

The Sign of Jonah

sermon digest

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Jonah 1:1-2; Luke 11:29-32

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Time Magazine reported in May, 1957, the closing of a “smash hit” play in Manhattan after only three performances. The actors were amateurs, students of Union Theological Seminary. The play was *The Sign of Jonah* written by an East German pastor, Guenter Rutenborn, immediately following World War II. The one-act play was written for the church, but it rang bells of anguish in Germany so loudly that it continued for 1,000 performances on a West Berlin stage. The author struggled with the legacy of the Third Reich and the inhumanity exposed by the war and asked the question, who's to blame? Some say Hitler. Some say the German people. Some say God. So, Rutenborn's play puts God on trial. Most of the witnesses are victims. Blame is assessed and accusations leveled, but no one seems to be responsible; but, then, everyone is responsible. Finally the judge decides; blame God. God is found guilty. The sentence: Let him become a man, a wanderer on earth, homeless, hungry, a despised Jew. As the gavel falls and the judge leaves the bench, three archangels carry out the sentence. “I, Gabriel, shall go to a virgin by the name of Mary. She shall bear him—a Jew.” “I, Michael, shall go and order the heavenly hosts to let him walk on earth without any protection.” “I, Raphael, shall be present when he dies, and I shall stand at his grave.”

In Berlin, after the Holocaust and the War, the play was prophetic. Perhaps that is why Rutenborn chose *The Sign of Jonah* as a title. In the Gospels, “the sign of Jonah” is noted in Matthew and Luke with little concern for the identity of the Old Testament character. Matthew cites Jonah's three days in the belly of a sea monster as a symbol of the Son of Man's three days and nights in the tomb, but Luke identifies the sign of Jonah with his message of repentance. Both Gospels respond to the demand for a sign from heaven to prove that Jesus acted by the power of God rather than demons. In contrast with Matthew's Jewish focus, Luke is the more universal Gospel. Jesus is always looking beyond the provincial boundaries of his little world to the larger cosmos. Luke's God loves sinners as well as saints and refuses to be caged in institutional Jewish religion, or any other human structure, for that matter.

Jonah is a symbol. The Hebrew Jonah is a mystery. In fact, one might say that there are two Jonahs, the historical prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 associated with the eighth century reign of Jeroboam II and the literary figure associated with the book by his name. The absence of historical data provides an opportunity for storytelling, and the myth becomes larger than the man. The literary Jonah, then, is an entertaining story, a composite of Jewish folklore and the imagination flowing from divine inspiration.

Phyllis Trible wrote the commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, VII, and simply calls Jonah a “fictitious character.” Considering that Trible is on the faculty of the Wake Forest Divinity School, a Baptist institution, we ought to be shocked; but she makes a clear distinction between the history and the myth that must be considered in an attempt to understand this strange book of the Old Testament. The Jonah story makes reference to geographical locations that can be found on a map, but they are little more than props on the stage of an entertaining tale. Like many other passages in the Bible the truth of history is not in the facts presented but in the message of the story. The story serves both to entertain and to teach, and no one should discount the profound message about a God of universal love.

Jonah is called by Jahweh, the LORD, to go to the Gentile city of Nineveh and condemn the city for its evil ways. Jonah does the unthinkable thing for a prophet. He rebels; he goes to sea to get away from Jahweh. But the LORD follows, sends a storm that nearly sinks the ship, and the foreign sailors finally arrive at the conclusion that Jonah is the problem. Following Jonah's instruction, they throw him into the sea, a sacrifice to the angry god. Then, Jahweh sends a sea monster to swallow him. In the stomach of a fish, he has an epiphany, recites a psalm/prayer to God, and the fish vomits him up on land. This time Jonah chooses to be obedient to the call of God and preaches a warning to the people of Nineveh. To his surprise (and chagrin) the whole nation repents—even the animals, and God spares the city. The epilogue is about Jonah's continued resistance to a God of grace. This

gracious God is consistently gracious even to Jonah. In the humorous exchange, a liberal theology of inclusion breaks through the disarming humor.

Without clear evidence, some believe that Jonah belongs with Ruth as an argument against the anti-Gentile sentiments of Ezra-Nehemiah after the Exile. Thus, Jonah becomes a symbol of an exclusive religion with zero-tolerance for outsiders. This was not a particularly new story for Israel any more than it is a particularly old story for us. Every generation has had to decide whether to run and hide or stand and work for the good people who are outside our family bounds. Israel hated the Babylonians for their big cities, big powerful armies, and big pagan centers of worship. Jews were divided. They viewed their captors as the enemy to be destroyed, the enemy to be ignored, or possibly an enemy with whom they were to live at peace as children of God. Jeremiah sent a letter to Jewish exiles in Babylon advising them to seek the peace of the city where they live: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" Even if our motives are purely selfish and we are concerned only to protect our own, we need to acknowledge that our welfare is tied to all of the people around us.

You are Jonah. The word of God to Jonah identifies Ninevah as "that great city" three times. What is the nature of this greatness? Is it of strategic importance to Israel or to the development of the purpose of God in history? Is it great because of the important people who live there? Is the city just big and powerful? In the story, the greatness of Ninevah has three dimensions: a concentrated quantity of meanness, an enormous geographic expanse (three-days walk across), and a population of 120 thousand souls plus numerous animals. To Jonah, the city's only importance is as a center of evil, and he can easily justify his flight with the rubber stamp message: NOT WORTH SAVING! We are reminded of Cain who carried his mark to the land of Nod where he got on with life and built a city, perhaps the first, named after his son Enoch. That story of beginnings sets the pace for the attitude of Israel. Cities are places built by the likes of Cain. The agrarian society of the shepherd was the proper place for God to call out his son David, and the Jews never forgot their rural roots. God might be known as King, but God never ceased to be the shepherd of Israel, and God never was identified as "mayor" of anywhere.

The big city is the symbol of concentrated evil. Approaching the Republican national convention in Houston a few years ago, Dan Rather commented on this enormous southern city which had grown to be so much like the metropolitan industrial centers of the north. He quoted a jingle only a fellow Houstonian can appreciate: "If I owned Houston, and I owned hell, I would rent out Houston and live in hell." I recall the surge of growth in Houston in the late seventies as workers were leaving the auto industry of the north for the oil centers of the south. City services and streets were overloaded, tempers flared, and crime flourished. The city had become a melting pot of races and cultures which tended to heat without melting and blending into one community. The big city is a sign of our time. The segregated ghettos of warring cultures, the poverty and crime which seem to accompany the masses, and the rotting buildings and streets of another era, create an environment approximating hell on earth.

The need of the world around us is overwhelming. We would like to ignore it or run away from our responsibility, but the African spiritual is on target: there's no hiding place down here. The natural human tendency is to hide, to isolate and insulate ourselves, to stay away from dark alleys and mean people. Jonah is Israel in flight from the calling of God to become the beacon of light to the Gentiles, and Jonah is every Christian who has attempted to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye toward the bad places of our world. All of us are Jonah. In an attempt to protect our children from bad places we allow ourselves to be blinded to the need of someone else's children just as loved as much a concern of a loving God.

We are reminded by the visitation of the Magi, closing the Christmas celebration with Epiphany, that God crosses our artificial human borders of exclusion. If we are to worship the God of Jesus whom we call the Christ, we must adopt the inclusive love of God toward the whole world around us.