

Jonah



SESSION 1: *Jonah 1:1–3*

Keep your hand on the plow—hold on!

Comment 1

Jonah is one of the many interesting books in that portion of the Bible that we sometimes call “the Old Testament.” But the phrase “the Old Testament” can be misleading. It can imply that these books are somehow outdated or “old hat.” And they aren’t, for they are the very books that gave life and strength to Jesus and to every writer of what we call the New Testament.

So some people prefer to call these books “the Hebrew scriptures,” for these are the biblical books that were written primarily in the Hebrew language, rather than Greek, which was used by all of the later writers.

Comment 2

From a Jewish perspective, the Hebrew scriptures are divided into three groups: the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. The section of the Hebrew scriptures that is called “the Prophets” consists of three longer prophetic books—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—and twelve shorter books, including Jonah.

Christians sometimes call these shorter writings “the minor prophets.” But that can imply that they are of “minor” importance, which isn’t the idea at all. From a Jewish perspective, and probably from the perspective of Jesus as well, the shorter prophetic books are equal in importance to the longer ones. So for Jews, these shorter books are simply called “the Twelve Prophets.” Jonah is one of the twelve.

Comment 3

The Jewish book of Ecclesiasticus (sometimes called “Sirach”) was written perhaps 200 years before the time of Jesus. The author of this book (which is often included in Catholic Bibles) comments about the enduring impact that Jonah and other members of the “Twelve Prophets” have had on the Jewish people:

*“May the bones of the Twelve Prophets
send forth new life from where they lie,
for they comforted the people of Jacob
and delivered them with confident hope”*

(Sirach 49:10)

Comment 4

As the quotation from Ecclesiasticus implies, Jonah has been capturing the hearts and minds of people for thousands of years.

This short book has been the subject of many Jewish commentaries, written by both ancient and modern rabbis. Jonah is mentioned several times in Matthew and Luke, and its powerful story is also told and retold in Islamic literature, including the Koran, which speaks highly of Jonah’s message.

Comment 5

Jonah’s ability to get under the skin has also made it the subject of endless paintings and other artistic creations. One of the largest scenes painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome is a scene from the story

of Jonah.

Clearly, there is something about this story's dramatic power that can't be ignored.

Comment 6

Most other books found in “the Prophets” consist of a collection of sayings attributed to one or more of the ancient Jewish prophets. Sometimes these are intermingled with brief references to historical contexts or other events that prompted those writings.

Jonah is different. It is very much a story. Although it is about someone who was understood to be a prophet, it is primarily a story, not a collection of prophetic sayings.

Comment 7

As a story, Jonah is designed to teach. It is designed to teach us something about God and ourselves and how we answer God's call.

It doesn't matter if the story itself ever “happened” or not. It was not written as history. It was written as a powerful story, a story that reveals important truths about God—and us.

Comment 8

As such, it is just as powerful and just as effective as the fictional story told by the prophet Nathan to King David when Nathan was confronting David about his sin. And it's certainly as powerful and enduring as any of the story-like parables told by Jesus, as conveyed to us by the Gospels.

Stories don't have to have “happened” to be true. And stories don't have to have “happened” for them to help us better understand who God is—and who we ought to be. Jonah may not have “happened.” But it's truer than true.

Comment 9

The story of Jonah was probably first told aloud. It may have been memorized and repeated for hundreds of years before it was written down. However, there is historical evidence that it had entered written form by about 300 to 400 BCE.

The book of Jonah lends itself to oral story

telling. It's very dramatic. It's full of dialogue—back and forth conversations between various characters. It captures and holds the listener's attention.

Comment 10

Its four short chapters are also filled with questions—fourteen in all. Although these questions are addressed to various characters in the story, they also confront the listener—and the reader. We, too, are called to respond.

Over years of telling, the story of Jonah was tightly refined. Even in written form, it comes across as carefully crafted. Every word and phrase seems to count for something.

Comment 11

When the story of Jonah was put into written form, it was divided into seven distinct scenes, perhaps reflecting how it was told and understood in oral settings. The old Hebrew manuscripts of Jonah don't have chapters and verses. But they do have visual breaks between each of the seven scenes.

So in our study of Jonah, we'll be looking at the text one scene at a time. Each scene has its own power, its own message.

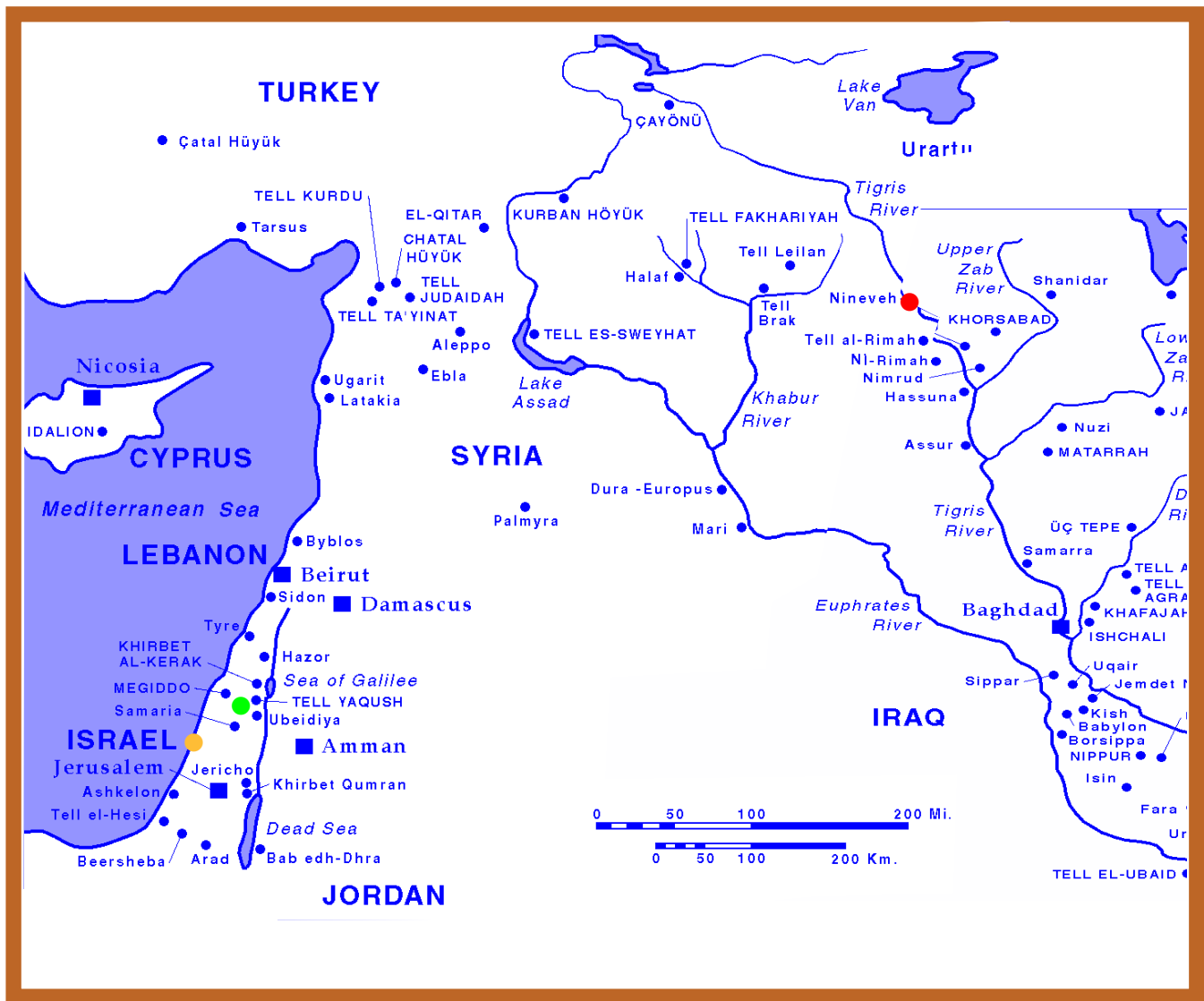
Scripture to Read

2 Kings 14:23–26

Comment 12

This brief passage from 2 Kings is the only other reference to Jonah in the Jewish scriptures. The “Jonah” who is mentioned in this passage becomes the main character in the story that is told in the book of Jonah.

The passage in 2 Kings tells about a King Jeroboam who reigned in Israel for forty-one years. This was the second King Jeroboam to reign in Israel, and this king is described as having “restored” the borders of Israel, in response to an assurance of success delivered by the prophet Jonah.



Comment 13

“Restoring” the borders of Israel probably means that the king was able to provide some protection to poor farmers and villagers on the outskirts of Israel, people who would otherwise be terrorized by raiding parties from surrounding nations.

The prophet is described as being the son of a man named Amittai. And 2 Kings describes him as being from a town known as Gath-hepher (shown on the map with a green dot ●). Gath-hepher is close to the town of Nazareth, which Jesus called home. So perhaps it’s to be expected that both Matthew and Luke portray Jesus as identifying with Jonah during confrontations with the religious authorities.

For Discussion

How is Jeroboam described in 2 Kings?

If you had been Jonah, a servant of a good and holy God, how might have you felt about this ruler? What kinds of people evoke similar feelings for you today?

If you had been Jonah, how might you have felt, deep down inside, if God had told you to go tell this wicked ruler that God was about to bless his efforts in restoring the borders of Israel?

Why do you think God did such a thing? In what kinds of situations might God act in a similar manner today?

If you had been Jonah, how do you think you might have felt if, after receiving God’s blessing, Jeroboam continued in his evil and wicked ways?

If you had been Jonah, what kind of re-

sponse from God might you have expected—or desired—when the king, even after this blessing, continued to do what was wrong in the eyes of God?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:1

Comment 14

The Book of Jonah starts with a Hebrew word that functions as a sure sign that a story is about to follow. The King James Version translates it as “Now,” but the full impact of the word might be better conveyed with the expression, “Now it came to pass that . . .”

This same Hebrew word, indicating the beginning of a dramatic story, appears many times in the Jewish scriptures.

For example, the same word opens the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, Esther, and Nehemiah. And this same word appears at the beginning of a number of the Elijah stories told in 1 Kings.

Get ready to listen, the author is telling us. I have a story to tell, the author is saying.

Comment 15

The author then identifies the two main characters of the story: God and Jonah, the lowly prophet who had previously been stuck delivering messages of blessing to the wicked King Jeroboam.

To make sure we don't miss the kinds of feelings that will be generated in the heart of Jonah, the author identifies this character very specifically as “Jonah, son of Amittai,” the prophet who had such a hard time with King Jeroboam.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:1–2

Comment 16

The formula here is a common one in Jewish literature. The word of the Lord comes to someone, and that person (usually a prophet) is told to arise and go to a specific place where the will of

God can be done. Many stories about Elijah have a similar structure.

Scripture to Read

1 Kings 21:17–18

1 Kings 17:2–5

1 Kings 17:8–9

For Discussion

When the word of the Lord comes to Jonah, where is Jonah told to go?

In what ways does the place where Jonah is asked to go seem similar to where he has been serving already—and in what ways does it seem different?

If you had been Jonah, how would all of this have made you feel toward God?

In what kinds of situations today might people feel the same?

Comment 17

The Book of Jonah calls Nineveh both a “great city” and an intensely wicked city. During the time in which this story is set, Nineveh was the dominant city of the Assyrian Empire. It was great in might. It was great in riches. And it was great in the awful evil that it could—and did—inflict on others.

The city of Nineveh no longer exists. But it stood for thousands of years in what is now the nation of Iraq. Nineveh (shown on the map with a red dot ●) was despised by the people of Israel, and the depth of that feeling comes through in some of the other biblical passages that mention Nineveh.

Scripture to Read

Nahum 1:1 and 3:1–3

Nahum 3:16,18–19

Zephaniah 2:13,15

For Discussion

What are some of the equivalents to Nineveh today?

Comment 18

The Book of Jonah shows us a prophet being sent by God to Nineveh, the most hated city of that day in that part of the world.

The King James Version says that Jonah is to “cry against it,” but that old-time phrasing can give us the wrong idea. The Hebrew word that is used here simply means to preach. It means to deliver a message from God. No “condemnation” is necessarily involved.

Comment 19

Jonah has previously delivered a message of God’s blessing to the wicked king of Israel. That must have been hard to do.

Now he is being asked to deliver a message from God to a city that is far more evil than the city run by King Jeroboam. It is a city with blood on its hands. A city filled with merchants and soldiers, all getting rich off the poor. A powerful city that snubs its nose at God. A city that serves as the capital of a major “world power.” A city that destroys everyone and everything that gets in its way.

Comment 20

The Book of Jonah makes clear that the God of Israel is not the private God of a single nation. The Holy One is paying attention not only to what is happening in Jerusalem but also to what is happening in Nineveh.

The Book of Jonah is telling us that the arrogance and evil of this great world power has not been hidden. Day after day, its wickedness rises up before God.

Comment 21

From the viewpoint of Jonah, every act of injustice, every act of violence, every act of greed, every act of economic exploitation is an assault not just on the weak and the impoverished. Every evil that is done, by individuals or nations, is an assault on God.

And according to Jonah, when the wickedness of nations rises up to assault God, God does not just “sit back and take it.” Nor does God rush to

punish. Instead, God begins working for change. God’s desire is not to condemn unto death but to transform unto life. Instead of writing off evildoers, as we might, God longs to write them in.

Comment 22

The preaching that Jonah is being asked to undertake is a call to change, a call to a new beginning, a call to righteous living. And Jonah, being a prophet of God, knows that the call of God is always accompanied by a promise of blessing.

Before the most outrageously evil people—even the most outrageously evil nations—God offers open arms and says “Come!”

For Discussion

In what kinds of situations in our own world are the attitudes of people and nations different from the attitudes of God?

What should the response of God’s people be when such differences appear?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:3

Comment 23

When Jonah hears what God wants him to do, his immediate response is to flee. The text says that he decides to flee to “Tarshish.” If Tarshish was a real town, no one knows where it was. But “Tarshish” may also be a figure of speech. In ancient Jewish literature, “Tarshish” seems to be a figurative designation for the farthest place one can imagine.

So Jonah, hearing the call of God, decides to run. He hears the gospel train a-coming. But he is not about to get on board. Instead, he heads down to the port of Joppa (shown on the map with yellow dot ●) to board a ship to the farthest end of the earth.

Comment 24

Twice this verse tells us that Jonah goes “down.” He goes “down” to Joppa. And then he goes “down” into the innermost part of the ship. Jonah is going “down” like one who is dead or dying.

Twice this same verse tells us that Jonah's goal is to "flee from the presence of the Lord," to flee from the Giver of Life, to flee from the Maker of Hope. He is like Adam and Eve, in the Book of Genesis, who try to hide themselves from "the presence of the Lord."

Comment 25

Ancient Jewish people, hearing this story, would probably smile at this point. Maybe even chuckle. For they would recall the psalm that teaches that there is nowhere to escape from God's presence. They would smile because they would know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jonah's effort will fail.

For Discussion

What do you think Jonah is afraid of or upset about? Why is he trying to run from God?

What's the equivalent of "Tarshish" for us today? How—and why—do we try to flee from God today?

Scripture to Read

Genesis 3:8

Psalm 139:7–14

Comment 26

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks to people who are filled with fear and frustration and hesitation. He urges them to "take up their bed and walk." He tells them to "throw off their cross and follow." The Gospel of Mark explains that the choice before us is a choice between the ways of life and the ways of death, the ways of good and the ways of evil.

In similar fashion, Jonah is being asked to "take up his fears and follow." He is being asked to "throw off" his hate and his resentment and walk in the gracious ways of a forgiving and embracing God.

Comment 27

Jonah is offered the chance to "get on board." He is offered the chance to walk in the ways of life. But instead, he "goes down." He lets his fears

and his angers overwhelm him. He "goes down" to Joppa, a city in the opposite direction of Nineveh. He "goes down" into the deepest part of a ship, when a journey to Nineveh requires no ship at all.

In a way, this first scene from the Book of Jonah poses a question to each of us. When the God of the universe calls—when the God who is assaulted by every act of evil seeks to enlist us in the cause of transformation and forgiveness—will we "go down" or will we "rise up"? Will we seek life or will we seek death? Will we "get on board" or will we fool ourselves into thinking that we can somehow flee from the presence of our gracious God?

Comment 28

Although it is subtle and understated, this first scene in Jonah echoes the words of Psalm 139. It is a reminder to each of us that no matter how hard we try to flee from God, whether we "take the wings of the morning" or catch a boat to "Tarshish" or "dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea," there is still a loving arm waiting to lead us, a strong arm ready to hold us.

It's never too late to turn around, for to paraphrase an old spiritual, if we are to do God's work in a troubled world, sometimes what we have to do is to "*keep our hands on the plow—and hold on.*"

Jonah



SESSION 2: *Jonah 1:4–16*

Wasn't that a great big storm?

Comment 1

The Book of Jonah was written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew text is divided into seven distinct scenes. These seven scenes probably reflect the way this story or parable was originally told and understood.

In the first scene, the word of the Lord comes to a lonely and discouraged prophet named Jonah. The text identifies him as the prophet who served during the time of the second King Jeroboam of Israel. Jeroboam is described in scripture as a wicked ruler who did great evil in the sight of God. It wouldn't have been easy for anyone to serve as a prophet in such a time. Clearly Jonah has not had an easy time of it.

Comment 2

As the story of Jonah begins, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to "arise and go to Nineveh." Nineveh is the capital of a major world power. It represents a nation that thinks of itself as "number one." It's a nation that bullies and beats up on other nations, especially weaker nations. It's proud and arrogant, filled with merchants and soldiers. Other passages of scripture describe these merchants and soldiers as having blood on their hands.

According to the book of Nahum, Nineveh is a city filled with corpses. It's likely that slaves were brought to Nineveh from conquered nations, and these slaves may have literally been worked to death, at which point their broken-down bodies would be thrown out onto the street to be eaten

by vultures and wild dogs.

Comment 3

In the story of Jonah, the word of the Lord comes to a broken and discouraged prophet, someone who has already endured more than he can handle. And the word of the Lord tells him to arise and go to Nineveh so that he can "call out" to it and deliver to it the message of a gracious and forgiving God, a God who longs for this wicked nation to change its ways.

The book of Jonah portrays the deep wickedness of Nineveh as an assault on God. God can't take it any more. And now God is determined to bring about a change.

Comment 4

But instead of heading out across the desert in a northwesterly direction toward Nineveh, Jonah turns—and flees.

He flees in a southeasterly direction to Joppa, where he finds a ship going to "Tarshish," which in that day is a common way of saying that you're going to the far side of the earth.

Comment 5

The story is clear about Jonah's purpose. Twice it tells us what Jonah is trying to do. Jonah is trying to "flee from the presence of the Lord."

Jonah hears what the Lord wants him to do—and Jonah doesn't want to do it. He would rather see Nineveh destroyed rather than delivered.

Comment 6

It's likely that the people of Israel hate and despise the people of Nineveh. If Jonah were to go and preach there, the people of Nineveh might repent. And that would surely cause God to bless them and accept them and embrace them.

For Jonah, such a thing is disgusting beyond belief. The mere thought of Nineveh being blessed by God is more than he can bear. So Jonah runs. He tries to run from this gracious God. He tries to run to the far side of the earth.

Comment 7

As a result, the first scene of Jonah ends with Jonah going “down” to the port of Joppa where he goes “down” into the lowest parts of a ship that is preparing to sail eastward on the Mediterranean Sea.

In the story's opening verses, God invites Jonah to “rise.” But Jonah rejects the invitation, and the more he tries to flee from God's presence, the deeper he sinks. In the mind of the writer, he is like a man dying. Step by fateful step, Jonah is going down, down, down.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:4

Comment 8

The Book of Jonah is a teaching story. And like many good stories, it uses lots of humor. Its power and effectiveness comes in part from the way it makes us smile and laugh.

So Scene 2 begins with God sending out a great wind into the sea. Jonah is hiding down in the bottom of a ship, trying to flee from the presence of the Lord. But this same Lord from whom Jonah is trying to flee now sends a storm into the sea. The boat rocks back and forth. Giant waves crash over it. Rain pours from the sky. The boat bounces every which way. Those on board get sicker and sicker.

Comment 9

The Hebrew text of this verse is even more vivid than it first appears. Literally, the Hebrew

text says that God “hurls” a storm onto the sea. It's as if this God that Jonah is fleeing from simply reaches down and picks out a great wind from the heavenly cupboard and then hurls it out onto the sea.

According to biblical scholars who study this book in Hebrew, a literal translation of the last part of this verse might be, “And as for the ship—it had a mind to break up.” It's as if the storm that God has hurled onto the sea is so big and so strong that even the ship itself is exhausted.

For Discussion

In the mind of the writer, why do you think God hurls this storm onto the sea? Is it to punish Jonah for running? Or is it done for some other reason?

How have you seen God act in similar ways today?

Scripture to Read

Ezekiel 27:5–7

Comment 10

This passage from Ezekiel is a description of what ships were like in the general time period in which the story of Jonah is set.

These ships are wooden vessels. The body of the ship is made of fir. They have sailing masts made of cedar, but they are also propelled by oars made of oak. The sailors who do the rowing sit on benches made of ivory. And the sails themselves are made of Egyptian linen.

Mostly, these ships are used to transport goods and materials from one place to another. They might occasionally carry passengers. But mostly they are a freight operation undertaken for commercial purposes.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:5a

Comment 11

When God hurls a great storm onto the sea, the crew of the ship becomes afraid. Crews of ships were often drawn from many different

lands. They might speak different languages—and come from diverse religious traditions. Some may have carried idols and other religious trinkets with them. So when the storm hits, they each begin crying out to their own gods.

They also begin throwing overboard the valuable cargo that they are carrying, trying to lighten the ship. The Hebrew word that is used to describe their actions is the same Hebrew word that is used to describe God’s action in sending the storm. They “hurl” the cargo overboard.

Comment 12

The sailors “hurl” things out of the ship. They are afraid that the heavy cargo will be knocked from side to side, crashing repeatedly into the sides of the ship, perhaps causing the fir boards to give way and the water to come pouring in. The cargo might include horses and mules, heavy minerals, precious metals, ivory, and other valuable products.

In describing the terror of the sailors—and their efforts to cry out for divine assistance—the book of Jonah may be trying to call to mind a portion of Psalm 107. Not only is the description in Jonah similar to what is found in Psalm 107 but the lesson that is drawn in the psalm is relevant in many ways to the message of the book of Jonah.

Scripture to Read

Psalm 107:23–31

For Discussion

In what ways might verse 31 from Psalm 107 connect with the Jonah story?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:5

Comment 13

Jonah has been asked by God to go to Nineveh and “cry out” a message from the Lord, calling the people to repentance and transformation. But instead, he’s jumped on a ship—where the only “crying out” is done by frightened sailors.

God has “hurled” a storm at the sea. And as the storm beats the ship from side to side, the sailors begin to “hurl” their cargo into the sea. On the face of every sailor, there is panic. In the heart of every sailor, there is prayer. “God help us!” they cry.

Comment 14

In the midst of all this, Jonah sleeps. For the third time in five verses, the book of Jonah tells us that Jonah has “gone down.” He has gone “down” into the innermost part of the ship—and he lies there sleeping.

When it comes time to follow in the way that God has set before him, Jonah flees. When it comes time to stand up and pray, Jonah sinks down out of sight. When it comes time to cry out to God in a time of trouble, Jonah crawls into bed and falls asleep.

Comment 15

God may have woke Jonah up this morning and started him on his way. But Jonah, the frustrated prophet, isn’t about to follow.

Instead of following along the way on which God has set him, Jonah runs in the opposite direction—and then falls right back asleep.

Here is a man who does not want to be awakened. Here is a man who does not want to be set on God’s way.

Let me sleep, he pleads. Let me sleep!

For Discussion

Why do you think Jonah is so eager to sleep?

In what kinds of situations is it hard for us as well to follow in God’s way?

In what kinds of situations is it hard for us to follow the call of Psalm 107:31 and “praise the Lord for God’s goodness” and for all “the wonderful works” that God is doing for *all* the children of the world?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:6

Comment 16

Another character appears. The captain of the ship finds Jonah hiding under a blanket, deep in the center of the ship. The captain can't believe it. Everyone is frantically running all over the ship, trying to save the ship from disaster. And here is Jonah, sleeping!

"What do you mean by such behavior?" asks the captain. "Sleeper, arise! Get up and call on your God! Perhaps your God will hear us—and we will not die!"

For Discussion

What do you think Jonah is feeling—or perhaps muttering to himself—when the captain finds him and tells him to arise and call on God?

When do we have similar feelings? Are there times when we, too, don't want to pray? Why?

Comment 17

Jonah's encounter with the captain is both tragic and comic. Back in Scene 1, the word of the Lord has come to Jonah and told him to "arise and go" so that he might "call out" to the people of Nineveh and deliver God's message so that the people will be transformed—and saved from their destructive ways.

Jonah tries to flee from God's presence. He goes down, down, down. He buries himself in a ship. He covers himself with sleep. And the next voice he hears is the captain of the ship saying "arise and get up."

Comment 18

The captain is calling on Jonah to "call out" to his God so that the people around him will be saved from destruction.

In effect, it is the same request that God has already made of Jonah. But now it comes through the lips of the captain. It's a reminder that we can't flee from God. It's a reminder that God can speak to us through anyone, even through a nonbeliever. It's a reminder that though we would prefer to sleep, we are each called to arise, get up, and go—so that we might save others from destruction, so that we might turn others around, so that we

might be agents of life and not agents of death.

Comment 19

The words of the captain to Jonah—"Sleeper, arise!"—will be echoed later in the words of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus turns to a paralyzed man who has been lowered into a house by his friends. Jesus turns to him and says, "Take up your bed and walk!"

In a hurting world, forever teetering on the brink of destruction, in a world where people are treated without dignity or hope, in a world that follows greed rather than grace, God is speaking to each of us: "Sleeper, arise!"

The words may come from God above—or perhaps from the captain of the battered ship on which we are sailing. But to every sleeper, God says the same: "Take up your bed and walk!" To every sleeper, God says, "Get up and go!" The work of mercy, the work to which we are called—it is never done.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:7

Proverbs 18:18

Proverbs 16:33

Comment 20

In the ancient world, it was common to make decisions about people through the casting of lots. The book of Proverbs expresses a common belief that the outcome of such an effort was not a matter of chance. It was believed that God determined the outcome.

Perhaps that's why the book of Acts describes the disciples of Jesus casting lots to select someone to replace Judas, who has died in the aftermath of the crucifixion. It's likely that the disciples believed that by casting lots, it wouldn't be *their* choice about who would replace Judas as one of "the twelve" but rather *God's* choice.

Comment 21

At least in some circumstances, the "casting of lots" seems to have been done by selecting a distinctive stone or pebble or other small ob-

ject for each person present. Someone would sit down and create a deep fold in their lap or outer garment. All of the stones or small objects would be placed into the lap. And then the person into whose lap the stones or small objects had been placed would begin to jiggle and swing and bounce the pocket of cloth until one of the stones was “cast” out.

In other words, one of the stones would pop out. And this stone would be understood as a sign from God pointing to a particular individual.

Comment 22

So in the Jonah story, in the midst of the furious storm that has come upon them, the sailors begin to think that someone on board must be responsible for this terrible tragedy that they are suffering. The storm, they think, must be a judgment from God on someone on board.

To find out who it is, they cast lots. And the lot falls to Jonah.

For Discussion

What do you think of this method of decision-making? Is it better or worse than the methods we use today? Why?

Are the sailors right or wrong in assuming that the storm is God’s punishment on someone on board?

How does this scapegoating approach express itself in our world today?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:8

Comment 23

The sailors cast lots—and the lot falls to Jonah. But the sailors are reluctant to act. The implication of their decision making is to turn this man Jonah into a human sacrifice. But they are not sure that they want to do that. So they begin asking Jonah questions.

They want to know who is sending this evil upon them. They demand to know Jonah’s business or occupation. They want to know where he comes from and what nationality he is. In short,

they want to understand this man that the casting of lots has identified as the culprit. Maybe there is something he can say that will show them that the casting of lots has gone wrong.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:9

Comment 24

This verse is at the critical center of Scene 2 of Jonah. Ancient Jewish writers would often polish and refine their work to an unbelievable degree, often going way beyond what we would even think of doing.

One way that they would point to the heart of a message was to put the most important words of a passage directly into the center of that passage.

Comment 25

For example, in the original Hebrew, the Twenty-Third Psalm is very carefully constructed. The heart of the Psalm—the phrase “thou art with me”—falls in the exact center. There are precisely twenty-six Hebrew words before that phrase and precisely twenty-six Hebrew words after that phrase.

We miss all of this in English, but by constructing the psalm so carefully, the author of this highly polished psalm points to the dramatic heart of its message: “Thou art with me.”

Comment 26

In the same way, Scene 2 in the book of Jonah has an exact center. And that exact center is Jonah’s response to the sailors. In the Hebrew version of Jonah, there are exactly ninety-four words in this scene *before* Jonah speaks, and there are exactly ninety-four words in this scene *after* he speaks, plus one concluding verse that is separate from the main action of the scene.

For Discussion

What do you notice about Jonah’s response as stated in verse 9? What facts about himself does Jonah include?

Why is it important for Jonah to acknowledge both his ethnic and spiritual identity?

When people today ask us who we are, how should we respond?

Comment 27

Jonah ignores the sailors' question about his occupation and place of birth. Perhaps he doesn't see these things as important. Instead, he reveals the heart of who he is. He honors his heritage by identifying himself as a "Hebrew." Then he honors his God by revealing that he worships "the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land."

Jonah knows that he doesn't worship a small god. His God is the absolute Lord, the God of heaven, the Maker of the sea and the dry land—and everything in between. In his answer, Jonah echoes the words of Psalm 95. The God that he fears—the God that he reveres—is the Great Creator, the Holy One above all holy ones.

Scripture to Read

Psalm 95:3–6

Jonah 1:10–11

Comment 28

Jonah tells the truth—in every way. He tells who he is. He identifies his heritage, both culturally and spiritually. And he reveals as well what he is trying to do. He admits to the sailors that he is trying to flee from the presence of the Great Creator, trying to run from the presence of the Maker of the sea and the dry land and everything that is.

By his own words, Jonah reveals the folly of his effort. The sailors hear—and are terrified. They realize that his efforts are doomed to failure—and they fear that they too will suffer because of what he's done.

Comment 29

The storm that God has hurled at the sea is still pounding the sides of the ship. Water is everywhere. The wind is howling. Waves are rising. Desperately, the sailors ask Jonah what they can

do to free themselves from danger. They realize that this storm is raging because Jonah, in a reversal of the famous hymn, has said to God, "Please, God, *don't* stand by me!"

"What is this that you have done?" they ask. There is amazement in their eyes. How could you be so stupid, they seem to say, going your own way instead of God's, thereby endangering not only yourself but us?

Comment 30

The sailors' question to Jonah, "What is this that you have done?" is the same question that the book of Genesis describes God as asking the woman in the Garden of Eden when she and her husband have gone their own way and eaten of the tree that they were told not to eat.

By putting this same question into the mouth of the sailors, the book of Jonah seems to be saying that when we flee from God—when we fail to "arise and go" as God commands, when we fail to be agents of change and grace in a world of evil and death—then we have committed the ultimate sin. We are like Adam and Eve, foolishly going our own way in the face of an Almighty God, the Creator of all that is.

Scripture to Read

Genesis 3:13

For Discussion

In what kinds of situations might we, too, hear a voice within asking, "What is this that thou hast done?"

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:12

Comment 31

Jonah now tells the sailors to pick him up and throw him into the stormy sea. The Hebrew word that Jonah uses for what the sailors should do is the same Hebrew word that has appeared several times before in the story. It's the word for "hurl." Just as God has *hurled* a great wind over the sea, and just as the sailors have *hurled* their cargo

overboard, Jonah now asks that the men on the ship pick him up and *hurl* him into the sea.

Jonah tells the sailors that if they do this, the sea will be calm.

For Discussion

From the viewpoint of the story, why do you think Jonah tells the sailors to hurl him into the sea? Does he want to be punished for what he's done? Does he want to save the sailors from destruction? Or does he perhaps think that by drowning he will finally succeed in fleeing from the presence of God?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:13

Comment 32

The sailors have cast lots and the lot has fallen to Jonah as the cause of their trouble. Jonah himself has admitted a terrible thing. He has admitted that he is attempting to flee from the God who has made everything. He is trying to go his own way.

Yet the sailors are reluctant to hurl him into the sea. So they go back to their rowing, pulling with all their strength against the force of the waves. They try desperately to get to land, not wanting to hurl Jonah into the sea. But the wind keeps howling.

For Discussion

Why do you think the sailors don't hurl Jonah into the sea right away? What's going on in their minds?

What do you think Jonah is thinking when they decide to row some more instead of hurling him into the sea? Do you think he's relieved—or disappointed? Why?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:14

Comment 33

When the sailors find that their rowing is of no use, they cry out. But instead of crying out to

their own small gods, they cry out to the Maker of heaven and earth. They “cry out” as Jonah was to “cry out” in Nineveh. They “cry out” to the Almighty Creator—to whom Jonah himself refused to “cry out” when the storm was rocking the boat.

The sailors are outsiders. They are from many different nations. They have not known this God before. Yet they “cry out” to the Holy One as the storm is raging. Meanwhile Jonah, who is God's anointed prophet, remains silent. Meanwhile Jonah, God's own child, refuses to “cry out” to the One who has made him.

Comment 34

The Book of Jonah seems to be saying something very similar to what Jesus himself would later say.

If those who know God best won't “cry out” to the Lord in their time of need, if they won't “cry out” to the Holy One in praise and thanksgiving, then *someone somewhere* will “cry out,” and if every human remains silent, then somehow the stones themselves will begin to “cry out.”

Scripture to Read

Luke 19:37–40

Comment 35

When the sailors on the ship “cry out” to God—because Jonah himself, the religious one, will not cry out—they ask God for mercy.

Somehow, these sailors know that the true God is a God of life and not a God of death. So they ask God not to hold it against them if they hurl an innocent man to his death. They “cry out” in anguish, in a situation that they cannot control. They “cry out” to a God who has all power, a God who is never “out of control.”

Comment 36

Perhaps the story is trying to remind us that we too will sometimes need to “cry out” to God—not just in praise, not just in worship, but sometimes in despair, sometimes in anguish, sometimes not knowing what to do, sometimes

in a raging storm. Sometimes we will simply be crying, “Dear Lord, stand by me!”

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:15

Comment 37

Desperate and at their wits’ end, the sailors now hurl Jonah into the sea. They hurl Jonah into the storm that God has hurled across the face of the earth.

Immediately, the sea ceases from its raging. Immediately, the sea hears the voice of its Maker. Immediately, when the sea hears the words, “Peace, be still,” the sea obeys. The sea does what Jonah did not do. The sea obeys.

In the book of Jonah, the sea is the opposite of Jonah. The sea arises when God says, “Arise!” The sea goes when God says, “Go!” And the sea retreats when God says, “Retreat!”

Comment 38

Jonah, on the other hand, is like so many of us. We refuse to listen to our Maker, especially when our Maker says something that we don’t want to hear. And we refuse to follow our Maker when our Maker is headed to a place to which we don’t want to go.

Like Jonah, we think we know best. Like Jonah, we go our own way. And like Jonah, when we cling to our bed and lose ourselves in sleep, we find no rest. Storms rage. Captains call. Seas rise. And a voice begins ringing in our ears, “What hast thou done?”

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:16

Comment 39

Scene 2 concludes with the sailors who have been left on the ship falling down on their knees and praising God exceedingly. They have met the Maker of the sea and dry land. They have seen the power of the Creator first hand. And their response, far different from the response of Jonah, is the response of worship.

They offer a sacrifice as a sign of their devotion and they make vows to God Almighty—vows that they intend to keep. They have been transformed from worshipers of idols to worshipers of the Holy One. They have been changed—just as God seeks to change the evil nation whose capital lies in Nineveh. And in response to their change, God offers a blessing—just as Jonah fears God will offer to the hated city of Nineveh.

Comment 40

Scene 2 closes with Jonah being hurled into the sea. Jonah is a weary man. For forty-one years, he has had to deal with wicked King Jeroboam. Through those forty-one years, he has shed his share of tears. He feels exhausted and overwhelmed.

Perhaps the book of Jonah is written for those of us who sometimes feel like Jonah. Perhaps it is written so that when we are tempted to flee—and when we are tempted to sleep—we will nevertheless rise up and sing, as Jonah himself should have sung, in the words of James Weldon Johnson:

*God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray!*

Jonah



SESSION 3: *Jonah 1:17–2:10*

While on others thou art calling...

Comment 1

The book of Jonah was written in seven distinct scenes. In the first scene, the word of the Lord comes to a lonely and discouraged prophet named Jonah. Jonah has been called as a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam the Second, a man who is described in scripture as someone who continually did great evil in the sight of God.

As the story (or parable) begins, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to “arise and go to Nineveh.” Nineveh is the capital of a major world power, a city of even more wickedness than Jerusalem. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and to preach there, in the hope that the city will be transformed and depart from its evil ways.

Comment 2

Jonah, like most people of that day, hates and despises Nineveh. And perhaps he fears that if were to go Nineveh, the city would repent and receive God’s blessing. He would rather see it remain in its evil path—and risk total destruction by an angry God.

So instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah goes down to the sea, jumps aboard a ship that’s headed in the opposite direction, and tries his best to flee from the presence of God. He’s sick of God and God’s ways. He’s going to do his own thing. But in order to do that, he first has to run.

Comment 3

In the second scene, God hurls a mighty storm across the sea. The boat in which Jonah is riding is battered by intense wind and rain. The sailors go into a panic. They throw their expensive cargo overboard. They are trying to the ship. They are trying to save their own lives.

The sailors come from many different nations. They each begin calling out to their own gods and idols, pleading to be saved from this violent storm. But Jonah sleeps. He is down in the deepest part of the ship. He lifts no hand to help. And he utters no prayer.

The captain of the ship awakens Jonah. “Sleeper, arise!” he says, “And call on your god—lest we perish!”

Comment 4

The sailors cast lots to see who might be responsible for this terrible storm. The lot falls to Jonah. Immediately the sailors bombard him with questions, trying to figure out who he is and what he might have done.

Jonah answers by declaring his ethnic and spiritual identity. “I am a Hebrew (or Jew),” he says. “And I worship the God of heaven, the Almighty Creator, the One who has made the sea and the dry land and everything in between.”

Comment 5

When Jonah tells the sailors that he is trying to “flee from the presence” of this mighty God, the sailors are terrified. “What shall we do?” they

ask.

“Hurl me into the sea,” says Jonah. Initially, the sailors are reluctant to do that. They go back to their oars. They desperately try to row in order to bring the ship back to safety. But the storm is too fierce. Their rowing does no good.

Comment 6

Finally the sailors “call out” to the Lord, as Jonah himself has refused to do. They have not known the true God before. But they call out to this God for mercy and forgiveness as they pick up Jonah and toss him into the sea.

When Jonah hits the water, the sea stops its raging. The Maker of all that is speaks. The sea listens, and the sea obeys.

In gratitude, the sailors again address God in prayer. They offer sacrifices and utter vows of personal devotion. God has saved them and blessed them and delivered them. Instead of trying to flee from God’s presence, as Jonah has done, the sailors are filled with thanksgiving.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:17a

For Discussion

In what sense, if any, might Jonah have been sad to have been swallowed by a fish? In what sense, if any, might he have been glad?

What does this verse tell us about God? And what difference does this insight make for our lives today?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 1:17b

Comment 7

The King James Version says that God “prepares” a great fish to swallow up Jonah. But the sense of the Hebrew word is more like God has “appointed” or “assigned” a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

According to the book of Jonah, just as God speaks to the sea and the sea obeys, so too God speaks to a fish—and the fish obeys.

Comment 8

This part of the story serves as yet another reminder that there is no fleeing from God’s presence. God knows ahead of time what is happening. And God is there.

Jonah may think that by being hurled into the sea, he will at last escape from God’s presence. But even in the sea—even under the water—God is there, preparing a way, thinking ahead, appointing one creature to care for another.

For Discussion

What might this portion of the story be able to teach us about “environmental concerns” and the rest of creation?

Comment 9

The text says that Jonah remains in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Possibly the three days and three nights are symbolic of the time that is required to lose all hope.

After three days and three nights without food or water, any normal person would be dead. After three days and three nights, no body put into a tomb would emerge on its own. After three days and three nights, Jonah has sunk as low as he can go. Death has him in its jaws. There is only the tiniest of hairs separating Jonah from his end.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:1 (*first three words only*)

Comment 10

The first three words of this second chapter convey an awesome reality: “*Then* Jonah prayed.”

The prayer of this prophet of God was a long time coming. According to the story, Jonah didn’t pray when God told him to get up and go to Nineveh: he just fled.

Nor did Jonah pray when he saw a boat down in Joppa headed for the far side of the world: he just got on board.

Nor did Jonah pray when a mighty storm battered his boat: he just hid himself in the deepest part of the vessel.

Nor did Jonah pray when the boat seemed

ready to sink and everyone aboard was desperately crying out to their gods: he just slept.

Comment 11

Nor did Jonah pray when he admitted to the sailors that he was fleeing from the Creator of the universe: he just asked to be hurled into the sea.

Nor did Jonah pray when he finally hit the water: he just hoped he'd drown.

Nor did Jonah pray when a great fish, appointed by God, swallowed him whole: he just gritted his teeth and looked away.

According to the story, three days pass. Three long nights go by. Jonah is all but dead and gone. *Then*, when there is only a hair's breadth of life left in him—*then*, when all hope seems gone—*then* Jonah prays.

For Discussion

How is Jonah's behavior similar or different from how we behave? What made Jonah wait so long? What makes people today—even people of faith—become rebellious toward God?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:1

Comment 12

This verse begins with the words: "*Then* Jonah prayed." But while we are still reeling from the effect of those words, the story comes at us again. It tells us that Jonah prays "to the Lord his God."

After all that Jonah has done—after all of Jonah's stubborn refusals to let God wake him up and start him on his way, after Jonah's arrogant efforts to flee from God's presence, after all that Jonah has done to endanger the lives of others—the Lord is still his God.

Comment 13

The fact that the Holy One, the Creator of heaven and earth, is still Jonah's God says nothing about Jonah or his destructive behavior. Jonah has done everything he could to deserve God no more. By trying to flee from God, Jonah has re-

pudiated his Maker. Yet God is still there, and the Holy One, the Almighty Maker of the sea and the dry land, is still Jonah's God.

God is faithful. God is steadfast. God endures all of our foolishness. And so it is to "his God" that Jonah, who has sunk as far "down" as down can be, finally prays.

Comment 14

It was days earlier that the sailors on the ship did their praying. The captain of the vessel has long since requested—and received—God's blessing. People who had never before known God have long since entered into God's embrace.

Now, deep within the belly of the fish—after many fretful days during which he was running down to Joppa, long after desperately searching out a ship that was headed to the far side of the earth, long after his endless tossing by the wind and the waves, long after enduring the terror of being picked up and hurled into the sea, three long days and nights after being swallowed by the great fish that heard and responded to God's command—Jonah finally prays.

Comment 15

Jonah isn't familiar with today's hymns. But in our imaginations, we can picture him there in the belly of the fish, down as low as he can go, finally opening his mouth to pray.

And we can imagine him, with tears in his eyes, utterly devoid of merit, singing with the weakest and frailest of voices, the pleading words of Fanny Crosby,

*Pass me not, O gentle savior;
hear my humble cry.
While on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by . . .*

Comment 16

The next eight verses of Jonah use a classic form of Hebrew poetry. And they seem to reflect the type of personal prayer and praise that might be shared in a public way as one enters the temple in Jerusalem after a particularly difficult time.

It was common in ancient times for Jewish people to sing a psalm of individual thanksgiving as they came into the temple. These psalms of individual thanksgiving were partly addressed to God as an expression of gratitude for what God had done. But they were also partly addressed to the congregation of other worshippers. In that sense, they functioned as a kind of testimony—or instruction—about the goodness of God.

The next eight verses in Jonah use many standard phrases from the book of Psalms, plus some unique phrases. But as we will see, the overall effect is that of a psalm of thanksgiving.

For Discussion

Jonah has ignored God, shunned God, and fled from God. Now he's barely hanging onto life. He's been in the belly of the fish for three days and nights. His situation is as hopeless as it can get. Why then, in the midst of a situation like this, would Jonah offer a psalm of *thanksgiving*? Why not a plea for deliverance? Why not a prayer of repentance?

What impact can thanksgiving have in our own lives, especially when things seem exceptionally bleak?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:2

Psalms 18:5–6

Psalms 120:1

Comment 17

Jonah had been asked by God to go to Nineveh and “cry out” to the people so that they might be saved. Jonah refused. Aboard ship, when the storm was raging, the captain asked him to “cry out” to his God so that the sailors might be saved. Once again, Jonah refused.

Now—finally—battered by the most severe of afflictions, Jonah “cries out.” He cries out to God in his distress.

Comment 18

Jonah, despite all that he has done, finds that God is still there. And not only is God still there,

but God hears his cry. This causes Jonah to be *thankful* beyond all measure.

To express the awfulness of his situation, Jonah says that his long-delayed cry to God comes from what the King James Version calls “the belly of hell.” Other versions call it the “belly of Sheol,” which means “the place of the dead.”

Comment 19

At the time during which the story of Jonah is set, most Jewish people probably didn't have any concept of people being raised from the dead or even of people going to either heaven or hell—at least not in the ways that we do.

In the minds of many ancient Jews, everyone who died went to a shadowy “underworld” called Sheol. It was thought to be under the earth somewhere, with bars or restraints to keep anyone from leaving. Some people thought there would be no awareness of God there. Others felt that God would somehow still be with those whose spirits resided in Sheol.

Comment 20

The King James Version seldom, if ever, uses the word Sheol. Often, the King James Version translates it as “hell” or as the “grave.” But more modern translations often use the word Sheol, which reflects the Hebrew word for that shadowy place of death.

So when Jonah says that he cried out to God “from the belly of Sheol,” he is saying that he cried out to God from death itself. That's how close he felt to his end.

Scripture to Read (on “Sheol”)

Note: These passages are best read from a more modern translation than the King James Version, preferably one that is fairly literal rather than one that is a modern “paraphrase”

Psalms 88:3

Job 7:9–10

Isaiah 5:14–15

For Discussion

What do you make of these passages?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:3–4

Psalm 42:7–8

Psalm 31:22

Comment 21

In his psalm of thanksgiving, Jonah acknowledges that he has been floundering in “the deep.” Even as he prays, he is overwhelmed by the seas. Billows and waves pass over him.

Yes, he has been stubborn. Yes, he has refused to look to God. Yes, he has tried to flee. But finally, in the midst of “the deep,” he comes to his senses. He longs to look again to God’s “holy temple.” In the words of a gospel song, Jonah is perhaps finally singing,

Take me back, take me back, dear Lord,

Take me back to the place

Where I first received you . . .

Comment 22

There is perhaps a double meaning in Jonah’s mention of “the deep.” On the one hand, in Scripture “the deep” can refer to the place where we struggle, the place where we feel lost and alone. But there are also biblical references to “the deep” as the place where our sins are buried, the place where our guilt is left behind.

There is a similar symbolism to the drama of baptism. We are cast down into “the deep,” and from “the deep,” we emerge as “new creatures.” So perhaps for Jonah, the exhausted prophet, “the deep” has been not just a place of distress but also a cleansing fount, a redeeming flood. If this is the case, it is not at all surprising that Jonah begins to sing a psalm of thanksgiving.

Scripture to Read

Micah 7:18–19

Jonah 2:5–7

Comment 23

In his song of thanksgiving, Jonah once again describes what has happened.

The waters were all over me, he says. My soul was sinking. The deep was closing around me.

The swirling sea “weeds” of the Evil One were wrapping themselves around my head. The Lord may have said, “Sleeper, arise!” The Holy One may have called, “Get up and go!” But instead of starting on my way, says Jonah, I headed down, down, down.

Comment 24

In the King James Version, Jonah says, “The earth with its bars was about me forever.” But in the original Hebrew, it’s clear that Jonah is talking about Sheol, the place of the dead. He was almost there. He was on his last breath. He had been three days and three nights in the belly of the fish before he had the courage to pray...

So by the time that Jonah prays, his soul is faint within him. His words are weak and feeble. He manages only the shortest of moans and the quietest of cries. Yet his prayer comes to God. Every word is heard, amplified loud and clear in God’s holy temple.

For Discussion

Do you think people who are unconscious or in a coma or have had a massive stroke are able to communicate with God? And if so, how?

Which do you think God finds it easiest to hear: the weak moan of someone who has fled from God, gotten into all kinds of trouble, and is now all but inside death’s door—or the proud prayer of those who have been faithful to God since their youth?

What teachings of Jesus can you think of that connect with the message found in this part of Jonah?

Comment 25

The Book of 2 Samuel describes a time when David was in severe danger, persecuted and harassed by Saul, thinking he wouldn’t survive. But in his moment of weakness, with a voice weak and frail, David calls out to God—and God hears him.

So 2 Samuel 22 presents a psalm of thanksgiving. It’s described as the psalm that David sings after receiving God’s blessing in the midst of great

fear.

Scripture to Read

2 Samuel 22:1–7

Jonah 2:8

For Discussion

What do you think Jonah 2:8 means? How does it relate to Jonah's experience?

Comment 26

Until now, Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving has been very personal. He has focused on his own experience, his own thanksgiving.

But it is typical for psalms of thanksgiving to also include words of advice for other members of the congregation who will be present when these songs are sung.

Comment 27

Here in verse 8, Jonah seems to be speaking as if he is in the temple, singing this psalm of thanksgiving as others listen. So now he pauses to make an important point.

Of course, as far as the story is concerned, there is no congregation present. Jonah is still in the belly of the fish. But the story is designed to have an impact on those of us who read it the congregation of the righteous. And so it is to us that Jonah seems to speak.

Comment 28

Jonah 2:8 has been translated in many ways. The King James Version says, "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." The Revised Standard Version says, "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty." The New International Version says, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."

Although the verse can be translated with a reference to "worthless idols," the "lying vanities" of which the King James Version speaks is perhaps closer to what the story has described. Jonah was not bowing down before false idols as such. It was his own self that he was worshiping. It was

a lying vanity that led him astray, a belief that he knew better than God what should be done. His actions grew out of a desire to serve himself rather than his Maker.

Comment 29

Jonah seems to say that when we chase after "lying vanities," we forsake our own mercy. The word that the King James Version translates as "mercy" is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means steadfast mercy and enduring love, a love that's there when we go astray, a mercy that endures even when we don't deserve it, the kind of mercy that reflects a relationship that just can't be broken.

This is the same steadfast love and loyal kindness that is spoken of frequently in the book of Ruth.

Comment 30

When we bow to ourselves, says Jonah, and when we think we're so great, all we have is ourselves. And in the end, when the storm is raging and the deep is calling, having only ourselves on which to rely doesn't bring much security.

It's only when we let go of ourselves, says Jonah, and cry out to God that we truly connect our lives to *hesed*. Only then do we connect our deepest being to the mercy that gives life, to the steadfast love that never lets us go.

For Discussion

What do you think Jonah would say about the modern economic and political notion that people should make it on their own — or not make it at all?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:9

Comment 31

Devout Jews would sometimes march in a procession into the temple, singing their songs of thanksgiving, such as Jonah is here described as singing in the belly of the fish. And generally these psalms would end with a vow, a promise

by the psalm-singer to offer sacrifices in praise to God, to present tithes or other gifts in the temple or to provide support to those who were in need or to engage in some other act of personal devotion.

So Jonah now offers a promise to fulfill the vows that he is making to the Lord.

Scripture to Read

Psalm 116:16–18

For Discussion

What do you think of this ancient practice of making personal vows to God as a sign of thanksgiving? What kind of “thanksgiving” vows, if any, might be appropriate today?

Comment 32

The end of Jonah’s psalm of thanksgiving offers personal vows—but goes beyond the making of vows. Once again, it’s as if Jonah is turning to the congregation and offering instruction. Once again, he offers a reminder.

There is no “congregation” to hear it, of course. There is only us. “Salvation is of the Lord,” he says in conclusion. This is Jonah’s message for all of us might sometimes be tempted to think otherwise: “Salvation is of the Lord.”

Comment 33

In part, Jonah is saying that we can’t save ourselves. We can run. We can flee. We can sleep. We can pretend that God didn’t wake us up this morning and start us on our way. We can flex our muscles and pretend we have the strength to make it on our own. But there is no salvation—no salvation anywhere, says Jonah—without God.

It works the other way as well, of course. God and deliverance are inseparable. You can’t have God and not have deliverance. You can’t have God and not have mercy. You can’t have God and not be freed from oppression—even an oppression of your own making.

Comment 34

God saves, says Jonah. God delivers. That’s

what God is all about. That’s what we can’t flee from. That’s what we can’t run from.

Even when we’ve been hurled into the sea, even when the waves are up to our neck, even when we’ve been in the belly of a fish for what seems like an eternity, God delivers. That’s who God is.

Comment 35

By ending his psalm of thanksgiving with a reminder that deliverance is from the Lord, Jonah also helps explain his first words to the sailors in the midst of the storm, when the sailors were frantically pressing him for answers.

“I am a Hebrew,” he says. At first glance, it seems to be a statement of ethnic identity, and in a way, it is. But it is more than that, for by calling himself a Hebrew, Jonah is identifying himself with a tradition of deliverance. For the Hebrew people, the core event of their existence (even today) is the celebration of the Passover, the feast in memory of their *deliverance* from Egypt, the feast in memory of their *liberation* from slavery, the feast in memory of their *redemption* from a “tight place” that held them fast.

Comment 36

For Jonah to say that he is a Hebrew is a way of identifying his heritage. That heritage is a heritage of deliverance at God’s own hand, a heritage that has experienced first-hand the reality of a God who makes a way.

When Jonah says, “I am a Hebrew,” he is really saying, “I am *one of the delivered ones*. I am one of those whom God has set free, one of those whom God has delivered.”

It is this same heritage that Jonah claims when he ends his psalm of thanksgiving with the words: “Salvation is of the Lord.” In other words, our God is deliverance.

Comment 37

In talking about God’s deliverance, the Hebrew text of this verse uses the Hebrew word *yesuatab*, which means “deliverance.” *Yesuatab* comes from the Hebrew verb *yesuah*, which

means “God delivers, God saves.”

Yesuah is also the Hebrew spelling of the name that was given to Jesus. When the Roman soldiers tack his name to the foot of the cross, they write it in Greek, thinking it is no more than his name. But to Jewish passersby—and to all who understand Hebrew—the true meaning is clear: God saves. God delivers. Deliverance and God are one and the same.

Comment 38

Like Jonah, Jesus spends three days in a tomb. Like Jonah, Jesus finds the bars of Sheol rising up around him. But just when the ways of death think they have won, the grave spits him forth. Why is the tomb cracked open? Why can't it hold him? Because God delivers. Because God saves. Because God's mercy endures forever.

“Salvation is of the Lord,” says Jonah. That's who God is.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 2:10

Comment 39

Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving ends with an affirmation of God's delivering power over all that would encompass us, all that would overpower us, all that would enslave us.

In the story, no sooner are these words out of Jonah's mouth than the Lord speaks. Once again, the fish hears—and the fish obeys. With words of faith still on his lips, Jonah is hurled from the belly of the fish onto dry land.

Comment 40

The One who has made both the sea and the dry land has delivered Jonah from death to life, from oppression to freedom, from suffocation to liberation.

Jonah forsakes his lying vanities and finds a steadfast mercy. It's a divine grace, a grace that looks beyond his faults—and sees his need.

Jonah



SESSION 4: *Jonah 3:1-10*

Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure...

Comment 1

The Book of Jonah is written in seven distinct scenes. In the first scene, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to “arise and go to Nineveh.”

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, a major world power, a city of great wealth and great wickedness. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and to preach there, in the hope that the city will be transformed and depart from its evil ways.

Comment 2

But instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah goes down to the sea, jumps aboard a ship, and tries his best to flee from the presence of God. He doesn't want to do what God has told him to do.

In the second scene, God hurls a mighty storm across the sea, and the boat in which Jonah is riding is battered by the wind and the rain. The sailors panic. Each begins calling out to his own god, hoping to be saved from this violent storm.

Comment 3

Jonah sleeps. He lifts no hand to help. And he utters no prayer. Frantically, the captain of the ship tries to awaken him as the sailors cast lots to see who might be responsible for this terrible storm. The lot falls to Jonah.

The sailors question Jonah, and he reveals that he is trying to flee from the presence of the God of heaven, the Maker of the sea and the dry land. This causes the sailors to be terrified.

“What shall we do?” they ask. “Hurl me into the sea,” says Jonah.

Comment 4

Despite the casting of lots, the sailors are reluctant to throw Jonah overboard. They want to find some other way out of this storm. So the sailors begin bombarding Jonah with questions. They want to figure out who he is and what he might have done.

Jonah answers by declaring his ethnic and spiritual identity. “I am a Hebrew (or Jew),” he says. “And I worship the God of heaven, the Almighty Creator, the One who has made the sea and the dry land and everything in between.”

Comment 5

For a while, the sailors try to keep rowing, but they get no where. Finally, they decide to act on Jonah's suggestion. They throw Jonah overboard—and as soon as Jonah hits the water, the sea stops its raging. Immediately, the sailors address God in prayer. They offer sacrifices and make vows. God has saved them. They are filled with thanksgiving.

Then, in the third scene, we find Jonah in the belly of a great fish. He remains there for three days and three nights, stubbornly refusing to call on God. Then, when all hope is lost, when three long days have past, in the midst of great affliction, Jonah finally calls out to God.

And God hears him.

Comment 6

As part of the story, we hear from Jonah a traditional Jewish “psalm of thanksgiving,” such as might be sung by someone entering the temple in Jerusalem.

Jonah praises the God who heard his cry, even as his soul fainted within him, even as he felt the doors of “Sheol” (the Jewish place of the dead) closing around him.

Comment 7

In his psalm of thanksgiving, Jonah reminds us about a lesson he has learned: those who “observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.” In other words, they who go their own way, thinking that they don’t need God, are in fact turning their back on grace. They’re turning their back on forgiveness. They’re turning their back on hope.

Jonah closes his psalm of thanksgiving with a declaration that “salvation is of the Lord.” His God is a God of deliverance, a God who breaks us free from all that enslaves us. Then, just as Jonah closes his psalm, the great fish vomits Jonah up onto dry land.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:1–2

Comment 8

Jonah has spent days fleeing down to the port of Joppa. Then, sometime after the ship sets sail, he’s hit by a violent storm that God has hurled out upon the sea. He has been questioned by the captain and the sailors—and has had no good answers to give.

When the lot falls to him, he asks the sailors to hurl him overboard, thinking he will drown in the sea. But when he hits the water, a great fish swallows him. He’s confined inside the fish for three days before he finally prays.

Then, before he knows what’s happening, the fish belches Jonah out onto dry land.

Comment 9

Jonah is lying there, dazed, perhaps longing

for some time to recover, longing for a little peace, maybe dreaming of a chance to return to the temple in Jerusalem and offer sacrifices and prayers, as he said in his psalm.

But before he can do any of that, the word of the Lord comes to him again, a second time. It’s the same message that he ran from before. It’s the same words, the same command. Nothing has changed.

For Discussion

If you had been Jonah, how do you think you would have felt when the word of the Lord comes to you again so quickly, saying the same thing as before? Would you have been sad—or glad? Why?

On what sorts of occasions and in what sorts of ways might the word of the Lord come us “a second time”?

Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 13:3–5

Jeremiah 33:1–3

Comment 10

The phrasing in Jonah about the word of the Lord coming to Jonah “a second time” may have reminded early readers of similar passages in the book of Jeremiah. On several occasions, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah a second time, asking him to do something that the Lord wants done.

But along with the sense of command comes a sense of promise. When Jeremiah is locked away in a prison, when his heart is discouraged and his body is aching, the word of the Lord comes to him a second time. He is told a second time to call unto the Maker of heaven and earth—because the Holy One is anxious to show him “great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.”

Comment 11

Perhaps the story of Jonah means to convey some of this same kind of promise.

Not only is Jonah once more told to “get up

and go,” but he is implicitly offered the promise that we are all offered when we walk in the ways of God—the chance to see “great and mighty things,” beyond what we ever imagine, beyond what we ever could know.

Comment 12

Jonah 3:2 indicates that when Jonah gets to Nineveh, he is to “preach unto it the preaching,” which God tells him to preach. In other translations, it says that he is to proclaim the “proclamation” that God gives him.

The Hebrew word that is used to describe this “preaching” or “proclamation” that Jonah is to deliver is unusual. It’s used nowhere else in the Hebrew scriptures.

Comment 13

Long before the time of Jesus, the Hebrew scriptures had been translated into Greek so that they could be read more easily by those Jews who were living in other parts of the Roman world. In fact, many scholars feel that Jesus and other early Jewish leaders of the Christian church probably read the Hebrew scriptures largely in Greek.

And in the Greek version of Jonah, the Greek word that is used for the “preaching” or “proclamation” that Jonah is to deliver is *kerygma*. This is the same Greek word that is used in the Christian Scriptures to refer to the core message of God’s goodness and love. The word *kerygma* is used to describe the *core* message—or “kernel” of truth—that Paul and other apostles delivered in many parts of the Roman world.

Comment 14

So it seems likely, then, that Jonah is not being asked to go to Nineveh to preach *every detail* about who God is and what God has done. He is being asked to focus on the essentials—the *kerygma*. He is to deliver a core understanding of God’s goodness and love.

It’s not that Jonah is expected to engage in lengthy teaching sessions or extended monologues. He is simply there to call out the *kerygma*.

He is to proclaim it. He is to preach it. And he is to do so in a way that will cause people to be changed, a way that will cause a whole nation to be transformed.

Scripture to Read

Titus 1:1–3

1 Corinthians 1:21

For Discussion

Can the “foolishness of preaching” still make a difference in our world? What is it that makes preaching effective or ineffective?

Sometimes preachers today tell us that they are preaching what God told them to preach—but how can we be sure?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:3a

Comment 15

The first time, when God said, “Arise and go,” Jonah went down and slept.

But this time, he arises and goes. He’s learned that we can never escape the word of the Lord. Even in a raging storm, even at the bottom of the sea, even in the belly of a fish—God is there.

Comment 16

Perhaps Jonah would rather be going home. Perhaps Jonah would rather spend time in the Temple, offering sacrifices and praying. Perhaps Jonah would rather spend time in worship with fellow believers.

But God’s focus right now seems to be on Nineveh, the capital of an evil nation, the heart of a wicked empire, the center of pagan practices, a city filled with nonbelievers. And God wants Jonah’s focus to be there too.

Scripture to Read

Mark 2:5–17

For Discussion

What to Jonah do you see in these stories

from Mark?

Where are the Ninevehs of our day?

Are God's people today really working to make a change in "publicans and sinners"?

If God were to stop by here today, where do you think God might ask us to "arise and go"? Would we go?

Comment 17

Scene four of Jonah ends in the middle of what we call the third verse of the third chapter. In the Hebrew text of this book, there's a visual break right in the middle of this verse.

So the next verses that we read will be from scene five. Something new is about to happen.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:3b-4

For Discussion

Does Jonah's message strike you as more a message of hope—or more a message of judgment? Why?

Comment 18

Jonah goes a day's journey into Nineveh, and as he goes, he "cries out." To "cry out" was what God first asked Jonah to do, before Jonah ran.

The message that Jonah "cries out" has a double twist. He "cries out" that Nineveh will be "overthrown." It will not die of its own doing. It will not fade because of its own failures. No, it will be overthrown—which implies the action of an outside force, an outside power that is greater than anything Nineveh has yet seen.

Comment 19

Jonah, of course, knows of what he speaks. Only a few scenes earlier, he himself was "overthrown" from the ship and hurled into the sea.

The other side to Jonah's message to Nineveh, however, is that the "overthrowing" that is coming will not happen for forty days.

In scripture, "forty days" is a common image that means a good long time—but not too long. "Forty days" refers to a time far off, but not so far

off that it can't be seen and felt. "Forty days" is time enough to prepare for even the most severe level of preparation, cleansing, or testing. It's time enough to do whatever it is that needs to be done.

Comment 20

"Forty days" was said to be the length of the flood, during which time Noah and his family floated in an "ark of safety." In like manner, scripture describes the length of time that Moses was on Mount Sinai as "forty days."

"Forty days" was how long it took the Jewish spies to scout out the land of Canaan. "Forty days" was how long Goliath tormented the people of Israel with his taunting. "Forty days" was how long Elijah spent on Mount Horeb. "Forty days" was how long Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.

Comment 21

It's not likely that any of these uses of "forty days" are meant as an "exact" number. Rather "forty days" is a colorful expression that simply means a substantial length of time. It's long enough to do what needs doing, but it's not too long. In a way, it's similar to our use of the word "month." Sometimes a month has twenty-eight days. Sometimes it has thirty-one. But usually when we say that something will happen in "a month" we aren't even meaning to be as precise as all that.

So "forty days" is more of an approximation than an exact number. And by its very nature, it suggests a time of testing, a time of cleansing, a time of preparation. Perhaps that's why in many Christian traditions, there is a time of preparation and testing before the celebration of Christ's passion. This time of preparation is called Lent—and it lasts "forty days."

Comment 22

To say that Nineveh will be "overthrown" but that it won't happen for "forty days" is a way of saying that judgment is not certain.

Yes, the city's wickedness—its greed and its

violence and its mistreatment of other smaller nations—has been seen by a holy God, and within this God’s hands lies all power. This God can throw over Nineveh with the mere wiggle of a finger.

But God, with great mercy, has sent a messenger—a messenger to warn the city. “Forty days” are left until it happens. In other words, there’s time enough to make a change. There’s time enough to be transformed. There’s time enough time to turn in a new direction.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:5

Comment 23

The people of Nineveh believe. Something about Jonah’s simple preaching—something about the “core message” or “kernel” or *kerygma* that Jonah delivers—rings a bell in their hearts.

They believe. They realize that they have done great evil in the sight of the Holy One. They realize that their city is in great danger. It could be toppled in a moment. But they also realize that in delaying destruction for “forty days,” this holy and powerful God is offering them an olive branch. This holy and powerful God is saying that things might change. This holy and powerful God is saying that an “overthrowing” doesn’t have to happen.

Comment 24

So the people of Nineveh proclaim a fast, a time of abstaining from food, a time of humility and sorrow. They dress in coarse, roughly woven sackcloth. They put dirt on their heads. It is a way of bowing low, a way of saying that they are nothing, a way of saying that they realize that they are all but dead, a way of indicating that they know how great God is.

Fasting and the wearing of sackcloth were common in ancient times, especially in Israel. When people fasted, it was as a group. A whole community would fast together.

Scripture to Read

Nehemiah 9:1

2 Chronicles 20:2–4

Scripture to Read

Joel 1:13–14

Joel 2:15–18

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:6–8

Comment 25

Part of the power of a fast was that it was undertaken by a whole group, from the least to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest.

So the story portrays the king of Nineveh hearing the message of Jonah and proclaiming a fast for all the residents of Nineveh. The king himself shows the way. He removes his royal robes, dresses in sackcloth, and throws ashes on his head.

Comment 26

But according to the book of Jonah, it was not just the people who were to fast. The animals were to join in as well. Even the animals were to be covered in sackcloth.

The inclusion of the animals seems to be consistent with the overall message of Jonah, which sees the whole world as one. God speaks to humans, and humans are to obey. God speaks to the wind, and the wind is to obey. God speaks to the waters, and the waters are to obey. God speaks to the fish, and the fish is to obey.

So when the city of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and ashes, it is not just the people who fast. Even the animals join in. They are God’s creatures, too.

For Discussion

What role do you think fasting should or should not play today?

If a whole church or a whole community or a whole nation were to undertake a fast, what sort of spirit or attitude should be at the center of it?

Would there be value today in trying to incorporate both animals and the world of nature

more fully into our religious life? If so, how might that be done?

Comment 27

Jews today celebrate a holy day each autumn called Yom Kippur, sometimes called the Day of Atonement. It is a time of repentance and fasting. It is a time of remembering God's forgiveness and grace. And it is a time to reflect on what God's forgiveness should mean for how we relate to others.

For the last eighteen hundred years or so, in synagogues all over the world, it has been traditional on the afternoon of Yom Kippur to read aloud the book of Jonah as well as the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, which likewise talks about fasting and repentance.

Scripture to Read

Isaiah 58:6–11

Comment 28

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet reminds us that true fasting is not just a time of mourning for sins we have committed. It is also a time to begin doing right—by feeding the hungry, by clothing the naked, by caring for the weak, by giving to the poor, and by breaking the bonds of all who are oppressed or enchained in any way.

When we “fast” in a manner such as this—when our “fasting” reflects a change in behavior and an effort to undo injustice—then when we call, God will answer. Then when we cry out, God will respond with “Here am I!” We'll be like a spring of water that fails not.

Comment 29

In the book of Jonah, the king of Nineveh serves as an example of how we all ought to respond to God. This king—who most Jews saw as the incarnation of evil—hears the word of the Lord and immediately gets up and gets off his throne. He puts on sackcloth and ashes—and he tells everyone in the city to do the same.

It's as if the head of the Ku Klux Klan gets up and tells all his followers to cry out mightily to

God. It's as if Adolf Hitler bows low and asks all of the German people to plead for forgiveness for what they have done to the Jewish people.

Comment 30

It is not just sackcloth and ashes that the king calls his people to. He urges them to engage in a *true* fast, the kind of which Isaiah spoke. He tells them to turn from their wicked ways. He tells them to undo the violence and mistreatment of others that has been such a big part of their daily lives.

The king does not just urge his people to give up food for a short while. He urges them to give up their pride, give up their greed, give up their violence. Somehow he seems to sense that this is what bowing before God really requires.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:9

Comment 31

These words provide the explanation of why the king of Nineveh orders a fast for the whole community—young and old, male and female, animal and human.

Literally, he says, “Who knows? God may turn from the heat of anger. God's mind may change. God's heart may soften. Who can know what God might do?”

For Discussion

How do you think Jonah feels when, after only one day of preaching, the whole city, the king included, falls on its knees, puts on sackcloth and ashes, begins to fast, and announces its intent to turn from its wicked ways?

Can you think of situations today in which God is more forgiving than some in our own society want to be?

Comment 32

Today, we sometimes sing about holding to God's “unchanging hand.” But for the people of Nineveh, their very hope lies in the fact that God's heart can indeed change.

Why else would God send Jonah to proclaim

the word of the Lord, saying that the overthrow of the city is still “forty days” away?

Comment 33

The goodness of God is unchanging, and the love of God is unending. Yet the Hebrew scriptures show us a God whose mind can change, a God who truly hears and responds to the pleas of a humble people, a God who longs to make the world right, even if it means holding back on judgment, even if it means holding back on condemnation.

The God who sends Jonah to Nineveh is a God who is eager to turn away from judgment, a God who longs rather for a life-enhancing change in human behavior.

Scripture to Read

Joel 2:12–13

Jeremiah 18:1–8

Jeremiah 26:13

Comment 34

The book of Joel describes a God who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.” This God has no desire to bring evil on anyone. This God’s greatest desire is to see humanity transformed. Joel goes on to say that when we put our whole selves in God’s hands, God “repents.” God turns away from whatever judgment or condemnation we might have deserved.

In like manner, the book of Jeremiah describes a God who seeks to re-mold humanity, a God who longs for all people to “amend” their ways. When we put our “doings” in line with God’s ways, says Jeremiah, then God “repents.” God puts a stop to the evil that we have brought on ourselves.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:10

Comment 35

After just one day of preaching, after just one day of delivering the message that God has told him to preach, Nineveh is changed. The people cry out to God mightily. The turn from their evil

ways. They strip off their pride and false vanity. They put on sackcloth and ashes—and plead for God’s mercy.

Immediately, God’s mind is changed. The city will not be overthrown after all. No judgment or punishment will be needed. All is forgiven.

Comment 36

Because this is a very carefully crafted story, polished over many centuries, we can be sure that each detail is included because of its deep meaning or its teaching purpose.

So as we reflect on the remarkable transformation that occurs in Nineveh after just *one* day, we may rightly find our minds being drawn back to the original description of Nineveh, earlier in this scene. There we are told that it is a city of “*three* days’ journey.” Yet, after only one day’s journey by Jonah, after only one’s day’s proclamation of the *kerygma*, Nineveh is transformed. Nineveh is forgiven.

Comment 37

The story of Jonah is filled with contrasts. Just as Nineveh is described as a city of “three days’ journey,” so too Jonah himself has rather personally experienced a “three days’ journey.” He is given a “three days’ journey” in the belly of a great fish—and unlike Nineveh, it takes all three days before he gets around to crying out to God.

And by that time, what Jonah offers is not “a mighty cry,” such as goes up in Nineveh after only one day. For Jonah, it takes all three days in the belly of the fish before he can even manage a weak whisper, for we are told that his soul is “faint” within him.

Comment 38

In a sense, then, this fifth scene of the Jonah story is a reminder that whenever we come to God, there is mercy to be found. We can cry out early—as do the people of Nineveh—or we can cry out late, as does Jonah. But there is mercy to be found.

Our evil ways and stubborn hearts may be an insult to God. Our greed and our violence may

be an awful affront to the Holy One. We may all—like Nineveh and like Jonah—deserve to be “overthrown.” But if we will bring to the Potter our wounded hearts, if we will bring our anguish and our sorrow, if we will set aside our evil ways, we can be re-fashioned. We can be re-made.

Comment 39

The message of this fifth scene from the story of Jonah is beautifully reflected in some words from a hymn written by Thomas Moore and Thomas Hastings:

*Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish—
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;
here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your
anguish:
earth hath no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal.*

*Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,
“Earth hath no sorrow that heav'n cannot
cure.”*

*Here see the Bread of Life, see the waters
flowing
forth from the throne of God, pure from above;
come to the feast of love—come ever knowing:
earth hath no sorrow but heav'n can remove.*

Jonah



SESSION 5: *Jonah 4:1-3*

Streams of mercy, never ceasing...

Comment 1

Scene One of Jonah takes place in Israel.

God calls, urging Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, a city of great evil and great power.

But after hearing God's call, Jonah runs. He runs in the opposite direction, trying to flee from God's presence. Eventually, he finds a ship headed toward the far side of the earth.

Comment 2

Scene Two of Jonah takes place aboard ship.

God hurls a storm across the sea. Many on the ship begin to panic. They work and pray in an effort to save their lives. But Jonah sleeps.

When the captain finally questions him, Jonah reveals that he is trying to flee from the Maker of the sea and the dry land, the Creator of all that is. Everyone is terrified.

When the sailors ask what to do, Jonah tells them to hurl him overboard. They do. The storm stops. And the sailors quickly turn to the true God with prayers and vows.

Comment 3

Scene Three of Jonah takes place in the waters of the sea.

God calls to a great fish, and this great fish comes and swallows Jonah soon after Jonah hits the water. For three days and three nights, Jonah stubbornly refuses to acknowledge God's act of mercy. Finally, when Jonah's soul is faint within him, Jonah breaks down and prays, offering to

God a joyous psalm of thanksgiving.

In his psalm, Jonah acknowledges that God is indeed the God of deliverance, the God who makes a way out of no way.

Comment 4

Scene Four of Jonah takes place on the shore of the sea, where Jonah has been hurled from the belly of the fish.

Once again, God calls. Once again, God urges Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh and preach the word that the Lord will give him.

This time, Jonah gets up and goes.

Comment 5

Scene Five of Jonah takes place in Nineveh, which is described as requiring three days' journey to cross, the same length of time that Jonah stubbornly waited in the belly of the fish before responding to God's mercy.

Jonah starts into the city, and on the very first day of his preaching, the people hear—and respond. The king orders a fast. Everyone puts on sackcloth and ashes, even the animals. They all forgo food—and call out to God to save them from destruction.

God sees what they do. God's mind is changed. This wicked city, whose great evil had risen up as an assault on God, now becomes the recipient of God's own mercy.

Comment 6

Scene by scene, Jonah has discovered a God

who's "got the whole world in his hands."

Within God's hands, God's got believers as well as pagans. Within God's hands, God's got the people of Jerusalem, people who for generations have known the God of deliverance. But within God's hands, God's also got the evil-minded people of Nineveh, people who have not yet had the pleasure of hearing God's voice in the same way as some others.

Comment 7

The story of Jonah is a reminder that within God's hands, God's got kings as well as peasants. God's got the rich as well as the poor. God's got people as well as animals. God's got mothers as well as babies. God's got the sea as well as the dry land. God's got the winds that howl as well as the fish that swallow. God's got prophets who run as well as prophets who pray.

Jonah is a reminder that you can't flee from this God—for "he's got the whole world in his hands."

Comment 8

There are no limits to God's mercy. There are no limits to God's grace. Even Nineveh, that great city whose awful actions have inspired a sense of deep fear and hatred in the hearts of its neighbors — even this awful city has now by God's hand become a city of blessing.

The city which its neighbors thought was unredeemable has now been redeemed.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:1

For Discussion

Why do you think Jonah is so angry? Who do you think Jonah is angry at? Who gets angry at God today? Why?

Comment 9

Before a day passes, the people of Nineveh repent. They hear, and they believe.

Maybe in their hearts, there has long been some deeply repressed awareness of what they are

doing. Maybe deep in their hearts, God's Spirit has been speaking all along. Maybe somewhere inside, they have felt the horror of their ways.

Comment 10

Whatever the reason, the people of Nineveh unite. They unite as a city. They unite as a nation. They fast and pray. They understand that they deserve destruction. But they sense that God's mind can be changed. They sense that condemnation and destruction are never God's desire.

Perhaps if they humble themselves, perhaps if the whole city, even the animals, join in prayer, perhaps then God's mercy will be revealed.

And it happens just as the people of Nineveh hope. God honors their prayers. The city is saved.

Comment 11

We might think that when Jonah sees what has happened, he will rejoice with the people of the city. Perhaps we might expect him to join with the people of the city in singing something similar to these words from a hymn by Robert Robinson:

*Come, thou Fount of ev'ry blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.*

*Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of thy redeeming love.*

*O to grace, how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wand'ring heart to thee.*

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above!*

Comment 12

But Jonah's reaction is anything but a hymn. Instead of singing, he burns with anger. A fury rolls through his soul.

What he feels is not just mild disappointment. It is a raging disgust that totally consumes his heart and his mind. It's all he can think about. It dominates his every conscious thought.

Comment 13

In describing Jonah's reaction, the Hebrew text of the book develops a parallel pattern that we easily miss in English.

Back in Scene Five, we find the people of Nineveh turning from their "evil way." And the Hebrew word that the text uses to describe that "evil way" is *rā'āh*.

Comment 14

Then, in response to the humble prayer of the people, God repents of the "evil" that God has had in mind to do onto the city. And once again, the Hebrew word that the text uses to describe the destruction that God has threatened to unleash is *rā'āh*.

Now, as Scene Six begins, we learn of Jonah's raging fury over what has happened. And the Hebrew word that the text uses to describe Jonah's heart is *rā'āh*.

For Discussion

What do you think the Hebrew writer of the book of Jonah intends for us to learn from the repeated use of the word *rā'āh* in this part of the story?

How is this lesson similar or different from any of the teachings of Jesus that are conveyed in the Gospels?

What similarities or differences become clear between the people of Nineveh, God, and Jonah?

How often in our own world do you think violence and evil are rooted in anger? What does that tell us about how society should deal with violence and evil?

Scripture to Read

Genesis 4:1-5,8

Scripture to Read

Matthew 5:21-24

For Discussion

How can we break the power that fury and anger sometimes hold over our souls? Given its destructive power, how can we find release?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:1-2

For Discussion

What does verse 2 tell us about Jonah and his anger?

Comment 15

With fury building in his heart over the mercy that God has shown to the people of Nineveh, Jonah turns to God in prayer.

Yet Jonah begins by hiding his anger. According to the story, his first words are very respectful: "I pray thee, O Lord..."

At first, it seems as if Jonah knows his place. His anger is hidden under a pious spirituality.

Comment 16

But before long, Jonah is talking back to God. "Isn't this exactly what I told you would happen, when I was back in Israel, when you first tried to get me to come here?"

Jonah doesn't explain what it is that he had "told" God would happen. Perhaps he is referring to God's compassionate forgiveness toward the people of Nineveh. Or perhaps he is referring to the fury that God's compassion has generated in his heart. Or maybe it's a little of each.

Comment 17

Unfortunately, from Jonah's perspective, God doesn't seem to have been listening the first time that Jonah tried to tell God off. And so now Jonah is having to do it all over again.

The story teller seems to imply that there is nothing unique about Jonah's situation. When our hearts are taken captive by anger and fury and the ways of evil, we don't feel very close to God. Again and again, we have to "explain" things to God. Again and again, like Jonah, we have to flee to "Tarshish."

Of course, as Jonah himself fails to mention, more often than not, it's not just "Tarshish" that we're fleeing *to*. It's God that we're fleeing *from*.

Comment 18

Finally, Jonah lets out the anger that he is feeling. God is just too "gracious." God is just too "merciful." God is just too "slow to anger." God is just too filled with "great kindness." God is just too eager to turn from evil's way.

The word that the Hebrew text uses here when Jonah complains about God's back being turned on "evil" is the same word that the Hebrew text has used before: *rā'āh*. This is the same word that the Hebrew text also uses to describe Jonah's raging fury.

Comment 19

Jonah and God—they are not alike. Jonah, like so many of us, is filled with *rā'āh*. He longs to see the wicked destroyed. But God has "repented" of *rā'āh*. God takes no delight in destruction.

From the beginning, Jonah has known the truth—and been disgusted. God seeks not revenge but transformation. God is not a God of fury but a God of love.

Hundreds of years later, the Gospel of John will express a similar idea: "For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

Comment 20

The short book of Jonah offers several descriptions of God.

The first comes in Jonah's words to the sailors, where he describes God as "the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry

land."

The second comes in Jonah's prayer within the belly of the great fish, where Jonah describes God as a God of deliverance: "Salvation is of the Lord."

Comment 21

The third description of God comes in Jonah's prayer.

After Nineveh is saved from destruction, Jonah describes God as "gracious," "merciful," "slow to anger," filled with "great kindness"—and eager to turn from *rā'āh*. God doesn't want any part of the raging fury that seeks revenge rather than redemption. God doesn't want any part of the evil that pursues violence rather than peace.

Comment 22

The book of Jonah offers three major descriptions of God: First, God is the Creator of all. Second, God is the Deliverer of all. Third, God shows mercy to all.

But these three descriptions are not unique to Jonah. They appear many other places in the Jewish scriptures as well.

Scripture to Read

2 Chronicles 30:9
Nehemiah 9:16–17

Scripture to Read

Psalms 86:5,15
Psalm 103:7–11

Scripture to Read

Psalms 145:8
Joel 2:13

Comment 23

In Scene Six of Jonah we find God described as "compassionate." The Hebrew word for this is used thirteen times in the Jewish scriptures—and all thirteen times it is used as a description of God.

And as the Jewish scriptures make clear, for God to be *compassionate* means that God hears

the cry of the weak. A God who is *compassionate* does not turn a deaf ear to those in need. The cries of those who are in need rise—and their cries are heard.

Comment 24

Scene Six of Jonah also describes God as “merciful.” The Hebrew word for merciful is *rahfm*. It’s related to *rehem*, the Hebrew word for “womb.” So when the Jewish scriptures talk about God as “merciful,” they are describing a characteristic of God that is similar to the love of a mother for a child.

We sometimes talk about God as “Father,” but according to the Jewish scriptures, God is Mother as well. It’s not surprising, therefore, that Jesus, like other ancient Jews, sometimes described God as being like a mother hen who gathers in her chicks to guard them from danger (Matthew 23:37).

For Discussion

Do you think that Christians today should talk about God’s role as Mother more often than they do? Why or why not?

Why do you think some people are so resistant to calling God anything but “Father”?

Comment 25

Jonah’s prayer also describes God as being “slow to anger.”

Based on other uses of this term in the Jewish scriptures, it’s clear that Jonah is saying that God does not have a quick temper. God does not quickly explode with the kind of violent fury of which we would be capable. God takes great offense at evil, but God does not lash out at the drop of a hat.

Comment 26

In the King James Version, Scene Six of Jonah also describes God as being filled with a “great kindness.”

The Hebrew word that Jonah uses is *hesed*, the same word that was used earlier in the book to describe God’s “steadfast love.” It’s the same

word that is found repeatedly in the book of Ruth. This is the kind of love that lasts forever, for it is based on an unending, unshakable commitment.

The book of Hosea often talks about *hesed* as it compares God to a spouse whose partner is unfaithful. And according to Hosea, despite our human unfaithfulness, God still loves and forgives us and willingly takes us back.

Hesed is a love that won’t let go.

Comment 27

Lastly, Scene Six of Jonah describes God as having “repented of evil.”

Jonah knows that he has a God who has repudiated violence, abandoned fury, and forsaken hate. Jonah’s God holds no grudges. Jonah’s God is always ready to forgive. And that’s part of what Jonah finds so hard. To Jonah, it feels like God is literally letting the wicked city of Nineveh “get away with murder.”

For Discussion

Who is it hardest for us to see God forgive? Why?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:3

For Discussion

Why do you think Jonah asks to die? Do you think he feels that because of the fury that is in his heart, he doesn’t deserve to live? Do you think he’s depressed? Or do you think that by asking to die he’s maybe once again trying to “send a message” to a God whom he sees as overly merciful? What do you think is going on here?

Comment 28

In 1 Kings 19, the prophet Elijah is overwhelmed with the situation in which God has put him. Elijah has challenged the prophets of Baal, the idol that is worshiped by many of the people—but in so doing, he has gotten Queen Jezebel furious with him. She is a powerful woman with many soldiers at her disposal. And

she announces that she intends to have Elijah hunted down and killed.

This is more than Elijah can bear. He has been hunted before by Jezebel and her husband. Elijah has been living on the edge for years. He thought that maybe after defeating the prophets of Baal, he might have some rest. But the story in 1 Kings 19 suggests that God has other ideas.

Comment 29

When Elijah realizes the situation that God has gotten him into, he turns to God in prayer. According to the story, Elijah leaves his servant behind. He goes off into the wilderness and cries to God. What does Elijah ask God to do? Elijah asks God to strike him dead.

So perhaps Jonah, like Elijah, feels that God has made some kind of mistake. Perhaps Jonah, like Elijah, feels that the only way to get through to the Holy One is to insist that the Holy One destroy him.

Comment 30

Perhaps, for Jonah as well as for Elijah, the request to die is yet another desperate effort to “flee from the presence of the Lord.” Perhaps it’s also an effort to change God from an agent of life into an agent of death.

Jonah’s request comes right on the heels of his acknowledgement of who God is. So perhaps the request also has something to do with the fury in Jonah’s soul, a fury that is related in some way to the character of God.

Comment 31

If this is how you are, Jonah seems to say, then I don’t want to be your prophet. God, if this is how you are, then I don’t want to be your servant.

God, Jonah seems to say, if all you can offer is mercy—when to my way of thinking, vengeance would be so much more appropriate—then I don’t want to live. I don’t want to see this kind of compassion. I don’t want to see this kind of grace. This just isn’t the kind of God that I had in mind.

Comment 32

There may be another reason as well why Jonah is angry.

There are suggestions in the Jewish tradition that God’s people should model their behavior on the character of God. Jonah has now seen God’s great mercy first-hand. And perhaps the implication is too much for Jonah. Perhaps he knows that if this is how God is, then he, too, should be practicing this kind of mercy, this kind of compassion, this kind of forgiveness. Perhaps, as a prophet, Jonah himself has even preached this kind of thing.

Comment 33

But now, seeing God’s mercy first-hand, it seems too hard. It’s not consistent with the kind of person that Jonah has become. So perhaps his fury is with God’s expectation that all of us also behave in this gracious way.

If so, then Jonah’s understanding of human responsibility is very similar to what was preached by Jesus—except that, unlike Jonah, Jesus was willing to practice what he preached.

Scripture to Read

Luke 6:35–37

For Discussion

Is it really possible for us to be as merciful as God is, not only to those who are more deserving but also to those who are, as Luke says, “unthankful” or “evil”?

Do you think that being merciful is something that you just start doing? Or does it take practice? Does it have to be learned? And if it has to be learned, how do we learn? What disciplines can we follow?

Comment 34

The book of Jonah is probably intended as a parable or “teaching” story. As a “teaching” story, it inevitably draws the reader in.

When we hear about Jonah and his behavior, we know deep down in our hearts that there have been times when this furious prophet could have

been us. We can see ourselves in his anger. We can see ourselves in his frustration.

Comment 35

We can perhaps even see ourselves turning to God in certain situations, saying, “Get me out of here. I can’t take this any more! I can’t be this merciful. I can’t be this forgiving!”

And yet, at the same time, because of the very effective way the story has been told, we can also sense within ourselves a deep horror at what Jonah has said and at what Jonah has done. We know that he has made the wrong choice. We know that his words and his deeds have been misguided.

Comment 36

Scene Six of Jonah ends with a dramatic flourish. Immediately after Jonah asks God to put him to death, the scene screeches to a halt. There is an obvious visual break in the Hebrew text, and it’s clear that the author intends for all of us who are listening—or reading—to pause at this point and think.

By pausing for a moment, the author gives us time to mull over Jonah’s words. What is our response to God’s compassion? What is our response to God’s mothering mercy? What is our response to a God who is slow to anger and abundant with steadfast love?

Comment 37

Will we be like Jonah—and pursue death rather than mercy, fury rather than love? Or will we be willing to follow in the way of our merciful God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creator of the sea and the dry land, who knows better than any of us how to fashion and re-fashion a broken world?

Clearly, the book of Jonah is urging us to follow in the way of God, not the way of Jonah.

Perhaps the book of Jonah is even hoping that we will join—along with all of creation—in singing the sentiments found in a hymn written in the early 1800s by Henry Francis Lyte:

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
to his feet your tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
evermore his praises sing:*

Alleluia, alleluia!

Praise the everlasting King!

*Praise him for his grace and favor
to his people in distress;*

*praise him, still the same as ever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless:*

Alleluia, alleluia!

Glorious in his faithfulness!

*Father-like, he tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame he knows;*

*in his hands, he gently bears us,
rescues us from all our foes.*

Alleluia, alleluia!

Widely yet his mercy flows!

*Angels, help us to adore him,
you behold him face to face;*

*sun and moon, bow down before him,
dwellers all in time and space.*

Alleluia, alleluia!

Praise with us the God of grace!

Jonah



SESSION 6: *Jonah 4:4-II*

Hear the lambs, all a-cryin'...

Comment 1

The book of Jonah is a highly polished teaching parable, designed to deliver a true lesson from God to all who hear it.

The book has seven distinct scenes, clearly marked out in the original Hebrew text.

Scene One can be summarized as "GOD CALLS, JONAH RUNS." In this scene, God appoints Jonah as an agent of mercy for the city of Nineveh. But Jonah doesn't want to go. So he runs to a ship headed in the opposite direction.

Comment 2

Scene Two can be summarized as "GOD STORMS, JONAH SLEEPS, CAPTAIN PLEADS, SAILORS HURL." In this scene, God hurls a great storm at the ship in which Jonah is riding. The captain of the ship, desperately wanting to save the lives of his crew, pleads for Jonah to arise and pray to his God.

But Jonah explains that he's not in a praying mood. He's not willing to approach God. He wants to flee from God. The only salvation for the sailors, he says, is to pick him up and hurl him into the sea.

Comment 3

Scene Three can be summarized as "GOD SAVES, JONAH FRETS, JONAH PRAYS."

Just as God appointed Jonah as an agent of salvation for Nineveh, so now God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah. The fish is there soon after Jonah hits the water.

For three days and three nights, Jonah frets, refusing to acknowledge God's act of mercy. Finally, when his soul is faint within him, Jonah breaks down and prays, offering to God a psalm of thanksgiving.

Comment 4

Scene Four of Jonah can be summarized as "FISH HURLS, GOD CALLS, JONAH GOES."

God instructs the great fish to hurl Jonah up onto dry land. Then God once again urges Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, that wicked city, to save it from destruction.

Realizing all that he has been through, Jonah finally gets up and goes.

Comment 5

Scene Five of Jonah can be summarized as "JONAH PREACHES, KING HEARS, CITY FASTS, GOD SAVES."

Although it would take three days for Jonah to preach God's message throughout the city, it takes only one day for the king to hear. The king, realizing that his people are in great danger, immediately orders a fast. All the people and animals cover themselves in sack cloth and ashes. They refrain from eating food. They call out to God for mercy and renounce their evil ways.

God hears their plea, and God turns away the destruction that the city of Nineveh was about to bring down on itself. Mercy flows free, and the people are saved.

Comment 6

Scene Six can be summarized as “JONAH STEWS, JONAH ACCUSES, JONAH LONGS FOR DEATH.”

When Jonah hears the people’s prayer and senses God’s response, Jonah burns with anger, which the Hebrew text calls *rā’āh*, the same word that is used to describe the “evil ways” of Nineveh, the same word that is used to describe the “destruction” that Nineveh would have experienced had not God turned Nineveh away from the path down which it was headed.

Comment 7

As we saw last time, in his fury, Jonah accuses God of acting irresponsibly. He accuses God of being too merciful, too gracious, too slow to anger, too full of steadfast love, too lacking in *rā’āh*.

Jonah is so mad that he finally insists he would rather be dead than live in the presence of such a God. And with these words of spite and disgust, the next-to-last scene of Jonah came to a close.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:4

Comment 8

Scene Seven of Jonah begins with a question from the Lord to Jonah. The question that we read here is the first of three questions that will appear in this final scene. All are addressed to Jonah. But in effect, they are addressed to all of us who read the story.

“Doest thou well to be angry?” asks God.

The question is not *whether* Jonah is angry or *why* Jonah is angry or even *what* Jonah is angry about. Rather, God asks Jonah to think about what the anger (or *rā’āh*) is doing to him.

Is the *rā’āh* that lies within him leading to wellness—or to brokenness? Is the *rā’āh* building Jonah up—or tearing Jonah down?

Comment 9

In the previous scene, we saw how the Hebrew

word *rā’āh* was used to bring to mind the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain grows angry or “wroth” (*rā’āh*) with Abel and then, before Cain knows what’s happening, the anger leads to murder and violence, which is also described as *rā’āh*.

Now here in Scene Seven, we find yet another allusion to the Cain and Abel story.

God asks, “Doest thou well to be angry?” In God’s question, the Hebrew word that is translated as “do well” is a word that appears in this form only rarely in the Jewish scriptures. And one of those other rare places is in the Cain and Abel story.

Scripture to Read

Genesis 4:6–7a

Comment 10

In the Cain and Abel story, Cain finds himself growing angry. God speaks gently with him and explains that to “do well,” one must put aside *rā’āh*.

When we “do well,” says Genesis, we are “accepted” by God. But when we “do not well,” then sin lies at the door. It crouches there, just outside our heart. It’s like a hungry lion, waiting to devour our souls.

Comment 11

So when God asks Jonah if he is “doing well” by being angry (or *rā’āh*), the implication is clear.

Through his violent and hateful anger, Jonah is not preparing his heart to sing the modern hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul,” for there can be no wellness for any of us when we let anger serve as open invitation to Satan to come and stand beside us, hiding outside our door like a crouching lion, ever ready to pounce, ever ready to make things the opposite of “well.”

Comment 12

Seemingly, the book of Jonah would have us remember that when we clutch to the vengeance (*rā’āh*) from which God has already turned, when we grasp at the hate and violence in which

God can have no part, we are forcibly separating ourselves from the Holy One.

And according to the book of Jonah, when we close the door to God, we are simultaneously opening the door—whether we realize it or not—to the lion that is crouching just outside.

When a destructive surge of *rā'āh* takes hold of our life, the results can be disastrous.

For Discussion

How do people today clutch to *rā'āh*? How do nations today clutch to *rā'āh*?

How can people and nations that are broken by *rā'āh* begin to “do well”?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:5

Comment 13

God begins gently asking Jonah some questions, but before the conversation has barely begun, Jonah walks out on God.

Instead, of answering God’s very important question, Jonah simply storms out of the city. He sets himself up on the east side of Nineveh, where he erects a “booth” and then waits to see what God will do.

For Discussion

Why do you think Jonah storms out on God? How do we do the same?

What do you think Jonah is trying to do by setting up a “booth” east of the city? What is he expecting—or hoping—will happen?

Comment 14

The book of Jonah is no casual story. Each detail is included for a reason. Each detail contributes to the overall message.

So when we read that Jonah goes “east” of the city, perhaps we should ask ourselves what going “east” of the city might mean. Why didn’t the story simply say that Jonah went “outside” the city?

Comment 15

As it turns out, the Jewish scriptures often portray “east” as the direction from which God comes. Lightning is understood as being hurled from God’s own hand, and scripture describes it as being hurled from the east. Likewise, the sun, which is seen as a gift from God, is described as rising in the east, and both deliverance and judgment, when they come, are also often said to come from the east.

In the Jewish scriptures, then, “east” is often a colorful way of indicating the direction from which God will come.

Comment 16

However, there may be a double layer of significance to the use of the word “east” in the story. For after Cain is possessed by a hateful anger—or *rā'āh*—toward his brother Abel, and after that *rā'āh* causes Cain to commit a violent murder, God looks down and sees a “lion” crouching at the door of the entire human family. God senses that *rā'āh*—once it’s unleashed—simply begets more *rā'āh*.

So according to Genesis, God mercifully puts a protective mark on Cain. The mark is to indicate that no one is to take *rā'āh* (or vengeance) on Cain because of the *rā'āh* (or violence) that Cain did to Abel.

Comment 17

In the Genesis story, Cain is sheltered by God despite the *rā'āh* that has destroyed his wellness, for God knows that you can’t end *rā'āh* through more *rā'āh*. In a dramatic and remarkable way, the Genesis story demonstrates that the only way to overcome violence and anger and hate is through an abundance of mercy. Evil must be overcome with good.

According to the Genesis story, after God steps in, then Cain—the murderer who is now surrounded by God’s mercy—moves off to live in the “east.”

So by telling us how Jonah, a man filled with *rā'āh*, goes off to live “east” of Nineveh, the au-

thor of Jonah is filling this story with a deep significance.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 10:12–13

Exodus 14:21

Scripture to Read

Psalms 48:7

Ezekiel 17:5–6,10

Scripture to Read

Genesis 4:13–16

Comment 18

The Jonah story suggests that Jonah goes “east” of Nineveh and sets up a “booth.”

The Hebrew word that is translated as “booth” can refer to a temporary shelter that someone erects outdoors, such as might be put up by a shepherd or a soldier who is keeping watch somewhere.

But “booths” were also used in a religious way, as a way of recalling God’s deliverance in the time of the Exodus, when God’s people wandered through the wilderness, living in “booths” or tents, never putting down roots.

Comment 19

One of the ancient festivals that Jewish people celebrate every year is the Feast of Booths, sometimes called the Feast of Tabernacles.

In olden days, during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jews would live for seven days under temporary outdoor shelters, remembering how God delivered them from the wilderness. In Israel today, some Orthodox Jews still do this, at least in a symbolic sort of way.

Comment 20

Since celebrating the Feast of Booths was something that only Jews did, the faithful keeping of this tradition could sometimes degenerate into a way of feeling “superior” to other nations.

Some of this attitude comes through in the words of the book of Zechariah, where it seems

to be hoped that God will notice all those foreign nations that *don’t* celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. At times, some Jews seemed to have hoped that God would bring punishment on other nations for their failure to participate in the Feast of Booths.

Scripture to Read

Nehemiah 8:14–17

Zechariah 14:16–19

Comment 21

The book of Jonah tells us that Jonah never answers God’s question about the effect that *rā’āh* is having on him. Instead, Jonah leaves the city and sets up a “booth” on the east side of the city. We can’t know for sure what the author intends by all of this. But it’s possible that Jonah is going “east” of Nineveh to engage in his own private celebration of the Feast of Booths.

Perhaps he is hoping that God will see not only his faithfulness in celebrating the Feast of Booths but also the absence of the people of Nineveh, who—despite their outward act of repentance—have not been instructed in faithful Jewish rituals. Perhaps Jonah is hoping that when God sees the absence of the people of Nineveh at this celebration of the Feast of Booths, God will rise up in anger and bring judgment and destruction on the city after all.

Comment 22

The text tells us that Jonah plans to “wait” to see what will “become of the city.” Perhaps, instead of answering God’s question, Jonah intends to “show” God how deserving of punishment the people of Nineveh are. Then Jonah will be able to watch with joy as a wind rises in the “east,” as it did when God brought judgment on the land of Egypt.

By being in the east, Jonah will be the first to see it. And because Jonah is filled with *rā’āh*, Jonah will rejoice when the people of Nineveh finally get what he figures is due them.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which religious events today can express judgment rather than mercy?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:6

Comment 23

Jonah stomps off to the east and sets up his own private “booth,” hoping to see God’s punishment fall on the people of Nineveh for not attending this traditional event that was normally done as a way of honoring God.

The “booths” that ancient Jewish people set up for the Feast of Tabernacles were often made of sticks and branches, and because the branches had been cut, their leaves didn’t stay green long, especially in the hot desert sun. So the leaves would quickly wither, and people sitting under the “booths” would feel the hot sun beating down on them.

Comment 24

Just when Jonah feels the hot sun beating through the roof of his little “booth,” something remarkable happens. The same God who spoke to the mighty wind and to the great fish now speaks to a tiny seed. The seed sprouts and grows at an incredible pace.

Soon a huge green vine twirls itself around Jonah’s fragile little “booth,” where he is sitting. Although Jonah is still filled with anger and hate, although he has once again walked out on God, God appoints a vine to grow quickly and wrap Jonah in shade.

As Jonah feels the vine’s blessed relief, he grows glad. The man who was described only a few verses earlier as being “displeased with great displeasure” is now “rejoicing with great joy.”

For Discussion

What do you think we should learn from God’s action — and Jonah’s response?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:7

Comment 25

Jonah is enjoying the merciful shade that the vine is providing. It is unexpected—and undeserved—but Jonah quickly comes to expect the soothing relief that it provides.

Then a new day dawns. And the same God who has been on speaking terms with the wind and the fish and the seed now speaks to a worm. The worm is called, and the worm responds, making its way to the vine. Slowly but surely, the worm eats into the vine at its roots. Before Jonah knows what is happening, the vine withers and dies.

For Discussion

Do you think that God is really on speaking terms with the wind and the waves and fish and plants and animals? If so, what does that mean for how we should treat the water and the land, the plants and the animals with which we share this world?

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:8

Comment 26

A vine has provided soothing shade for Jonah as he sat pouting in his “booth.” But now the vine has died.

But God isn’t finished yet. Once again, God speaks. This time God speaks to the air. The King James Version says that a “vehement wind” arises.

Comment 27

Literally, the Hebrew text implies that this wind is not only vehement but “sultry.” It is hot. It is scorching. And it comes from “the east,” blowing its heat directly onto poor Jonah.

Jonah becomes so miserable that he wants to die. He still has *rā’āh* within him. We can almost hear him cursing and swearing as he becomes more and more delirious with heat stroke.

Comment 28

Jonah has been angry with Nineveh. He's been angry with God. Now he's angry with the worm that ate the gourd that had so gently spread its leaves over his "booth."

How dare that worm destroy his vine? Has the worm no pity? Does the worm not understand the importance of shade in a desert environment?

Then, just as Jonah is getting himself worked into a raging fury, God once again speaks—and this time Jonah responds.

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:9

Comment 29

God's question to Jonah this time is almost the same as before: "Doest thou well to be angry?" Of course, this time Jonah's anger is not directed at God but at the worm that killed the gourd that had been giving him shade.

Jonah is outraged at what has happened. The vine didn't deserve to be destroyed. He is filled with righteous indignation.

Comment 30

This time, when God speaks, Jonah doesn't run off to pout. Instead, Jonah speaks up to God.

"Yes," Jonah shouts, "I have good reason to be angry! Didn't you see what that worm did to that helpless vine? The vine had done much for me. I treasured it. A gourd may seem a lowly thing. But I understood its value. I saw the good that it was doing. But this worm saw none of that. It just came along and destroyed the vine! It isn't right!"

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:10

Comment 31

The logic of God's words to Jonah follow a common kind of Jewish reasoning that is found in other places in scripture as well.

Essentially, God is saying that if Jonah, who is human, has had pity on a lowly vine that has come up only the day before, then how much more should not I, the Creator of the universe, have pity on a great city that has existed for hundreds of years—a city filled with more than 120,000 men, women, and children, plus more animals than anyone can count?

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 5:9–13

Matthew 6:30

Luke 12:24

Comment 32

The divine logic that is expressed in Jonah is found not only in many other places in scripture. It is also found in a well-known hymn by Civilla Martin, who suggests that if God's eye is on the sparrows (as it is), then how much more must God's eye also be on us?

Why should I feel discouraged?

Why should the shadows come?

Why should my heart be lonely,

And long for heav'n and home,

When Jesus is my portion—

My constant friend is he!

His eye is on the sparrow—

And I know he watches me!

Comment 33

In the King James Version, God asks Jonah why God should not "spare" Nineveh. That's a correct interpretation of God's ultimate action, but this language fails to reveal the depth of God's emotion.

Other translations do better by having God ask Jonah why God should not have "compassion" on Nineveh. But the Hebrew text is even more dramatic. Literally, what God asks is "Why should I not have tears in my eyes over Nineveh?"

Comment 34

The picture that we are given in these last

verses of Jonah is of a God who weeps. We have a God who weeps over both people and animals in strange cities, people and animals in wicked places, people and animals who have been a part of great greed and violence, people and animals so unschooled in the ways of God that they don't even know their right hand from their left. Over these, God weeps.

It is perhaps with the full depth of these verses in mind that Jesus pauses as he approaches Jerusalem—and weeps. In his actions, Jesus seems to want to demonstrate God's own heart. Our God is a God who weeps, for our God is a God of great compassion.

Scripture to Read

Luke 19:41–42

For Discussion

Who—or what—might we be surprised to find God weeping over today? What should be our own attitude toward those over whom God weeps?

Comment 35

In God's words to Jonah, God points out how Jonah has had pity for a lowly vine which he has not planted, which he has not labored over, which he himself has not caused to grow.

These words are significant, for they are designed to give added weight to God's tears. Nineveh is not a Jewish city. In this sense, from a Jewish perspective, it is not a city that God has planted. As a wicked and violent city, it has not grown and matured in God's own way. As the capital of a Gentile nation, Nineveh is not a place that could be called "God's own." Yet God weeps over it.

Comment 36

The book of Jonah is teaching us—and all who read it—that God's mercy encompasses not only the Jewish nation but all nations.

All of creation falls within the realm of God's holy tears. Humans of every nationality and cultural tradition, animals and plants, water and air,

God's "chosen people" as well as those who don't seem to have the slightest sense of who God is or what God can do—all fall within the realm of God's compassionate love.

Comment 37

Through the years, many of God's people—Jews and Christians alike—have sometimes managed to imagine that they have had an exclusive relationship with God, that God was somehow for them and no one else.

But an old slave spiritual has long understood the truth of the matter. God cares about all who are in need—and expects us to do the same:

*You hear the lambs a-cryin',
Hear the lambs a-cryin',
Hear the lambs a-cryin'.
My Savior spoke these words so sweet:
O Shepherd, feed my sheep!*

Scripture to Read

Jonah 4:10–11

For Discussion

What do you notice about the way that the book of Jonah ends? What might be the significance of the way it ends?

Comment 37

Jonah 4:2–3 contains Jonah's angry outburst against God, uttered when Jonah realizes that God is going to transform rather than destroy the evil city of Nineveh. Jonah complains that God is too merciful, too slow to anger, too filled with compassion. And in Hebrew, Jonah's angry complaint contains 39 words.

The book of Jonah ends with God's response to Jonah, explaining the breadth of God's love and depth of God's tears. And in Hebrew, God's gentle response runs exactly 39 words—the same length as Jonah's angry complaint.

Comment 38

The incredible balance between the length of Jonah's complaint and God's response reflects the

author's careful attention to detail. It may also reflect the author's appreciation for the "perfection" of God's response.

But perhaps the equality of words serves in itself as another reflection of the mercy of God, for God doesn't overwhelm poor Jonah, as God surely could. Rather, God's response is measured and modest, using no more words than Jonah himself used.

Comment 39

More significantly, perhaps, the book of Jonah ends not with a statement but with a question. It's a question addressed to Jonah, but in effect, it is a question addressed to all who read this book.

"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?" asks the book in its final verse. "Should I not weep over the lambs all a-cryin', wherever they may be? Should I not reach out in mercy to all creatures of my own hand, whether they be animal or human? Should I not show my great mercy, even to those who understand so little of my ways, so that they too might be changed?"

Comment 40

As the Book of Jonah closes, we are left with God's question ringing in our ears. Given all that we have experienced in this expertly fashioned parable and all that we have learned, the more the question rings, the more our souls want to cry out and answer, "Yes, yes, yes!"

The question that Jonah leaves with us is similar to a haunting question that is repeated again and again in an old spiritual, a song that makes explicit connections to the story of Jonah:

*Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel—
an' why not every man?*

*He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,
an' Jonah from the belly of the whale,
an' the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace—
an' why not every man,
an' why not every man?*