

“Jonah’s Auslanerausweis:
Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 2)”
Psalm 47; Jonah 1:1-10

Last week I read the chapter in Bill Bryson’s travel book about his trip through Switzerland. He wasn’t impressed with Switzerland. But he was impressed to learn that even though Switzerland is land-locked, at the time he was writing, it boasted the largest manufacturer of marine engines. That’s pretty amazing, considering that the only country in history that is less of a seafaring country was ancient Israel.

Can a landlocked country really make good ship engines? You’d have to ask the sailors. Can the God of an ancient country that is terrified of the sea really be the God of the sea? You’d have to ask the sailors.

But the story of Jonah is not supposed to start with a prophet on a ship. It’s supposed to start with a prophet going 1,000 km overland. Across the desert from Israel to Nineveh, near present-day Mosul, Iraq.

He’s not going to go. Why not?

First of all, because the Assyrian empire is incredibly wicked. That’s not just Israel’s opinion. They’re known throughout the ancient world for brutal crimes against humanity. One scholarly article is titled “[The] Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death,” and concludes that no country has a more “gory and bloodcurdling ... history” than Assyria. I can’t even mention the things they did to captured enemies. One commentator said that sending Jonah to Nineveh would be like God calling a Frenchman to go to Berlin to preach against the Nazis in 1942.

But there’s a deeper, spiritual reason, that Jonah is not going to Nineveh. It’s not just that Jonah doesn’t like the Assyrians. Nobody likes the Assyrians. Jonah doesn’t like the God who calls him to preach there.

To really get this, we need to look at 3 things from the first 10 verses of our story:

Jonah’s Expatriation

Jonah’s Ausländerausweis

The Sign of Jonah

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1. Jonah’s Expatriation

I am an expatriate.

Even when you’re not running from God’s calling, expatriating is no small thing, as so many of you know. You might not give up your citizenship, but you give up your sense of home!

Think of what Jonah gave up, though. Jonah, son of Ammatai, was a prophet in the royal court of Israel; a spiritual advisor to Jeroboam II in the 8th Century BC. Jonah has a lot of job security, and access to power and prestige in the palace.

Jonah’s ministry and calling were tied to this nation and this land. The Promised Land. The place where God was reigning on earth. The place where God’s promises were gold. The place where the light of God’s face shone.

And Jonah left.

Jonah is disgusted by the very idea of Nineveh. But he’s even more disgusted by the idea of being in the presence of the God who would want to take him to Nineveh.

“I don’t want to be in the same room as you, Yahweh. I don’t want to be in the land where you dwell. Or among the people who call on your name. I don’t want to represent your Word to my king, or to the King of Nineveh. I’m leaving your presence. I’m leaving you. I’m leaving everything. Leave me alone.”

So he buys his ticket to Tarshish, at the far other end of the Mediterranean, a ticket to the end of the world.

Jonah’s expatriation is an excommunication. God didn’t excommunicate him. He excommunicated God. He excommunicated himself. He bought a ticket. He sold his birthright citizenship.

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2. Jonah’s *Ausländerausweis*

But something weird happens. The storm comes along. The pagan sailors wake him up and tell him to pray to his God. They ask him (8) “Who are you!? Is this storm your fault? Tell us!”

What does he say? Jonah pulls out his *Ausländerausweis*! “I am a Hebrew.” He identifies his nationality. Then “I worship (or serve) Yahweh)” — Israel’s God.

Isn’t that something? When he gets a chance, even in the middle of a storm, to identify himself, he leads off with his ethnic identity. And then his religious identity. “Look here! I’m a Hebrew!” “Look here! My allegiance is to the God of everything: the land and the sea.”

He is proud to tell these lost pagans that his God is God of all their pathetic gods. He’s proud to tell them that his God is the one in charge of this storm. He’s proud that he, as a Hebrew prophet, is in the inner circle of the world’s power structures.

He goes down below the deck of the boat just as the storm is starting. He is used to working in the palace and speaking the words of God Almighty. He doesn’t have time to talk to a bunch of pagan sailors.

But if he has to talk to pagan sailors—this gives him the chance to tell them how special he is, and, by contrast, how pathetic the pagans are. “You’re crying out in vain to all these gods. My God is the real God.”

On Tuesday I was approached by some evangelists who wanted me to become a Christian. It would be one thing to say these things Jonah says on a normal Tuesday afternoon. To bear witness to people you think are lost and confused.

But this isn’t a well-meaning evangelist in Stadelhoferplatz on a normal Tuesday. This is a runaway prophet who has just excommunicated himself from God and God’s Promised Land.

Leaving America has made me feel both less and more American. More proud about some American things. Very embarrassed about other American things. More aware of who I am; more confused about who I am. It happens.

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But Jonah, having left Israel and Israel’s God in utter disgust; having renounced his citizenship and run from the LORD; having boarded the ship and gone below deck to sleep, is confronted by the sailors. He pulls out his Ausländerausweis and shows it off to these strangers.

These pagans themselves can hardly believe it. “What have you done!?” It terrified them. To realize that they were in the presence of the God of the Sea. It also must have stunned them to realize they were in a boat with God’s prophet, who was proud of his religion and nationality, at the very same time as he defied the God of the Sea.

Eugene Peterson says that “holiness is the cultivated habit of responding to God’s Word instead of fitting into the world’s program.” And here’s Jonah, fitting in with the world’s pattern of religious and national pride, while rejecting God’s word in utter disgust and running from God’s presence.

Sometimes people go to church to hide from God. Sometimes people use religion to reject and run from the God who might challenge their rights, their pride, their ultimate commitments.

When you go to church in order to be your own god, you’ve become a really worldly religious person. Samuel Johnson famously said that “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.” Having left his God, the Promised Land, and the promises themselves, Jonah takes refuge, instead, in nationalism. It’s a pathetic place for a prophet. He’s traded the promises of God for the pride of position and an Ausländerausweis he can wave proudly in pagans’ faces.

3. The Sign of Jonah

Fast forward to the New Testament. There’s another man who was a proud nationalist. Who looked down on the Gentile nations. Who boasted about his position and his pedigree; his learning and his leadership. Who was so zealously religious that he violently tried to stamp out the Jesus movement. And one day the risen Jesus confronted him. To be his spokesman. Among pagan Gentiles. By the time Paul’s journey of international witness to God’s grace and mercy was through, he had sailed further West toward Tarshish than Jonah ever got by running away.

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One time, when it looked like Paul might be killed for his witness, he wrote to the church in Philippi. He told them, “look, actually, if I got to pick, I would rather die. To finish my work and to be with Jesus is way more attractive to me than running around the Mediterranean trying to preach and avoid getting arrested again. But here’s the thing: you people at Phillippi need me. The Greeks in Thessalonica can use me. The Roman believers could use a pastor. I’d even like to make it to Spain and bear witness there. To die is gain. But if I go on living, I’m going to keep pouring myself out for all you Gentiles.”

How does a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealot, a nationalist, and a persecutor of Christians end up pouring his life out on foreign soil for the benefit of foreigners? Why would such a prominent patriot expatriate and preach to pagans?

Because he realized that Jesus had lived in the palace, not merely as a prophet, but as the prince of heaven. That Jesus volunteered to go a long way from home. On a rescue mission to people like us, who even in our most religious moments really don’t know our right hand from our left hand. That Jesus was ultimately willing to be excommunicated from his heavenly Father at the cross of Calvary; cut off not just from the people and place that gave him his identity, but from life itself. That Jesus was willing to be viewed as a traitor to his nation and a threat to the nations—to be killed as a rebel against Rome and Jerusalem.

And when Paul ran into the resurrected Jesus on the Road to Damascus, where he was heading to try to kill the Jesus movement, Paul realized that he had been wrong. God was God, and Jesus was the Lord, the God of Israel and the hope of the nations.

Conclusion

Do we see “the sign of Jonah”? Paul did. Jesus, raised from the dead, is God given to humanity. To all nations. When we see Jesus expatriating in order to make us his sisters and brothers, how can we not go with him and begin to love every human being alive? When we recognize Jesus as not only the Messiah to Israel, but the hope of all the earth, how can we not say “the earth is the Lord’s, and everyone in it”? When we see what it took for Jesus to make us his own, how can we not love the possibility of being united with women and men and boys and girls of every

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nation by faith in Jesus? When we see Jesus enduring the hatred of proud religious people in order to redeem us, how can we not excommunicate ourselves from proud religion and embrace the Savior who embraces people of every nation?

When someone stops you and asks you who you are, where you are from, and who you serve, what is your first thought? “I am an American, a banker, and a member of IPC?” “I am Swiss, an architect, and a member of the historic Fraumunster Church.” Or is your first thought: “I’m a fearfully and wonderfully made creation of God, a new creation in Christ Jesus, a sinner saved by sheer grace, and a privileged witness bearer in word and deed to the diverse people God has put in my life.”

Let’s lose our religion. Let’s discover the God of the nations and the compassion of Jesus. And only then will we be ready to go out from here and be the smile of God in the life of everyone we get to serve in Jesus’ name.