

Epiphany Resources

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Ep3B – Jonah (2003)

Litany of Call

The Voice calling long ago.
The Voice calling today.

The Voice compelling Jonah to go.
The Voice compelling us to go.

The Voice calling to Jonah
compelling him to share the good news
of God's redemptive love.

The Voice calling to us
compelling us to share the good news
of God's redemptive love.

With those who would be enemies.
With those who would be enemies.

The people of Nineveh, beloved of God.
The people of Iraq, beloved of God.

The Voice calling long ago.
The Voice calling today.

Story/Sermon – “Jonah Faces Nineveh” (2003)

Here's the thing about prophets,
they're never welcome in their own land.
Which means that they might be perfectly believable to someone else.
This is Jonah's dilemma.

The work of a prophet is to speak to people
about things they would rather not hear
in order that they might be closer to God
and (if they are concerned) spared from the wrath of God
and/or the consequences of their actions.

Jonah is your average kind of prophet. He knows his job.
But this is not the assignment that he was waiting for.

"Go to Nineveh" says the voice from on high.
Nineveh? Nineveh is the enemy.
Nineveh is the city that we fight.

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Nineveh is they, them, those, the other.

"Go to Nineveh." For what?

A successful prophet journey would yield a 'happy ever after' for Nineveh.

No way.

Jonah may just be your average prophet

but if he goes to Nineveh

and given that outsiders are more hearable than insiders

they just might listen to him.

And if they listen to him

they will be- well - beloved of God.

Nineveh, beloved of God? No way.

Jonah does the only thing a self respecting prophet can do in just such a situation. He runs as far and as fast in the opposite direction as possible. Nineveh? No way. Tarshish, here I come.

Of course, as in all God-man stories, the God character holds the ace. In this case the God character finds and torments poor Jonah even as he hides with a boat full of strangers headed for Tarshish. As the boat rests in the waters of the sea, the breath of God blows mighty winds and the hand of God rains down. The boat is tossed in the sea and the inhabitants are fearful. Surely the gods are calling, and they are angry. Which of the passengers is to blame? After a bit tarot-type action, the fingers all point at Jonah. An average prophet perhaps, but an above-average risk to the boat. The angry god continues to rail until poor Jonah is tossed into the sea.

In the nick of time,

as poor Jonah struggled against the waves for each sustaining breath,
a giant fish appears (as if by magic) and scoops up dear Jonah.

Holds him fast in the belly of the fish.

And from this extraordinary and unexpected place of refuge, Jonah begins to sing.

Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God.

Yes, for you I would even go to Nineveh.

Blurp! With the mightiest indigestion ever recorded, the fish spit Jonah back onto dry land.

And now Jonah faces the road to Nineveh once again.

Commitment to God notwithstanding, there is nothing Jonah wants less than a redeemed Nineveh. Crushed and broken, yes. Redeemed and strong, no. And yet he finds the courage to put one foot in front of the other as he enters the land of the enemy.

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Now Nineveh is an exceedingly great city, some three days journey across. And dear Jonah, fulfilling no more than the fine print requires, tiptoes inside just a days worth. And in the smallest voice he can find whispers "FORTY DAYS TO CLEAN UP YOUR ACT AND THEN GOD WILL DESTROY YOU." And out he runs as quickly as he can.

Yet before the dust is off his sandals, the scurry of repentance resounds throughout Nineveh. To Jonah's tremendous dismay, the prophet's words were indeed hearable in this enemy land. The king, the people and even the animals! have donned sack cloth and ashes. They have cried out for salvation. They have turned from their wicked ways. God's wrath melts and the people of Nineveh enjoy a little love feast with God.

Meanwhile poor Jonah is devastated. His prophetic reputation utterly ruined as his own people watch the enemy nuzzling up to God. Jonah's one shining moment of prophetic utterance, a pathetic speech with divine deliverance, given not to those he loves but rather to those scorned. His self pity swallowing the remainder of his pride.

Oh that I could die right now, he moans.

That feisty God character makes one more play for Jonah's heart, causing a shade tree to tower over Jonah. Despite his lament, Jonah can't help but be moved by the compassion of God. Though just as he snuggles in for his turn at God's bosom, the God character plants a little worm in the tree so that the tree withers and dies as the sun reaches its scorching heights.

Oh, whoa is me, cries Jonah. How could you tempt and torment me so?, he beseeches the god character.

At this moment of vulnerability
far more depleted than even in the belly of the fish
Jonah hears the word of God
that strikes terror in mortals even now.

That which was and is and will be
greater than Jonah, you and I
that which causes the sun to rise and the seas to swell
shows no partiality
no preferential options
not now, not ever.

And this
is the great - if terrifying - good news
in the story of dear Jonah. Amen.