

“When Cows Out-Repent Prophets:
Jonah and the Journey Outward” (Part 6)
Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 113

We’ve followed Jonah on a journey downward. In trying to get away from the presence of the LORD, because he doesn’t want to go to Nineveh, he goes down to Joppa, down into the cabin of the ship, down into a deep sleep, down into the sea, down into the belly of the great fish, and down to the very door of death itself.

Chapter 2 ends with a poem from the pit of darkness and despair. And in that poem, Jonah—who can’t escape from God’s face—has his spiritual awakening. His “ah ha!” moment. And he says something that lies at the very center of the Bible and at the very heart of human history: “SALVATION IS FROM THE LORD!” The poem, the prayer, is received by the LORD. The LORD summons the fish to spit Jonah onto dry land. And Jonah emerges in chapter 3 a different man.

Different how? Well, he smells a little different than he did at the beginning of the book, huh? — when he was occupied with his duties in the king’s court back in Israel? He’s had a back-from-the-dead experience. He’s had a discovery of God’s grace and salvation: God has been patient *and* absolutely determined to save him. God’s salvation, Jonah now knows, is stronger than death. God’s grace outruns the runaway prophet and meets him in the depths of the sea—even in the pit of a fish’s stomach.

Now Jonah is ready to be God’s prophet. Now Jonah has *experienced* God’s salvation himself. Now he’s qualified to speak of God’s salvation. Now we will see what Jonah does once he’s standing on dry ground and no longer running from God’s face.

One scholar puts it well: “in chapter 3, the plot rewinds and begins again” (Sherwood). In fact, verses 1-3 are in direct parallel to the first three verses of the book of Jonah.

Once again, the word of the LORD comes to Jonah. “Go and preach. Say what I tell you.” This time he goes. After a thousand or more kilometers, he arrives with a simple message: “forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

This scene poses a question. Will the invincible imperial city really respond to the LORD and his word like the vulnerable vessel on the stormy seas?

I don’t think Jonah expects repentance of Nineveh. Every expectation is that Nineveh will—best case scenario—laugh Jonah out of town.

But he walks through the streets. And it’s obvious that no one is laughing. No one is scoffing at him. No one is attacking him. No one is blaspheming his God. No one is calling for war against his country on account of his preaching. Instead, they’re listening. The word of the LORD came to them. Five words in Hebrew. 40 days till Nineveh’s destroyed. They knew it was the voice of God. They were cut to the heart.

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The real question, though, is, what happens as the message of Jonah reaches the emperor?

The king stands up. All eyes and ears are on him. What is his judgment going to be? Will he summon his guards to go arrest Jonah? To beat him? To publicly execute him? Will he find out that he’s an Israelite and mobilize his imperial army to attack Israel? Will he simply start laughing? Taunting the God of Israel to try and overthrow his city? Will he fear that the overthrow is real, and secure the city walls and gates, position archers in the towers, and set an ambush for the incoming army?

But the king stands up and ... repents. *Repents!* He leads his city—the most notoriously wicked and brutal city in the world—in repentance. Instead of holding out his scepter and summoning his troops to a display of power, he comes down *off* his throne and bows in the dust in repentance. He puts on sackcloth—the clothing of sorrow and regret and mourning. He calls for the whole city to get down in the dust with him. For the *cows* to put on the garments of mourning and repentance. Nobody *eats*. Not the king. Not the goats. Nobody drinks. Not the nobles. Not the prostitutes. No one proposes a toast or consumes a calorie. They recognize that their only need is for the debts of their wickedness to be canceled; for the wages of their sin to be paid by someone else. There is nothing to do but to seek the favor of Jonah’s God. And the whole city lies in the dust together, waiting for the mere possibility of God’s mercy. While they lie in the dust, they turn from their violence (9) toward one another. Everything that made Nineveh *Nineveh* is put on hold, and a hush of sorrow and reflection and justice comes over the city. Nineveh believed God. They heard Jonah. But they believed God.

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Imagine what is going through Jonah’s mind and heart as he sees the surprising success of his sermon?

Every time someone hears and heeds his short little sermon, and stops in their tracks and repents in dust and sackcloth, Jonah is confronted with the contrast between his *own* encounter with the word of the LORD and the Ninevites’ encounter with that same word. “Go to Nineveh and preach.” Jonah goes to Tarshish instead, fleeing from the face of God. “Forty days till Nineveh’s destroyed.” Nineveh drops everything they’re doing and humbles themselves under God’s mighty right hand.

Who’s supposed to repent more quickly? Wicked Ninevites or Israel’s prophets? Who’s supposed to hear and heed the word of God with more reverence and awe and humility? Clueless pagan sailors or the man set apart for God’s holy purposes? Who’s supposed to be the first to remember that they’re frail dust dependent on God for life and breath? An Assyrian *cow* or an Israelite religious professional?

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Just imagine how the Israelite readers of this story would have reacted as they read it! They’d laugh because it’s funny. It’s funny because it’s true. They’d cry with conviction: “We are Jonah. Make us more like Assyrian cows, O Lord!”

Just imagine how the God of Israel would react as his people read the story. As they walked with Jonah into wicked Nineveh, and saw it bowing in the dust before God’s majestic and holy presence. The Lord would laugh because it’s funny. It’s funny because it’s true. And the Lord would weep with the grief that his chosen people, called to be his prophetic voice among the nations, had become less sensitive to his voice than the nations to which his prophetic people were called. Less humble than pagan kings and pagan cows.

But the Lord God doesn’t just laugh. And he doesn’t just weep. When his own people no longer hear his voice, he comes right up to their ears and whispers his grace and truth into their hearts. This is the sign of Jonah. The Lord says “okay, my people: read this dark comedy, this satire, this story of your own hard hearts. Read it for a few hundred years. Let it sink in.”

And then the heavenly Father looks for a truer and better Jonah. He says to his new prophet “arise, Go to Bethlehem, to Judea, to Jerusalem, to Nazareth, to Capernaum. And proclaim to them the message that I give you.”

And Jesus goes. He comes with all the Father’s grief over the wickedness of the world he so loves. He comes with all the Father’s pain over the hypocrisy of his own chosen people. He comes with all the Father’s hope that the mission and ministry of his people in the world is not, after all this disappointment, a lost cause—so powerful is God’s Word. He comes with the power of God’s Word in his own voice, and in his own *person*. He comes to the local synagogues, sits down, and teaches the little congregations from the scroll of God’s Word. He speaks, and the people immediately recognize what Nineveh recognized in it: authority. “This guy is not speaking on his own behalf, but on behalf of the God of all. We had better listen.”

When the king, Herod, however, heard that God’s Word had come in the person of Jesus, he also got up from his throne. But he did not get up to proclaim a fast from food and water for the greatest to the least. He did not arise and say “prepare ye the way of the LORD!” He tried to kill Jesus. His infanticide of innocent young Hebrew boys made Jonah’s Nineveh’s look like a holy city compared Jerusalem and Judea, filled with the sound of the cries of mothers left childless by Herod’s rage.

Jesus, the true Jonah, the true prophet of God’s salvation, comes into the world of an infanticidal king. Jesus, God’s salvation and his true king, is cut off from the world he so loved by a homicidal religious mob with a little help from a band of pagan rulers and soldiers.

Jesus gets up from his throne and humbles himself. All the way to the dust of death. Theologians tell us that Jesus, who was sinless, *repented* on our behalf. Nevertheless Jesus the

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sinless one, bearing our guilt, was overthrown. After 40 days of fasting and prayer and devotion in the wilderness, and after 3 years of ministry, and after 33 years of faithfulness to his Father’s voice: Jesus the faithful Jonah is overthrown like Nineveh the wicked city deserved. Like Jonah the covenant-breaking Israelite deserved. Like we, the wandering sheep, who go astray and who are reluctant to wear the sackcloth of repentance, deserved.

There is only one thing more surprising than the Word of God breaking through to the hard hearts of wicked Nineveh:

The soft-hearted Word of God, Jesus, rending the heavens and coming down to speak himself in grace to hard-hearted you and me.

To be a real prophet of God, to be a prophetic people of God together, requires this one thing: complete surprise, over and over, that not only is salvation from the Lord, but that salvation and grace could be ours, when all we’d done, in word and deed, is ask for our lives and our world to be overthrown.

Thanks be to God. May we be his humble prophets, bearing his good news— speaking and living it authentically, because it has been our own experience.