



A Big Fish & Many Hooks
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Jonah should win an Oscar as best comedian of the Hebrew Scriptures. Imagine how Charlie Chaplin would play Jonah — avoiding God, endangering a whole shipload of sailors, going overboard and finally taking a three-day nap in a large fish. God’s call to be a prophet for God didn’t please Jonah. He was commissioned to travel to Nineveh on the banks of the Tigris River in modern day Iraq and warn its residents of impending divine wrath. Why a mission to travel so far away and offer a message of salvation to Israel’s sworn enemies? Jonah couldn’t figure that out and did all he could to go the opposite route. He became obedient only after surviving a risky and fishy alternative. He needed some time to think it over.

Jonah’s reluctance to prophesy to Nineveh is not out of fear of his possible failure as a prophet due to the resistance and retaliation of the Ninevites, but, as he will confess later, because he knows he will succeed by the grace of God. The Ninevites will turn around and change their ways and God will forgive them. Failure or success of a prophet’s mission is not measured on account of the prophet’s merit or abilities but on the trust and faithfulness to God.

In a tense conversation with God, Jonah utters a ridiculous justification for his actions by revealing his disapproval of God’s character. In a bout of anger, Jonah spits out his heartfelt confession: “[Y]ou are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:2) In other words, God cannot be trusted to deliver the kind of justice Jonah has in mind. God’s fault, in fact, is to be too lenient and that is confusing! It is evident Jonah prefers a more predictable God, a God who follows more closely our understanding of how the world works through punishment and reward.

A merciful God blows his mind and cannot be acceptable. I mean, think about it: wouldn’t you agree that if someone crosses you, you are entitled to take revenge and make him pay? Or wouldn’t you reward positive behavior as a way to reinforce it? It makes sense, doesn’t it? This is, after all, what religious people had understood all along up to the time the God of Israel appeared onto the stage: gods create the world out of physical violence, which includes chaos and murder. Gods are capricious and resolve world conflicts through lies, trickery, and physical violence. Anger and hatred are familiar sentiments to the gods. In the world’s perspective, tyrants are gods and gods are tyrants and violence is celebrated as a sign of strength.

It’s the way of the world, isn’t it? Why should we complain unless we stumble across the God of Abram who speaks the world into creation and with wisdom declares all creation good? How can it be that grace is available to us? All we need to do is to simply acknowledge that God wants to be part of our life and then be open and humble enough to let God in. Accepting the reality of a merciful God requires a grateful heart that is capable of reciprocating: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” That, unfortunately, doesn’t come to me very easily. When I



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am wronged, I feel sadness and a mixture of over-responsibility for what has happened and disappointment for not being quick enough for a smart reply. But I console myself when I lack come-backs by thinking that what seems a failure of wit is actually a blessing that refrains me from saying something I might regret later.

Jonah's story is not to be taken as a comical example of someone who does not recognize grace when it happens. The little book of the prophet Jonah, merely four short chapters, is part of the Holy Scriptures shared by both Jews and Christians alike. His story is even reported in the Koran, the holy book of Islam.¹ It sounds like a child's fable but it is actually a "powerful" spiritual teaching to which even Jesus referred to when he spoke of his death and resurrection.²

When one reads the book of Jonah, one is left wondering how a person dedicated to God can be so stubborn and argumentative with God. Jonah knows the kind of God he is dealing with. He has a crystal-clear understanding of the qualities of God and is intimate enough to converse with God, unafraid of revealing the reasons for his reluctance to undertake the mission. What Jonah demonstrates to all of us is that knowing God on an intellectual ground alone may not be sufficient. We may be very eloquent about God. We may be able to quote the Bible and make articulate theological arguments. But true knowledge of God is an ongoing process that starts with a spiritual conversion, an enlightenment of the mind as well as of the heart. Spiritual transformation is a process of death and resurrection; a spiritual process of letting go of the old self and embracing of the ways of the Lord; a faith-chosen and Spirit-guided journey though highs and lows begun and continued in humility and simplicity of heart.

Jonah's story is the humbling story of all human beings who struggle with their own resistance to God, their own reasoning and self-justification, their arrogance and sense of superiority, their anger, hatred, and sentiments of retaliation, their readiness to judge and to condemn and to take matters into their own hands. The miracle in the story is not so much the repentance and conversion of the Ninevites. It is remarkable that all people repented and changed their ways. But I think there is another miracle in the making, the one that expects an answer from Jonah at the end of the book. God asks: "[S]hould I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11) The question goes unanswered. That question is directed to all of us. How are we going to respond when God demonstrates concern for all people? Who are we to set limits to God's mercy?

¹ [Prophet Jonah - The Religion of Islam \(islamreligion.com\)](http://islamreligion.com)

² Matthew 12:38-41



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In a way, today's gospel gives us the answer and we have a model to follow. We are not left hanging but are invited into the story of Jesus' call of the first disciples. That call came at a time of crisis (the execution of John the Baptist by the hands of king Herod). Those Jesus calls leave everything behind to follow him. Again, that is a call to a change of heart, a readiness to embrace what Jesus represents and live by God's justice.

The metaphor of fishing for people is taken from the prophet Jeremiah (16:16), where it is used to symbolize God's disapproval of Israel.³ Catching people with hooks is used to represent the divine judgment upon the liars, the powerful, the cheaters, and the abusers of the world. Jesus, in other words, is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to confront and address the existing order of power and privilege. His aim is to redeem and liberate.

We are going through our own series of national crisis: the covid pandemic has killed over 400K: we are mourning their loss; it has also shut down the country for almost a year with great impact on the livelihood of many; the former president has been impeached twice; the country is divided to the point of seeing an attack on the capital and on democracy. Racial injustice and the resurgence of white supremacy have also brought anger, fear, and chaos to the nation. In this challenging atmosphere, how is Nativity to follow Jesus? What message does Nativity have to share? And how are we to usher in the kingdom values and call people to repent and believe the gospel with us?

This is gestational time when God is surely touching us in new ways. At the end of summer more of us will feel comfortable resuming face to face worship and other community activities; we will have opportunities to share with one another how the grace of God has shaped us during this time of isolation. What does the touch of God, the presence of God look like, sound like, and feel like?

The truth is we feel enthusiasm to follow Jesus only after we have been touched by grace and have a taste of the freedom of the kingdom. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. God's kingdom comes to us in times of sin, lack of civility, and decadence and not once we have eradicated injustice. It's a process we are called to be part of for the purpose of creating a world receptive to God's values. May we be alert to the ways God is working with us and be ready to follow. Amen.

³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 132. See also Amos 4:2 and Ezekiel 29:4