

A Drama In Five Parts

Jonah 1:1 – 2:10

The story of Jonah. It's about a man who lived a long time ago. The reason it's in the bible, though, is because it's also a story about us. Jonah travels a great journey. And even though his journey covers thousands of kilometres, more importantly it covers a great distance in his soul. Let's look at this story, but let's look at it not so much as a journal of places traveled in the world, but of places traveled in the soul. Will we find ourselves in it? Let's see.

I've broken down the story of Jonah's journey into five parts.

1) Part one starts with Jonah's call from God. His job is to be a prophet. A prophet is supposed to speak truth. It's not always easy. But imagine life without truth. Is it liveable? How can life be lived as a total lie? It can't, or at least it can't be lived well. But if truth is so necessary in life why is it so difficult to speak it and live it? Because it's not always a happy message. Jonah is supposed to go this great city called Nineveh and declare the truth that its inhabitants are responsible for great wickedness. They're in trouble.

Ok. It's hard to tell anyone that they've done wrong, that they will face trouble for it in some way, some day. But what's so bad about the Ninevites? Well, Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Assyria has committed terrible atrocities against people all over the world including the Israelites - slaughtering, pillaging, and destroying. Wouldn't Jonah the Israelite be more than happy to tell them that they've got it coming big time? Yes he would. But he's a survivor. Survivors like to stay alive. Maybe he hates the Assyrians, but he loves his life more. Maybe he's scared to go.

Well, that's one obvious way to interpret what he does in response to the call of God. He runs away. He boards a ship going the opposite direction, "away from the presence of the Lord," we're told.

Running away... is it something any of you have ever done? I know I have, more than once. We run away, avoid, deny, pretend because we don't want to face what we should face, do what we should do. Why? Because we are afraid. We are afraid for ourselves. We are afraid for others. We are afraid that something is going to change or something is going to be lost and we will never be able to make it good again. Running away is a common response to anything difficult we must face, any truth we must come to terms with for ourselves or in relationship to others we are connected with somehow.

Jonah runs away from what he must do. But can he ever get away from the presence of God? Can he ever run away from his conscience, from the truth, from what he must do? Can we? We can for a while. We can as long as we convince ourselves we don't have to deal with it. But what if we only had one more day to live? Would that push us to do something we are avoiding doing now? Would this catapult us past our fear?

2) So what happens to Jonah? The second part of the story is about the truth catching up to him. He is running away but God catches up to him. It happens through a storm. A storm can be destructive. We all know this. A storm also represents a crisis. But if a crisis forces us to change a destructive way we are going, then it's a good thing. In the end it's not destructive but redemptive. We don't know it at the time, though. Jonah doesn't know it and neither do the other people on the ship. They're scared for their lives. They pray to their gods. But not Jonah. Remember, he is running away from the presence of God. He's asleep while everyone else is crazy scared. Sleep represents a shutting down of his soul. Jonah doesn't want prayer contact with God because he is afraid of God and how his conscience and conviction will be awakened if he prays to God.

But the storm forces him to wake up. His running away has consequences for those around him. Paranoia sets in. 'Their lives are on the line because of me,' he believes. And isn't that the way it is with guilt? When we feel responsible about something, we interpret so much that happens around us as about us. It's all because of us, we are responsible. We can go on for a long time denying, running away, avoiding, blaming everyone and everything else but ourselves. But then, this whole path turns on us and falls on our heads. It's all our fault now, we believe. It's all because of us. 'If only I did this, if only I didn't do that'... we torment ourselves relentlessly and wear those around us down with our constant self-focus of guilt and condemnation, our fatalism about our unforgiveable responsibility.

So how does Jonah resolve this unbearable guilt he is carrying? 'Throw me overboard,' he tells the ship's crew. 'It's all my fault this is happening. Get rid of me and you'll be ok.' What an act of despair, is it not? Jonah can't see any way out other than death. Life is over. There is no way out of the mess. His mistake and failure is irreversible, the consequences unchangeable. Despair.... Hopelessness.... How many of us have ever gone through periods of total self-condemnation or periods of total hopelessness and despair? Sadly, people make fatal decisions when experiencing such times, and the consequences of making decisions in such times can be terrible. It's tragic how many suicides there are in our society. People believe in the moment that there is no other way, and they are unwilling to trust in some larger truth other than the immediacy of despair, hopelessness or self-condemnation under a crippling guilt that can find no constructive release. In crazy moments we run. In crazy moments we destroy ourselves and others in despair.

Jonah is thrown overboard in a raging storm into the middle of the ocean. How can he possibly survive?

3) Well this brings us to part three of our story and the psalm of thanksgiving. It's funny how psalms of thanksgiving are called that, but often, they are more like urgent, desperate pleas to God for deliverance. But isn't this an indication of some hope? If we have the energy to cry up to God for deliverance, isn't this an indication that we want to live, that we want another chance, that we believe there is another way forward?

Something happens inside Jonah. Something happens inside his soul, his spirit. From total despair he turns to God, not as his judge and condemner, but God as his deliverer. God is a God

of second chances. Jonah doesn't quite know this yet but the fact that he cries up to God is an indication that perhaps he believes it's possible.

What about you and me? Do we believe in second chances? Do we believe in God that way? Or is God simply our judge and condemner, if God exists in our minds at all?

4) This brings us to part four. Jonah is saved. He is given a second chance. This time he listens to God's call. He does the right thing. He goes to Nineveh and proclaims the message God has told him to proclaim. What's the message again? "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." There is no word of redemption here, just a word of judgement and destruction. These people from the leadership on down will get what's coming to them. They will pay for all their many sins against humanity. Jonah can only be happy about this, right?

But then, something startling happens. Something totally unexpected happens. The people listen to Jonah. They are upset. But instead of falling into despair, instead of feeling hopeless, fatalistic and lost, they grieve. They begin to fast and wear sackcloth. These actions are actions of mourning. People do this because they are sad. Are they sad because they are anticipating their doom? Are they sad because they're truly sorry for what they have done? Are they doing all this as public display hoping to pull at God's heart strings to change the judgement? Well, but even this indicates that they care about God's opinion enough to do something to change it. And change it they do! God changes God's mind. God decides not to destroy Nineveh. God chooses to believe the best about the Assyrians, that they are prepared to change their ways. God has to absorb all the evil they have done, as well as trust their better intentions for the future. God has to do this in order to forgive them.

Do you think that's wise? Do you think God is a fool? Do you think God is too soft? Well, but isn't God a God of second chances? Would Jonah not know this? Didn't he get a second chance? Yes but we're talking about the Assyrians. They're real sinners. They've got a lot of blood on their hands. Aren't they beyond the pale of God's mercy?

5) This brings us to part five. Here we get to the real heart of the story. Jonah is angry. He hates the Assyrians. He doesn't want God to get warm and fuzzy about them. But he knows God's heart. He says this to God in his prayers: "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Wow. Here it is. The reason Jonah ran away at the beginning of our story was not fear of the Assyrians, but hatred. He didn't want to be part of a plan of mercy and forgiveness. He wanted to hold on to his hate. His hate kept him fuelled and alive. To let go of his hate is equivalent to dying. He has nothing else to live for. Sad, isn't it? But then, what about us? What gives us energy? Is it always life-giving in God's eyes? Or, is it more like hate? Is it cynicism, resentment, bitterness? Is it jealousy, envy? Is it worry, self-pity? Is it self-contempt or a perfectionism to which neither we nor those around us can ever attain? Is it attachments to people and perceptions of them that are unrealistic? Is this what fuels our energy in life? What

would happen to us if we let these things go, surrendered them to God one by one? Would life be over? Or would life begin a whole new chapter?

The story ends with God's challenge to Jonah. And this challenge is like a struggle in Jonah's heart. It's all part of his prayers. There is a bush that grows and gives Jonah shade. But then the bush withers under the hot sun and dies. Jonah is really angry and upset about it. Here's God's challenge to him in response: Jonah, "you are concerned about the bush for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

That's how it ends. We don't know how Jonah responds. It ends that way as a challenge to us. How will we respond? To forgive.... To forgive others.... To forgive ourselves... to forgive life, God.... To forgive is to see the value of life greater than our hate, our anger, our despair, our worry.... To forgive is to see that life's possibility for good is always greater than we can imagine in our darkest day and most anxious night.... To forgive is to believe in God, and to believe in a God who values life – even the most decrepit and evil life in our estimation.... God values life and does not want it destroyed.

God cares about the victim, yes. On the cross God puts God's self forever in the shoes of all victims. On the cross God condemns all oppression, whether it's at the hands of Romans, Assyrians or people in our lives and our world today. But God will never deal with oppression by destroying. Hatred can never be converted into justice or good. Anger must always be channeled by love not hate. Forgiveness is a courageous act that acknowledges the wrong, names it as wrong, and yet believes that there is a way to redemption even with the wrong forever part of the story.... We can't get rid of the wrong by pretending it hasn't happened. But we can't get rid of the wrong by destroying the wrong-doer either.

Many don't believe this. Many will never believe this. Many will reject a God of infinite mercy preferring one of judgement and condemnation, especially of our enemies.... The God of Jesus, the God of the cross and resurrection, this God of Jonah.... This God is also calling each of us here and now.... How will we respond? Will we live the call in our own lives with their own particular challenges? Or will we keep running away? Will we pray to God and awaken our consciences and our hope? Or will we get stuck in despair, fatalism or anger and resentment? Will we learn forgiveness, or will we refuse to let things go and find a new way to tackle the wrongs? The god of Jonah, the God of Jesus has a way for you and for me.... Will we heed it?

Amen.