jonah, and he takes a slow boat to Tarshish which was on the farthest side of Spain, the very edge of the known world, to get away from the presence of God!

But it didn't work, as the story continues: *But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.* (Jonah 1:4, NRSV)

Jonah was down below deck, sleeping (just how you can sleep when you're running away from God, I don't know); maybe so sure of himself that he believed that by the time he returned from his runaway to Tarshish, God would have forgotten about Nineveh.

Jonah did not approve of the Ninevites; he did not like the Ninevites; Jonah wanted to have nothing to do with the Ninevites.

It was one of my Old Testament professors who said that Jonah “had a supreme confidence in the power of his own preaching, and he was afraid that if he preached repentance to the Ninevites, they would repent, and God would have mercy on them, and the city would be saved from its deserved destruction.”

Jonah wanted Nineveh demolished, devastated, done in and away with.

Did I say that Jonah did not like the Ninevites?

The ship's captain woke Jonah up and demanded that Jonah pray to his God because the crew all knew Jonah was running away from his God because Jonah had told them.

And to make sure that they had all the religious bases covered, the sailors drew straws to see who was to blame for their bad luck.

Jonah got the short straw!

Jonah said, “Throw me in the sea and the storm will stop.” The men said, “No”, but the storm got worse.

So they threw Jonah overboard, and the storm ceased, and this is where the story becomes a fish story.

I know that this is the only part of the story that most people know. And great arguments have been waged on the possibility or impossibility of a man spending three days and three nights in the belly of a whale.

I remember reading how some preacher had gone to the trouble of measuring the inner dimensions of a whale to prove that Jonah could have sat up or stretched out and even moved about a bit.

The story says that Jonah lived in that whale and also says that Jonah prayed, as I imagine anybody would who found themselves in those circumstances.

But then the whale spit Jonah out and the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. The second time around Jonah did not argue.

I like the way Eugene Peterson tells it in *The Message: This time Jonah started off straight for Nineveh, obeying GOD's orders to the letter.*

Nineveh was a big city, very big; it took three days to walk across it. (Jonah 3:3, The Message).

One day into the city, Jonah preached his message of repentance, and let me say, if you like my short sermons, you would love Jonah!

His sermon was only four words in Hebrew, seven in The Message: *“In forty days Nineveh will be smashed.”* (Jonah 3:4, The Message)

And things turned out just as he had feared they would: *The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide fast and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it: rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers.* (Jonah 3:3-5, The Message)

When word got to the king, he repented and issued a royal proclamation: *Everyone must turn around, turn back from an evil life and the violent ways that stain their hands. Who knows? Maybe God will turn around and change his mind about us, quit being angry with us and let us live!* (Jonah 3:9, The Message)

It was about as successful a preaching mission any traveling evangelist could hope for.

God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they abandoned their wicked ways; and God repented, changed the divine mind, and let them live.

If the story ended here, it would be a delightful story of mission accomplished.

But it doesn't end here.

For the story really is not about Nineveh, it is about Jonah.

Jonah didn't like what God did, and he became angry.

Listen to him: *He prayed to the LORD and said, ‘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 God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’* (Jonah 4:1-2, NRSV)

Let me be clear at this point. The story of Jonah is just that, a story, a parable.

As one scholar describes the story of Jonah, “It is a parable of human pretense and prejudice... a comedy of punctured pride and narrow vision.”

This story that is a major piece in the Minor Prophets was written in a time of growing intolerance on the part of the Hebrews toward other races and peoples.

It was written as a satire on that intolerance, a mixture of human self-righteousness set over against the overwhelming grace of God.

And I find it hard to understand why so much time and energy is spent surrounding this parable with solemn hogwash about the biology of a whale.

Jonah came face to face with God and learned that what he had professed to know all along about God, *gracious, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing*, was true.

He learned God meant it.

He learned that the world was bigger than he thought it was. He had thought it was no bigger than his own people, Israel; no larger than his social, racial, religious world.

Does God not understand as we understand? Does God not see things the way we see things? Is God not like us?

This is a common enough attitude. We've all made choices about who are the elect and non-elect, who's in and who's out.

Jonah found out that claiming his narrow concerns and his little loves with the great big heart of God was presumptuous.

He found that an identification of his dislikes and his prejudices with the attitudes of God was a self-serving arrogance.

Now don't get me wrong, Jonah was a good man. There was probably not a vicious bone in his body.

He was one of those people one commentator labeled as the ‘gentle people of prejudice’ that we always have with us.

Courteous, kindly, well-meaning gentle people. They know what is best and who is best, and they know exactly where God stands on all things.

Jonah found out that the world was far bigger than he thought, but not big enough to escape from God, not even in Tarshish,

The last we see of Jonah he is sitting under that gourd vine, that castor-oil plant, sulking, sulking.

The last words we hear from him are *“I should be better dead than alive,”* and God asking, *“Are you so angry?” “Yes, mortally angry.”*
(Jonah 4:3, The Message)

That is what he said, he’d be better off dead.

The last we hear from God are these words: *“You are sorry for the gourd, though you did not have the trouble of growing it, a plant which came up in a night and withered in a night. And should not I be sorry for the great city of Nineveh, with its hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number?”*

And then, no answer from Jonah.

What happened to him? Maybe just stayed there sulking. Maybe he poisoned himself on hate. I don’t know.

Maybe the story ends the way it does because it is a tale not over. It is still being acted out. Maybe it’s not once upon a time, but now upon our time.

Each of us is Jonah to some extent, of course.

Do you remember the climactic scene in the John Grisham movie, “A Time to Kill”?

A young African-American girl was brutally assaulted by two white men, and Matthew McConaughey plays the lawyer defending the little girl’s father who had ambushed and murdered them.

McConaughey stands before the all-white jury, asks them to close their eyes, and then takes them step-by-brutal step through the assault of this innocent little girl.

And he comes to the end, pauses, and then he says, “Imagine if she was white.”

There is that Jonah moment when you open your eyes to the fact God loves a world bigger than you.

The church was founded on faith in the one whose command was to love one another and who gave the word, “Go into all the world.”

But too many live a diminished faith and our world shrinks and our God becomes strictly local.

As someone said, “We spend our time tidying up the front yard because we do not even want to go around the block.”

You and I don’t have to figure it all out, fix everything, or do life perfectly by ourselves.

All we have to do is participate in God’s love for the world.

So why don’t we, you and I, think about how we can be a part of God’s bigger and better picture?

Maybe what we need to do is like Jonah take, if you will, a three-day fishing trip, that is, a serious spiritual reflection on the mystery and magnificence of God and just how much God has entrusted to us to deliver his word.

Let us be worthy of that trust. Let us be a people who are unafraid to live the adventure of faith that will bring even more joy and justice to the world.

I close this series on three of the minor prophets by using the words of Micah, another of the Minor Prophets to help you remember their major message: Amos: do justice, Hosea, love kindness, and Jonah, walk humbly with your God.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.