



## “Childhood Bible Stories: Jonah”

Jonah 4

July 26, 2020

“So Jonah went step, step, step, step up the road to do what God told him.”

This last line from the children’s rendition of Jonah chapters 1-2 perfectly illustrates the point of our Childhood Bible Stories series. The story of Jonah, as this version tells it, is a story about a man and a fish. We are told that Jonah is running away, but we don’t really know why. The story focuses on the colorful details: the drama and danger of a storm at sea, the peril of being tossed overboard, a fantastical 3-day stay in the belly of a fish. And that’s it. Jonah gets back on dry land and goes step, step on his way.

So let’s ignore the rest of the story and let’s limit ourselves to that childhood version for just a moment. It’s an exciting story. It stimulates our imaginations, it fills us with wonder and awe. And certainly, there is good news to be found in this shortened and simplified version of the narrative. We are reminded that even when we run away, God stays with us; that God provides for us, even when we get ourselves into trouble; that when we are alone and afraid, we can pray, and that God hears our prayers, even from the belly of an enormous fish. All of this is good news, and every bit of even this abbreviated account is worth teaching our children.

But this story is so much more, and we have to ask: *What do we miss when we limit ourselves to the childhood version? Is it possible that there is more good news to be found here?*

One thing we miss in the abbreviated childhood version is God’s call to Jonah. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” The story doesn’t give any further description beyond this or even tell us what

Jonah is supposed to say. We are left simply knowing that bad things are happening in Nineveh, and that Jonah is to go speak against it.

We know what happens next: Jonah runs.

How do we explain this? Is it that he was afraid or lacking in faith?

Fear would make a lot of sense. Nineveh wasn’t just a friendly neighboring city that needed a good rebuke. Nineveh was the capital city of the enemy empire, Assyria. In fact, Assyria was responsible for destroying the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel in 722 BCE. Jonah has been called by God to go and prophesy to the enemy. It’s not surprising that he wouldn’t want to do that.

But fear doesn’t tell the whole story. And I also don’t believe it can be explained as a lack of faith; on the contrary, we might say that Jonah has a great deal of faith. It’s not included in the children’s book version of the story, but in the NRSV translation, as a group of sailors question Jonah while the storm rages on around them, Jonah tells the sailors, “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9). He goes on to pray to God from the belly of the fish, and he has a deep understanding of the character of God as “gracious...and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (4:2).

And this is where we begin to approach the heart of the matter. Jonah isn’t suffering from a lack of faith - it is *because* of his faith that he runs away from God’s call. It is *because* Jonah believes that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that he runs. *This* is why he eventually gives such a half-hearted attempt at fulfilling his mission, going only a third of the way into the city

and muttering, “forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown,” a pitiably short sermon of just five words in Hebrew. This is why he gets so angry when his mission is wildly, unbelievably successful and the Ninevites repent.

Jonah runs, he gives minimal effort, he gets angry because it is in God’s very nature to show mercy. He has done everything he can to stand in the way of God being who God is. He has failed, and he is mad about it.

It sounds like a marital argument that I’m sure *none* of us have ever witnessed or experienced: *I KNEW you would do this!* And then Jonah repeats a refrain that we hear time and time again throughout scripture, but from Jonah, it’s not an acclamation of praise and worship but an accusation: “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.”

If we’re thinking about things that we miss in the childhood version of the story, not only do we miss Jonah’s call - we miss the aftermath. We miss his anger. We miss that fact that, when it comes down to it, Jonah is a pretty miserable person, bitter and vengeful. He finds the idea of God’s mercy so repulsive that he would rather die than live in a world where God shows mercy to the Ninevites.

It’s not a very flattering portrayal of Jonah, but I believe that we need his anger, we need his full humanity on display to really understand the significance of these events. Because God’s mercy is not only for the wicked Ninevites. It is also for a miserable man named Jonah, whom God rescues from the belly of the fish, and whom God patiently journeys alongside. It is for you, and for me, for all of us. Not because we deserve it, but because it is God’s nature to be merciful.

This story, taken altogether, is a mix of comical, shocking, and baffling, but this much we can say: when we exclusively focus on Jonah’s sojourn in the fish, we miss *a lot*.

The book of Jonah is not a story about a fish. It’s a story about mercy.

In his book *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes about his work as a lawyer defending the poor and the wrongly condemned. Stevenson’s stories and experiences portrayed in the book and also the movie *Just Mercy* lead us to examine more closely our understanding of justice and mercy, and what it means to be fully human.

Stevenson tells a story about being 10 years old at church. A friend had brought a visiting relative to the service, a boy who was quiet and shy. The newcomer didn’t say anything as the other boys chatted away, and finally 10-year-old Bryan Stevenson asked him where he was from. The boy tried to respond but he stuttered horribly. He had a severe speech impediment and struggled to say the name of the town where he lived. Young Bryan thought he must have been joking or playing around, and so he laughed. He didn’t stop laughing, and before long he saw his mother looking at him with an expression he’d never seen before, a mix of horror, anger, and shame. She called him over and admonished him. “Don’t you ever laugh at someone because they can’t get their words out right,” she said.

Bryan apologized to his mother. He hadn’t meant any harm. But his mother wasn’t satisfied, and she demanded that he go tell the boy sorry. And give him a hug. “And then I want you to tell him that you love him,” she said.

Ten-year-old Bryan was mortified, but he would not make the mistake of disobeying his mother.

And so he tells the boy he’s sorry and gives him an awkward hug. And with his mother and all his friends watching, he leans over and says, “uh...also...I love you.”

Here’s how Stevenson describes that moment in the book:

I tried to say it as insincerely as I could get away with and half-smiled as I spoke. I was still hugging the boy, so he couldn’t see the disingenuous

look on my youthful face. It made me feel less weird to smile like it was a joke. But then the boy hugged me tighter and whispered in my ear. He spoke flawlessly, without a stutter and without hesitation. “I love you, too.” There was such tenderness and earnestness in his voice, and just like that, I thought I would start crying.

This is more than just a touching story. It teaches us something about the nature of repentance and its relationship to mercy. In the book of Jonah, the Ninevites hear Jonah’s message about the coming destruction of Nineveh, and they take repentance to the extreme. Every person repents, all the way up to the king. The animals repent. “They proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth” (3:5). The repentance is immediate, and it is all-encompassing.

Rather than debate the historical accuracy of these events, we may be better served by asking why the story was told in this way. It wasn’t told this way to make the Ninevites look good. *Haven’t you heard of those wicked Ninevites? They are so good at repenting!* No. It has nothing to do with the merit of the Ninevites and everything to do with Jonah’s response.

Here’s what I mean by this: If only some of the Ninevites had repented, if even a lone chicken had continued on in its wickedness, Jonah may have felt justified in wanting to withhold God’s mercy. It may have even muddied the waters for us, as readers and hearers of the story, leading us to wonder if Jonah did have a point, after all. But because the story is told such that they ALL, to a person and to an animal, repent, the only finger we can point in this story is at Jonah. His offense at God’s mercy, his hardness of heart, his lack of mercy is circled, highlighted, underlined for all to see.

As readers and hearers of this story, we can both acknowledge the function of the Ninevites’ exaggerated, hyperbolic repentance, *and* we can acknowledge that very rarely is this how repentance happens in our own lives. Real repentance is much more messy. It is often not linear. Christians know this better than anyone; we come together in worship

each week and each and every time, we confess our sins together and ask for God’s forgiveness and mercy. Rather than an immediate reality, the work of repentance is often more like Jonah’s reaction to his call and his resulting push and pull with God: *I don’t want to go! Okay I’ll go. I’ll do what you said but in the most half-hearted way possible. Now I’m going to pout about it. Now I’m thankful. Now I’m angry. And on and on.*

If I’m honest, that sounds a little bit like me. I wonder if it sounds a little bit like you.

To be clear, we should strive for genuine repentance. But the truth is that we are not always quick to admit our wrongdoings. Even when we do, we may have a mix of motives and goals consciously and subconsciously at work. Part of the poignancy of Bryan Stevenson’s story about himself as a 10-year-old is that we have all been in his shoes. Sometimes we apologize because we are elbowed into it by someone we love and respect. Sometimes we say that we’re sorry because it’s the “right thing to do,” or to save face.

One thing I want to be careful to not endorse is what has become known as the non-apology, some version of *I’m sorry that you feel that I have something to be sorry for*. And it’s also true that an apology is not the same as true repentance, which entails a change in behavior.

But by the grace of God, our efforts are not ours alone. Part of the mystery and the wonder of God’s mercy is that even in our misguided and imperfect efforts, God’s mercy can intervene and transform.

Sometimes this looks like an undeserved, tender and earnest “I love you” from the mouth of a little boy.

Stevenson writes about the healing nature of mercy. It’s at a point in the book when he has just witnessed the execution of Jimmy Dill, a man with an intellectual disability who was unjustly condemned to death. Stevenson had tried to advocate for him, but it was too late. He drives home from the execution feeling utterly and completely broken, caught in a web of hurt and brokenness. But he hears God’s words

from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians on the radio: "my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness."

Stevenson writes:

I turned off the radio station, and as I slowly made my way home I understood that even as we are caught in a web of hurt and brokenness, we're also in a web of healing and mercy. I thought of the little boy who hugged me outside of church, creating reconciliation and love. I didn't deserve reconciliation or love in that moment, but that's not how mercy works. The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It's when mercy is the least expected that it's the most potent--strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal.

We are reminded that mercy does not exist for its own sake. It is not an end, but rather a beginning. Real mercy leads to transformation and to healing. It changes us. According to Stevenson, "when you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things that you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us".

So where does this leave our friend Jonah? In the story, we leave him angry, disappointed, and unsurprisingly, arguing with God. It is not what the childhood version of the story would have led us to expect. But it is a deeper, richer portrayal of what it means to be human, of the magnitude of God's mercy, and of the journey that it entails.

We may not know what happens next, but here's what we do know: Like Jonah, we know the character of God. We know "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." We know the One who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

And because we know this God, I believe that we

can have hope for Jonah. And we can have hope for us, too. Amen.