

Between Tarshish and Nineveh

We will spend this month together in the book of Jonah which sits atop of many people's lists of beloved bible stories from childhood. And why wouldn't it be? It has all the necessary ingredients of a good story, biblical or otherwise: larger-than-life characters, comedy, suspense, good guys and bad guys, and a happy-ish ending. What's not to like? [Read Jonah 1:1-16]

The great city's name, Nineveh means "great to God" in Hebrew, which gives us a hint of where the story is headed eventually. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, perhaps the most vicious of ancient Israel's enemies. As one scholar points out:

Nineveh was proud of killing Judeans...If you visit the British Museum, you can see spectacular wall reliefs depicting Assyrian sieges. The famous siege of Lachish shows multiple images of Judeans being [killed in multiple violent ways]. Archaeologists discovered this relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh.¹

So, I for one am sympathetic to Jonah's impulse to run—or sail—in the opposite direction. This is not a matter of a Carolina fan marching into Cameron to preach repentance to Blue Devils.

God is sending the prophet into the heart of enemy territory. Scholar Robert Alter writes:

To send a Hebrew prophet to Nineveh would be rather like sending a Jewish speaker to deliver exhortation to the Germans in Berlin in 1936.²

I'd run, too. As fast as my little legs could carry me.

¹http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4654
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Lachish

² Alter 1289

Jonah isn't alone. Other prophets try to dodge God, as well. Moses and Jeremiah both voice strong objections to God's call. Moses points out his stutter. Jeremiah insists he's too young. Jonah does not say a word. He simply bolts and lands himself on a boat headed to the end of the earth, Tarshish. But Tarshish is not the destination God has in mind, so God takes Tarshish out of play by stirring up the sea and the wind. The crew on board the ship is terrified. And Jonah is asleep.

I don't think his sleeping is the same as Jesus' in that boat in Mark because I don't think Jonah is resting. I sense he is trying to hide from God, trying shut God out and dodge what God has in mind. *If* Jonah is dreaming, he is dreaming of Tarshish, the place that at least seems to be a dream come true simply because it is not Nineveh. And while Jonah dreams, trying to avoid even thinking about Nineveh, a nightmare brews outside the boat for everyone on board.

While there may be places where I am not welcome, as a person of relative privilege, there are few places where it is actually dangerous for me to go. I do, however, have my own list of Ninevehs. There are places I have no interest in going to, people I would rather not engage, moments I would prefer not to experience or re-experience. I imagine you do, too. Maybe your Nineveh is a place of deep pain or sorrow or fear or anger or rejection. Maybe your Nineveh is populated by people whose convictions make your blood boil. Maybe your Nineveh is quite simply the very last place on earth you want God to ask you to go.

I have my Tarshish list, too. Maybe Tarshish had always been on Jonah's bucket list, but my gut tells me he chooses Tarshish because it is the farthest place from Nineveh he can think of at a moment's notice. My Tarshish tends to vary depending on the Nineveh on my unintentional itinerary. When called to stare down deep grief, my Tarshish may take the form of

bingeing something silly on Netflix or a tub of ice cream. Tarshish may come in naps without end and not answering texts. Tarshish may look like an extra drink or two or a shopping spree. Tarshish may take the form of a carefully curated life where nothing troublesome or controversial or difficult or counter to my way of thinking shows up in my feed or on my calendar. The catch for Jonah, for me, and for all of us is that Nineveh is still there. Nineveh is waiting. My avoiding it does not change the fact that Nineveh remains on my itinerary. I have to go there eventually.

And so does Jonah. But goodness how he tries not to. He is completely committed to NOT going there, so committed in fact that he suggests that the crew pitch him overboard and save themselves. *Jonah would rather drown than go to Nineveh.* To his credit, he is not inclined to take others down with him. After offering sacrifices and pleading with every god they can name, the sailors cast lots and decide this strange man sleeping in the hold must be the problem. They ask him what his story is, and he tells them, "I am a Hebrew...I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."³ In other words, Jonah worships and follows not multiple gods with distinct roles and realms, but one God who is sovereign over the heavens, the dry land, and the sea, one God who rules over all. Such a concept is foreign to the sailors. And it scares them to death. At some point they have got to wonder about this stranger who worships the Lord of all and is still trying to get away from that Lord. Like a small child who believes she is invisible when she covers her eyes, Jonah at least wants to think he can hide from God. Nineveh remains, and more significantly God remains. The psalmist asks God,

³ Jonah 1:9

“Where can I flee from your presence?”⁴ Jonah does not even ask. He decides for himself that the answer is Tarshish and the hold of a fishing boat. It’s absurd really, even comical, but for Jonah in that moment of sheer panic, it makes sense. He is so frightened, so determined not to cry out against Nineveh and her wicked ways that running away is the *only* thing that makes sense.

So, Jonah is tossed overboard. The sea is instantly calm and the sailors—at least for a moment—are converted. The story could end here. The story could end with a stubborn, sleepy Jonah at the bottom of the sea. He would get his way, I guess. He wouldn’t have to face Nineveh. But God has other things in mind. [Read Jonah 1:17]

God provides a fish. *Provides*. God helps Jonah when Jonah cannot help himself. God saves Jonah from drowning by providing a really big fish to swallow him whole. In the words of The Voice translation:

The Eternal *didn’t let Jonah die*. He chose a large fish to swallow Jonah; for three days and three nights *the prophet* Jonah sat *safely* inside the belly of this fish.⁵

It could be said that the Lord of land and sea and sky is simply getting the last word, making it crystal clear that Jonah is not in charge, but there’s more here, too. It’s that *provision* language.

God provides a way forward for Jonah when Jonah sees no way forward.

I haven’t been tossed overboard or swallowed up by a fish, at least not yet, but I have known God’s provision when I’ve been caught between Tarshish and Nineveh. Thirty-two years ago—almost to the day—I was a newly minted college graduate with no job, no real plans,

⁴ Psalm 139:7

⁵ Jonah 1: 17, The Voice

trying to wrap my head around my mother's recent cancer diagnosis. I had been to the Nineveh of a mom with cancer fourteen years before. I had absolutely no intention of going there again. I was angry and terrified, feeling I had nowhere to run. With mom's blessing, I traveled to Europe with a friend who lit a candle and prayed in every cathedral and every chapel while I sat scowling with my arms folded. I spent six weeks riding trains, laughing with new friends, crying thousands—if not millions—of tears and lugging a backpack filled with new treasures and dirty laundry. In that time through strangers' smiles, my travel partner's loving hugs, and sanctuaries filled with centuries of honest prayers, I felt my rigid broken heart soften as God's peace worked its way through the cracks. At other times, I have crossed paths with those who think and vote and believe very differently than I do and who have surprised my self-righteous self with deep love, friendship, compassion, and wisdom. I have looked up from the shadow of grief to see a sunflower sprouting where nothing else beautiful could grow. I have heard birdsong when all my heart could muster was a dirge. I have felt a nudge to step into a space where my gender, my job, my race, and/or my background have made me the "other" and I have been embraced like a long-lost sister. I have known a hunger that nothing on the shelves of Publix or on the menu at Kindred could fill; I have known thirst that nothing on the finest wine list or the biggest glass of sweet tea could satisfy; and time and again I have been gifted the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The bread and the cup do not look like a fish, and yet—when shared among others who are treading water or even drowning alongside me somewhere between Tarshish and Nineveh, squishy gluten-free bread and a-bit-too-tart Welch's have been a blessed taste of grace. The table set by and for the fallible and finicky people of God in the midst of a swirling world has been my big fish, my life raft.

The table is set once again this morning, dear ones. All is ready. There is an abundance of bread and juice reflecting the astounding abundance of grace we receive from God in the person of Jesus Christ. And everyone is invited: those who are dog paddling to Tarshish, those who are stuck in the muck of the deep blue sea, those who find themselves staring down Nineveh, and those who find themselves somewhere in between.

Come to the table and eat your fill. Come to the table and find rest for your soul. Come to the table and taste and see that the Lord is good. And as you come, know that you are treasured even when you are floundering, know that you are carried even when you are confused, know that you are loved even as you are nudged to love and called to cry out to every corner of this bewildering world God so deeply adores.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.