

In the Belly of a Big Fish

Readings: 'Prophet' by Carl Dennis
'Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale' by Dan Albergotti

There are at least two ways to tell the story of Jonah.

The first way is the straightforward retelling of what the text says. The story that begins, 'Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."' (Jonah 1:1, all translations NRSV).

The second way to tell a bible story, begins, 'There was a community of people who started telling a story. This story was so meaningful to them that they and the generations that followed kept telling it. People started calling it holy and then it was collected in a book with all the stories those people called holy. And now it's told again and again even today, millennia later. What did this story mean to them? How has its meaning shifted over time? What might this ancient story teach us now.' That is the way to engage with old stories that I find most compelling.

I'll tell this story both ways.

Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah who was told to go to Nineveh, which is the land we now know as Iraq. The original audience of this story would know that Nineveh was a very bad place – and a city that had a reputation for sin and violence. It had also already been defeated and destroyed in war by the time the story was created, so perhaps we can draw a modern analogy by thinking of a bad place that has also been defeated. Nazi Germany, perhaps. Jonah doesn't want to follow God's directions. He runs off in the opposite direction and boards a boat to cross the Mediterranean from Israel to what is now Spain. A tremendous storm comes up and the ship's captain and crew are struggling to keep the boat from sinking. Somehow, Jonah is asleep in the hold this whole time. The crew wakes him up and the truth comes out that Jonah is running away from his God. The crew reluctantly throws him overboard, only after Jonah assures them it is the right thing to do. Jonah is then swallowed by a big fish.

At this point, you might be wondering, "But I thought it was a whale?" The Hebrew words in the original translate as 'big fish.' Some of the earliest English translations of the Bible translated that Hebrew phrase as 'whale' but modern scholars think 'big fish' is more accurate. Further complicating everything is the reality that ancients did not share our understanding of animal classifications. They didn't know that whales were mammals. When this story was written, they might have intended to write about a whale because they understood it to be a giant fish, not the warmly blooded mammal we know it to be. The true intention has been lost to history.

Jonah spends three days in the belly of the big fish. Then he prays to be rescued. God instructs the fish to vomit Jonah out upon the dry land and the fish follows those instructions.

Then, God tells Jonah again to go to Nineveh, that evil city, and tell the people to repent their evil ways. Jonah arrives in the city and begins to speak to the people. He says only, 'Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown' – or, possibly 'transformed,' the Hebrew will support either translation. The people of Nineveh immediately believe that Jonah is speaking the truth. They begin repenting their evil ways. As a symbol of repentance, they begin fasting and wearing sackcloth, a coarse woven fabric made of goat's

wool. The news of this repentance reaches the king and he issues a decree, 'No human being or animal... shall taste anything. They shall not feed nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change [God's] mind; God may turn from [God's] fierce anger, so that we do not perish.' (3:7-9)

God then sees the repentance of the Ninevites and decides not to destroy them.

But the story doesn't end there. God's mercy makes Jonah angry. He had wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. He didn't understand why he had to come all this way if he doesn't get to see any destruction. He claims to know that God wouldn't go through with destroying the city, as God is too loving for that kind of thing. That's why he ran in the other direction to begin with. Jonah even asks God to kill him. He stomps off and builds a small shelter on the edge of the city, still hoping to watch a disaster unfold.

By the next morning, God has made a bush grow up beside the shelter to keep Jonah well shaded. Jonah loves to sit in the shade. The day after that, God sends a worm to eat and destroy the bush. The bush withers. The third day, there is no bush and God sends a hot wind and the hot sun and Jonah is really uncomfortable. Again, he asks God to kill him. He says he is angry enough about the death of the bush that had shaded him to die himself.

Then God gets the last word. God says, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons... and also many animals?" (4:9-11)

And that's where that story ends, with that question hanging in the air.

And now the second story, the story about the story. First, while there likely was a real historic prophet named Jonah, the son of Ammitai, the story in *The Book of Jonah* is fiction. The scholars say this story probably wasn't told until about 200 years after that historical Jonah died. The storytellers used this historical setting – and these historical places to tell a new story. We do that too. *Hamilton* the musical tells a new story about the founding of this country using historical figures. *The Book of Jonah* is an ancient version of that.

So what is this ancient fictional story and why did it become a sacred story?

First, it's an exciting story. There is a tremendous amount of action squeezed into four short chapters. It's fun to tell, but that doesn't explain the endurance of this story.

It's also a satire, a 2,500 year old satire. It's hard to see it as a satire when we pull out this story and focus on it separately from the other stories about prophets in the Hebrew Bible, but to the community who created this story, a community that told and retold stories of prophets, it was clearly satire. *The Book of Jonah* uses absurdity and exaggeration to criticize aspects of society that the authors thought were wrong.

There are so many parts of this story that are absurd. First God's call of Jonah. In ancient Hebrew call narratives, the people often doubt when God calls them to be prophets. "Really, you pick me? I'm not sure I can do this." After a divine appearance or other divine reassurance, they become prophets. But not Jonah. Jonah takes doubt to an extreme. Jonah runs away from God's call so thoroughly he ends up in the belly of a big fish. This is absurd. It's supposed to be absurd.

Another absurdity – how the people in Nineveh respond to Jonah. Most ancient prophets were not listened to. They were often recognized as prophets only in retrospect after awful things had happened and people were trying to make sense of what felt like divine wrath. Not Jonah. When he finally gets to Nineveh, he barely has time to utter a prophetic sentence before the people start repenting. The king repents – and instructs everyone in the kingdom, including livestock to repent – on the basis of hearsay alone. It's absurd. We know that people don't see the error of their ways and turn their life around based on one second-hand warning from a stranger. This is absurd. It's supposed to be absurd.

And when the people of Nineveh listen and repent and God saves them, Jonah is furious. More absurdity. Jonah, in his heart of hearts, didn't want to be listened to. Jonah wants to watch Nineveh be destroyed. He wants to see the city go up in flames or be swallowed whole by the earth or whatever means of destruction God came up with. He worries that God's mercy to this city that promises to change its ways would make Jonah look bad, like his prophecy isn't true. Jonah is a prophet who doesn't want to be listened to, so he throws a fit beside a short-lived bush when people heed his warning. God then argues with Jonah that it is good to be listened to. It's absurd. Real prophets want people to listen to them. This is absurd. It's supposed to be absurd.

Good satire has a strong point of view. Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' urges compassion for the poor in the midst of an Irish famine. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* uses satire to explore some of the most important issues of today. *The Book of Jonah* is an ancient antecedent to all that. It was written in a context where the people of Israel were navigating their relationships with foreigners. The elite had returned from exile and were creating a new society in a much more diverse context than they had known before. They had a notion of a golden past and they attempted to 'Make Israel Great Again.' They were separating families. Jewish men and non-Jewish women who were married were forcibly divorced and the women and any children born into those interreligious families had were expelled from Israel. The elite were also building walls – the protective walls around the holy city of Jerusalem – to keep out people who didn't look like them, worship like them, or speak like them.

There were many chanting the ancient Hebrew equivalent of 'Build the Wall!' We know that because texts celebrating that wall and other acts of separation from and violence toward foreigners also became part of the Hebrew Bible. Meanwhile, the creators of *The Book of Jonah* had a different vision. They had a vision of a God who cared about all people, even the deplorable Ninevites. They mocked those who wanted foreigners to suffer as petulant prophets. They created an anti-hero of sorts in Jonah to make their opponents look absurd and small minded if they said that God's care was limited to a certain group. They believed in a God that would not want people to wall anyone off or forcibly separate children from their parents. The community that created the Book of Jonah knew that every person has inherent worth and dignity, though, of course, they wouldn't have used our Unitarian Universalist phrase for that idea. They believed in a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world.

There is a fight throughout the Hebrew Bible about what we should do about the other, the person who doesn't look like us, worship like us, speak our language, live their lives the way we do. It is not settled – the argument itself is canonized and made holy. There is the Books of Jonah others about welcoming strangers on one side. Other scripture argues for separation from – and, at times, annihilation of those who are different. It is an old, holy argument that continues to this day.

While some of us value the Bible as a source of wisdom, we as Unitarian Universalists know that revelation is not sealed. Truth is ever unfolding. Our martyrs died for this right to change our mind religiously. So

when we look to the issues of our day – how do we treat those who are not like us being one of the central issue of our time – and possibly all time, we can turn to the Bible, the ancient satire of Jonah, as well as other sources. We can see how one group of people responded when their leaders were building walls and separating families and possibly find ourselves in a lineage of people who believe that all people deserve to be treated like the inherently worthy person they are. That, of course is not our only source of wisdom. We look to our Universalist heritage, when tells us that divine love extends to everyone, no matter what, no exceptions. There is nothing that you can do or no way that you can be that will separate you from the love that holds us all. We turn to our principles, the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace liberty and justice for all. We turn to our own experience, our own ethics, or own sense of integrity.

This doesn't mean that we all agree on a particular policy proposal. There is not one true Unitarian Universalist immigration policy. People of goodwill, people rooted in love, justice, and respect for others don't completely agree on what is the best course of action. This world is infinitely complicated and anyone who tells you there is any easy solution is wrong. Yet we can agree that all of our work in the world and all of the policies carried out in our names need to be rooted in love, justice, and respect for all.

May we go forth and make it so.

May we look at a stranger and see endless possibility.

May we maintain openness, willingness to grow, and curiosity.

May we act as love, as hope, as faith, and as life call us to act.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.