

## Jonah as Comedy or Prophet Behaving Badly

*Jonah 3:1-5, 10*

Read the story of Jonah any way you like, but it still challenges us. We are smart Christians. We have enough sense to know that we shouldn't identify with Jonah. This may be why we would rather argue about the big fish in the story than the big truth. When our focus in the story of Jonah shifts to whether or not it is literally true, we are as lost as Jonah.

Jonah fits what rhetorical scholarship calls the "**comic frame.**"<sup>iii</sup> The character of Jonah is a political caricature, an amalgamation of all that is snobbish and hateful in humanity. In a world of pain, anger, and violence we need the liberation of laughter. In Eugene O'Neil's play *Lazarus Laughs*, Lazarus comes forth from the grave laughing out loud.

The comic frame subverts the status quo, rocks the boat, challenges the system in which we have become so comfortable. It exposes conventional wisdom and dismantles majority opinions. The story of Jonah challenges the sense of privilege that existed in Israel. The **comic frame** doesn't mean superficial and frivolous. It is not "funny ha ha" but "funny aha aha." In 1931, President Hoover said, "What this country needs is a good big laugh. There seems to be a condition of hysteria. If someone could get off a good joke every ten days, I think our troubles would be over." I'm not talking about jokes; I'm talking about comedy as profound truth.

Kierkegaard called humor *the incognito of true religiosity* and said "the wiser a human being becomes, the more he or she will discover the comical." Bakhtin: "Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter."

There are times when only the comedian can force a people to see hard truth. The story of Jonah works when the truth hits us and we start crying, "O my Lord! It's us. It's us O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It's us O Lord hating on foreigners, collecting enemies like they were coins for our collection." Jonah is an outrageous, overdrawn caricature. He should be a star on Comedy Central.

Our Jonah is no hero; he is the embodiment of all the prejudice of his nation. If the suffering servant of Second Isaiah represents all that is good and right about Israel, Jonah represents all that is cold and hateful, all that can go wrong with religion. The writer of Jonah points out the contradictions in believing that God loves only Israel and not the other nations of the world.

The writer of the story of Jonah is the comedian; Jonah is the deadly serious one suffering for a lack of humor. Oppressive systems and ideologies all suffer from a lack of humor since they are characterized by pretentiousness, arrogance, fanaticism, intolerance, and repression.<sup>[iii]</sup>

**Now, let's find the comedy in the drama of Jonah. What does God say?** God says, GO TO NINEVEH but Jonah books a cruise ship to Tarshish. Guess what? Big storm pops up in the sea like an unexpected hurricane. The captain and crew believe God caused the storm. Jonah is sure of it but goes to sleep. Every man starts babbling to his own god. The captain wakes up Jonah and orders him to start praying. Finally, they cast lots and dump the preacher over board. On the face of it, when we are confronted with what we can't explain or handle or face, we start babbling about God's mysterious ways. Rowan Williams says this is the kind of bad religion we have to grow out of. Bad religion is about not trusting God, trying to avoid God or even outwitting him; about approaching God as a presence that is at best critical or hostile, always to be outmaneuvered where possible. Scene one is a brew of bad religion. Scene 2 opens with the picture you see on the cover of our order of worship. A giant fish swallows Jonah. I am interpreting the three days and three nights in the belly of the fish as one giant theological struggle of a prophet with the nature of his God. The study of theology needs to spend some time in the belly of the great big fish. An unexamined theology is not worth believing. Theology that doesn't pass through the belly of the fish is as worthless as the cross without the resurrection. It turns out that even the sea monster couldn't tolerate the intolerant Jonah and spits him out on dry land. Jonah, after three days as good as dead, emerges still angry and looking and smelling like Davy Jones in the Pirates of the Caribbean. It makes you feel sorry for the fish.

Scene three opens with Jonah walking into Nineveh to preach his sermon. We are told that it takes three days to walk across the great city and Jonah only walks for one day and never reaches the king's palace. How did the king hear? Social networking. He drops his one line sermon like a UPS delivery person during the Christmas rush. After all, the sermon is so short it qualifies as a tweet.

Of all things, the king preaches a sermon much superior to Jonah's, commands a fast, the wearing of sackcloth, a praying mightily to the Lord, and a turning from evil ways and **from the violence that is in their hearts**. And the people do all that the king commands.

And to the shock and dismay of Jonah, the entire city is converted. In spite of Jonah's bad preaching, God converts the entire city of Nineveh. The story has more twists and turns than an Olympic downhill slope. Jonah is the only successful prophet in the entire Old Testament. Noah had no converts. Elijah was hounded by Jezebel. Amos was chased out of town for preaching the truth. The greatest of them all was hung on a cross.

Scene four opens with Jonah displeased and angry. Jonah should have been rejoicing, dancing in the streets, and shouting glory. But instead he is pouting. His righteous indignation is so thick you couldn't stir it with a Williams Sonoma nuclear-powered blender.

Jonah was a one man band of NO! No to God's grace! No to God's mercy! No to God's acceptance of foreigners! No to humane treatment of enemies! No to God's patience! No to God's steadfast love! No to the inclusion of Nineveh in the kingdom of God! A one man band of criticism with horns blaring, drums beating, and all of it out of tune and sounding worse than a first round contestant on American Idol.

Jonah believed in revenge not reconciliation. He would have never understood Gandhi: An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind. Or Confucius: Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves. And Jesus would have made him crazy: Love your enemies.

In spite of the evidence against Jonah, he would easily be able to wiggle off the hook. Humans are gifted at "syndromes of denial and silence." Deniability is a staple of political survival. Jonah would deny he was xenophobic or racist or filled with hatred. Two days before the primary for Louisiana governor in 1956, you couldn't find anybody who was going to vote for Earl Long. Well, Earl won the election and the next day you couldn't find anyone who had voted for Uncle Earl. When accused we deny; when asked we are silent. Entire systems of domination and oppression have been upheld by denial and silence. "Mama said that if you don't say it out loud, it didn't really happen," says a Southern short story writer.

Jonah would fit right in the plot of any of our worst revenge movies. Mr. Calan, on NCIS Los Angeles says, "Kill them all." "My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, commander of the armies of the North, general of the Felix legions, loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next."

But Jonah's God refuses to be imprisoned by human ideology passed off as theology. In fact, God refuses to own our enemies. If Jonah is going to hate the people of Nineveh he really has fled from the presence of God. Whoever says, "I'm a Christian while hating a brother or sister is still in the darkness." God says, "I love Nineveh." "I forgive Nineveh." "I will not punish Nineveh." Isn't that just like God? Can we get it through our hearts that God loves Hanoi, Moscow, Kabul, Baghdad, Beijing, Paris, London, Berlin, all the cities of the world?

Since we believe that Scripture interprets Scripture, let me show you how Jesus handled the story of Jonah. He saw Jonah's three days and three nights as a metaphor for his descent into the heart of the earth. Then Jesus pushed Jonah's story to apply to his own people. You can read it in Matthew 12:39-42: "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup>For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup>The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!" <sup>42</sup>

Now look at Jonah sitting in a booth outside the city, waiting to see what would become of the city. Nothing is uglier than a pouting preacher. Jonah would rather his nation fall than accept the grace and mercy of God on those he hates.

It is only now that we learn that Jonah refused to go to Nineveh because, all along, he knew God's nature was to save. He knew his own Scripture: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." O yes, Jonah knew but he didn't want to know. When Jonah argues with God he uses a strange argument: "I knew as soon as you told me to go to Nineveh what would happen. You are gracious and merciful. I would rather die than see you give grace and mercy to the city of Nineveh." Jonah wanted to control God, tell God what to do, manipulate God.

Of all things, God doesn't ream out Jonah. He says, "Think about it Jonah. Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah almost shouts, "Yes, angry enough to die." God's response to Jonah drives home the message: You are concerned about the bush that I gave you, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. You care about the bush but you are angry at me for caring about Nineveh and its 120,000 people and also many animals?<sup>[iii]</sup>

You may not want to do this, but I'm going to ask you to consider whether or not the story of Jonah has any modern applications? You might not want to go there and if so, I will not push you.

While I will leave that to you, I will tell you this. I believe in the sign of Jonah: The gospel works. God is gracious and merciful. God is patient and forgiving. God is filled with steadfast love. The only sign God gives is the working of the gospel in a world still riddled with bad religion, bad blood, violence, and hatred. And that will be enough to keep me laughing along the way.

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<sup>ii</sup> A. Cheree Carlson. A rhetorical scholar argues that the comic frame creates a consciousness of a system as a system, revealing its inherent weaknesses, and preparing an aware populace to deal with them."

<sup>iii</sup> Johan Cilliers, "Clowning on the Pulpit? Contours of a Comic Vision on Preaching." See also Joseph M. Webb, "Send in the Clowns?' Preaching, Gospel and the Art of the Comedic."

<sup>iiii</sup> By the way the story of Jonah shows up again in the gospels. The struggle to love foreigners never leaves us. When the religious leaders came running to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you," Jesus pointed them back to Jonah. "No sign will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!" (Matthew 12:39-42)