

Jonah 3
June 18, 2023
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“It’s me. Hi. I’m the preacher. It’s (not about) me.”¹

I feel I should share a disclaimer...as many of you know, I spent Friday evening in Pittsburgh with our daughter and one of her friends seeing Taylor Swift in concert. I have now had the privilege of seeing Ms. Swift in concert 4 times. She is a tremendously gifted performer who has generated quite a following. Her other shows were amazing. This one was outlandish and spectacular. The hype is not simply hype. And the Swifties are as devoted as you have heard. What Taylor Swift has created, crafted, and shaped is a community of joy and play and passion that—at least in my imagination—rivals what my mother described when the Beatles appeared on Ed Sullivan. It’s all about Taylor **and** it’s not about Taylor at all. There are costumes and friendship bracelet exchanges and crowds of fans singing at the top of their lungs in neighboring parking lots (and on Friday from boats on the Allegheny River). Even without tickets, these fans are determined to be a part of this thing, this happening that has swept through not simply the nation but the world. Even some of my most stubbornly particular music snob friends have found themselves smitten and swept up, too.

And then there’s Jonah. Last time we saw our hero, he was blinking his eyes on the beach, still sticky from mingling with a whale’s breakfast. [Read Jonah 3:1-10]

God gives Jonah a second chance to do what God called him to do the first time. The language is a little different, but the message is the same: Go and preach to Nineveh. Like chapter one, we do not hear Jonah say anything. Unlike chapter one, he actually heads *toward* Nineveh, not away. Apparently being tossed overboard and hanging out in a fish’s belly for three days are effective ways to change a

¹ With gratitude for and apologies to Taylor Swift

stubborn prophet's mind. So Jonah walks right in the midst of enemy territory, a bustling mess of humanity and preaches a five-word sermon. Five. Words. In Hebrew, that is. In at least one English translation it's almost twice as long—nine words. And the people listen. Jonah's sermon generates an immediate response. The people stop doing whatever it was that upset God so; and they repent. And they fast. And put on sackcloth, the traditional mourning clothes. All this, after five words from smelly old Jonah. On behalf of preachers who routinely preach using far more than five words: no one likes a show off, brother Jonah.

That said, I don't think the people's response is about Jonah and his powerful preaching. The narrator does not say that the people were in awe of Jonah or persuaded by Jonah. Nope. "And the people of Nineveh believed **God**." Yes, Jonah delivers the very short, direct message. But it ain't about Jonah. It's about God and the people of Nineveh. In this big production, Jonah is playing only a bit part. As is the king.

Repentance flows through Nineveh like a wave around a stadium. The king joins in with his own almost comical over-the-top response. Cows and sheep putting on sackcloth? Even if his dramatic reaction of disrobing and plopping himself down on a readymade pile of ashes is absurd, the king does seem to take the repentance, the change of heart seriously. He seems to trust God, too, enough to make a spectacle of himself. He calls for every living creature to take part in this repentance wave—no eating, no drinking. In Dr. Robert Alter's translation, the king insists that every creature, two-legged and four-legged:

Shall call out to God with all their might. And every [one] of them shall turn back from [their] evil way and from the outrage to which they hold fast.²

² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Volume 2: Prophets (New York: Norton, 2019) 1296.

As I mentioned few weeks ago, Nineveh was the capital of Ancient Israel and Judah's worst enemy. The Assyrian kings relished trampling and destroying the two kingdoms. These were not simply misunderstood foreign neighbors. These are among ancient Israel's worst enemies known for relishing their violence and outrage. And now suddenly these same folks are now repenting and letting go of their evil and their outrage. After five words from Jonah.

Jonah's sermon might not have passed muster with my preaching professors—at least at first blush—because there doesn't seem to be much mention of grace. We Presbyterians are big on grace. God's grace bats first and last from our vantage point. I am quick to hear the doom in Jonah's words, but there is grace, too. The number 40 is one of the bible's favorite numbers. When we read 40, we are meant to understand not simply a countdown clock of 960 hours, but rather a long period of time. Noah and the animals floated for 40 days. The Hebrews and Moses wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. In the middle of their wandering, Moses spends 40 days on the mountain. And of course, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. Jonah proclaims that Nineveh has 40 days to shape up, to repent, to change their hearts and lives. God through the voice of Jonah gives Nineveh not one day, but 40 days to let go of the outrage and the evil they have clung to, a forty-day grace period to turn their lives around.

And they do. That is some sermon, but it ain't about the preacher. In this book named for Jonah, God is mentioned 39 times in 48 verses. Jonah is simply the reluctant messenger. To his credit, he does not try to draw attention to himself. He does not seem to want to make the cover of *Time* magazine's top ten preachers issue. He does not seem to be angling for a TED Talk or a book deal. He points to God and steps out of the way, and the people respond. And then the king does, too. The people are not waiting on the king to tell them what to do. Their change of hearts is well underway by

the time the king joins in, makes his grand declaration, and wonders out loud, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind.” For all of his grandiose displays, even the king has enough sense, enough humility not to insist that he knows how God will respond. And the king hasn’t even heard Jonah’s sermon. We are simply told that the king responds, “when the news reaches him.” He is not necessarily persuaded by this smelly preacher. He is persuaded by the word of God as it comes to him through the actions of his people.

Many days—too many—I am persuaded that we are a world all too intent on hanging onto our outrage, our meanness, and our evil ways. We grieve and worry and despair and we say we want someone to do something about it—whatever IT may be. And yet, when I take a breath, open my eyes, and look a bit more closely at the world around me, I see people doing something. When Taylor Swift fans had done all the right things to get a spot in line to purchase tickets and the system melted down, a few determined fans took it upon themselves to sidestep the system:

Instead of leaving one another to scrap it out on the official secondary market, where ticket prices were astronomical and scammers were salivating, some resourceful fans banded together, using their tight-knit community on social media to problem solve:

From Twitter and Facebook to Tumblr and TikTok, [and elsewhere], volunteers created a network of spreadsheets, Google Forms and online bulletin boards to facilitate face-value sales and exchanges among fellow devotees. ‘The fandom can be kind of crazy,’ said Amanda Jacobsmeyer, 29, the founder of the TS Fandom Fund, a Tumblr collective that seeks to address, however incrementally, economic inequality among Swifties. ‘But it really is a community and we look out for each other.’³

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/arts/music/taylor-swift-eras-tour-tickets-fans.html>

They didn't wait for Ticketmaster to get its act together or even for their beloved Taylor to sweep in and fix it. They decided to do what they knew to do and take care of one another.

Over the past few years, a group known as Free Mom Hugs has been showing up at various events around the nation to offer hugs, along with cookies, smiles, and listening ears to people whose families have kicked them out or cut them off because of who they love or who they understand themselves to be. The group was founded by one mom, Sara Cunningham, who initially rejected her own son because of what she had been taught, what she had always believed. And now the group she helped found states on its website:

We embrace people of all faiths, backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and ... orientations. Our goal is to change the world simply by showing up.⁴

Members of the group offer to show up for weddings when a person's family will not, and work to bring reconciliation within families full of hurt, anger, and broken hearts. One of the first strangers to welcome Sara's hug had not been hugged by her own family in four years.⁵ And it all started not with a king, not with a preacher, but with one mom.

June 15 was my work-aversary here. We have had a wonderfully full two years together, and I am praying for many more. Life is taking root in this congregation in an exciting way. New faces have found a welcome here, and familiar faces have returned. New leaders have heard a call to serve in new ways. And again, it's not about the preacher—or not *simply* about the preacher. God sees something sacred and beautiful in you, just as God sees something beautiful in those who are outraged by you and by us and just as God sees something beautiful, something worth saving in those whose stir up outrage

⁴ <https://freemomhugs.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=544>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/style/free-mom-hugs-lgbtq-nonprofit.html>

in us, too. We are one small part of the Body of Christ, not because of me, but because that's who God has called us and shaped us to be together.

The final song on Friday evening ended with confetti cannons sending small pieces of tissue paper soaring into the crowd of 70,000. From where I stood, I saw no one battling to grab it all for themselves. Instead, I saw people grasping one or two to keep while handing other pieces off to others. I saw strangers exchanging tired smiles and homemade friendship bracelets as together we slowly made our way out of the stadium and into the waiting world.

The church at large is a bit anxious about finding its way these days. Some have given up on us as irrelevant, stuck in the past, hard-hearted, close-minded, and downright mean. And yet, in my almost 27 years of ministry and over 54 years on the planet, I have known the church to be a place of deep love, persistent curiosity, and—on her best days—heartfelt repentance. I have listened to a lot of preachers. I have now preached a fair number of sermons myself, and it has never been about those other preachers or me. Never will be. We are the people of God together. God has offered us grace by the stadium full in Jesus Christ. I do not have a confetti cannon. As fun as it sounds, I don't think I really need one. God doesn't either because God has you and me and us. Together as a body and as individuals we are sent out each and every week to offer a word of grace and truth and mercy and love in the name of Jesus Christ, the very one who offers us—and everyone else—grace and truth and mercy and love and—by the grace of God—more than enough time to turn ourselves around. It is not and never will be about the preacher all by themselves. It is and always will be about God and the people who hear and respond to the word of grace in the Word of God.

And who knows? Maybe we too can change God's world for the better simply by going out and showing up. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.