

Jonah 1:1-2: "One day the Lord spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. He said, 'Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware of how wicked its people are.'"

*This story is not history, nor should it be treated as such. There was once a minor prophet named Jonah, who was the son of Amittai. He is briefly mentioned in the Book of Kings (2 Kings 14:25). The historical Jonah is thought to have lived around 750 BCE. The story of Jonah in scripture is thought to have been written during the post-exilic period, after the Jews came back from Babylon, about 450 BCE.*

The story of Jonah is for any of us who have thought that the Bible only talks about holy, faithful, feet-not-touching the ground, "religious" people. If you have ever thought that, this story ought to give you a more touchable picture of the Bible!

Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh. He considered them to be rotten, sinful people. They were Assyrians; Nineveh was the capital of the superpower that had ravaged the northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE. Besides that, Nineveh was the worship center of Astarte, a fertility god. Nineveh was a hated, despised, despotic Near Eastern power that had caused much suffering in Israel. (*Perhaps like ISIS or Al-Qaeda today?*) So when God spoke to Jonah and asked him to go to the people of Nineveh and warn them that God was upset with their wickedness, Jonah took off in the opposite direction. Totally going against what God had asked, Jonah caught a boat for Spain. But Jonah could not outrun or hide from God.

A huge, terrifying storm threatened to destroy the ship, and those on board started asking, "Why is this happening? Is some god upset with someone on board?" They prayed to their various gods, and finally the ship's captain went down to Jonah, who was sound asleep below deck, and asked HIM to get up and pray to his god. The fury of the storm continued, until finally the sailors drew lots to see who was to blame for their peril. The lot fell to Jonah. At this, Jonah came clean, and told them that the storm was his fault and that they should throw him overboard in order to save the ship. The sailors did not want to do this, but finally, praying to Jonah's God for forgiveness, they did throw Jonah overboard.

But God wasn't finished with Jonah yet. A big fish came and swallowed Jonah. Jonah agonized there in the belly of that fish for three days, praying all of chapter Two to God... Finally, the fish vomited Jonah up on the shore and God again told Jonah to go to Nineveh.

This time, Jonah didn't run away. He went to Nineveh, and walked for three days through the spread-out city, declaring: "In forty days you will be history – Nineveh will be destroyed! God is mad!"

But a strange thing happened: the people of Nineveh heard and believed God's message. They decided that everybody should observe a period of fasting, and all the people, ALL of them, showed their repentance. The king of Nineveh ordered this because he had hope: "Perhaps God will change his mind; perhaps he will stop being angry and we will not die!"

Well, that's just what happened! The mercy the Ninevites hoped for did indeed materialize. To Jonah's dismay, God didn't destroy them after all. God changed God's mind when the people changed their ways. The Bible repeatedly shows that God is willing to change God's mind when we change our actions.

Jonah was devastated, and totally furious with God. 'I told you, God, before I left home, that you'd end up doing this! That's why I ran away! I knew that you are a loving, merciful, patient, kind God, always ready to change your mind and not punish... So just let me die! I'm better off dead than alive!' (4:2-3)

God answered Jonah, "What right do you have to be angry?" Jonah just went out east of the city and sulked. He was sort of like the precursor of the older brother in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. Jonah made himself a shelter, and sat there waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. Then God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable. Jonah was quite pleased with the plant. But at dawn the next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, causing it to die. After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind, and Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. Jonah complained to God, "I am better off dead than alive."

God challenged Jonah, "What right do you have to be angry about the bush?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry - angry enough to die!" And God said to him, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do a thing for it and you didn't make it grow - yet you're upset about it! How much *more*, then, should I be allowed to have pity on Nineveh, that confused city with more than 120,000 persons?"

God's mercy was bigger than Jonah wanted it to be. He hated those bad people who lived down the road in Nineveh... And his worst fears had come to pass: "I KNEW you wouldn't destroy them!!"

Perhaps we can identify with Jonah a bit. Why doesn't God just get rid of the "bad guys" of the world? Why does God let the ones who massacre villages and behead journalists continue to thrive? Why hasn't God brought home those 300 girl students kidnapped last May by Boko Haram in Nigeria? Why does God let those who cheat and hurt others and take away jobs from folks who need them continue to get rich and never get "justice"?

How often we find ourselves in the same sort of boat as Jonah, trying to gain comfort from the thought that someday, those folks we don't like (or understand) or scare us WILL be held accountable. That big SUV that bullies you, pushing you to go faster than you are comfortable going, making you feel tight and angry, he'll get his! The highly-paid executives in companies that keep receiving exorbitant pay raises while their low-paid workers can't even make \$10/hour, won't God hold them accountable? Our politicians that too often seem more concerned with self-preservation than with really helping the ordinary people of our nation. The car companies who neglected to admit to defects, for years. These angers seem justifiable... So did Jonah's.

God's mercy was bigger than Jonah wanted it to be... We may want to say, "God, I want to

serve you, but please, let me help meek folks and those who will really appreciate my help. Don't ask me to reach out to scary, mean people!" God's ways, though, are not our ways, and if we try to pretend that they are, we are trying to force God into our own little palatable boxes!

The people of Nineveh heard the message of God's judgment and dared to hope for God's forgiveness if they turned from their ways. For this they were blessed, even as Jonah was outraged by the very same showing of mercy.

Be sure to notice that Jonah didn't really do anything great. He was not a 'hero' type. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire and imitate, we should see that Jonah was very like us. Even when Jonah got it right, finally going to Nineveh, he did it wrong, with a bad attitude and getting angry with God. But the whole time, God was right there working with and through Jonah. He didn't sweep Jonah under the carpet, but remained faithful, accomplishing His purpose through Jonah in spite of Jonah's resistance and ineptitude.

The message in the Book of Jonah is that God will not be constricted by the tight and narrow boundaries we might try to cement into place. God cares for every person. If we hear the call to follow Jesus, we are called to be part of something larger than our prejudices, our comfort zones, even our idea of what a "church" should be. God is the one who decides the boundaries and the wideness of God's mercy.

There is much in life, in our society, that Jonah would not like today. Surely there is also much for which God would have us repent today in our lives. Repent, make some new choices, see life differently, and experience in new ways the mercy and love of the one God.

May we hear this message and let it speak to and through our living, to and through our choices, and to and through our actions. We may need to let go of our hatreds and resentments and even our fears of others. Know that we are all created by God, and that God loves us *all*, even those we do not understand. God's mercy and God's ways are not ours. We are called to be obedient, and obedience to the way of Jesus includes something totally foreign to Jonah: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Luke 6:27) May we hear the message and promise of God's boundless love and walk forward in our lives, trusting in the promise that, no matter what, God is with us; we are not alone. (From Affirmation of Faith # 883 in hymnal, used as today's Call to Worship) Thanks be to God! Amen.