

Two-Minute Theology: MIDRASH

Let's start with two-minute theology on the topic of **midrash**. There is an ancient and honorable tradition in the Jewish faith called midrash. From the earliest times, rabbis noticed that there are silences in the scripture – places where the holy text just doesn't tell the whole story. For example, women are barely mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, yet they were clearly an important part of the story. What were their lives like? In midrash, Jewish theologians tell the "rest of the story," using what they know of God and of human nature to spin out a story that makes sense with the scripture we have received, and that gives us a fuller understanding. We are invited to do midrash, too. It is fair when the scripture before us is silent on an important point. We have to be a little humble when we do it, and we have to be sure that the part of the story we imagine is consistent with what we know of God from elsewhere in the scripture. But if we are careful, and honest, it is okay for us to do midrash where the scripture leaves a question to be answered. It's also fun to try, and it brings us into deep engagement with the Great Story of our faith! So, this morning I will do a little midrash as part of my sermon. Listen for it. See if you think I have been fair in using my own spiritual imagination in conversation with the scripture. Maybe you would fill in the blanks in this story differently than I do. If so, let's talk about it later. That could be a fun conversation!

After the Whale
Jonah 3 and 4
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Let's play fill in the blank. Are you ready? Jonah and the _____. Clearly you already know the story of the first two chapters of the very short Hebrew Bible book of Jonah. You probably drew that story with crayons in Sunday school when you were little, right? You remember: God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach, and Jonah, for reasons that aren't explained right away, goes the other direction, toward Tarshish. He tries to escape on a boat, but a big storm comes up, threatening all souls on board, and Jonah ends up going literally overboard as a sacrifice to save everyone else. Instead of dying, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish (not really a whale). After three days in the belly of the fish, he repents that he hadn't done what God told him to do in the first place, and the fish spits him out on dry land, to try again. There! That's the story of the first two chapters of Jonah. But I really like the next two chapters best, and so I want to tell you the rest of the story this morning.

Jonah, chapters 3 and 4. Listen now for the word of God:

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So [this time] Jonah [did go] to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change God's mind; God may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God did change God's mind about the calamity that God intended to bring upon them.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “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. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶Then the LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so, Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” ⁹But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And Jonah said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And 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 cows?”

May God add a blessing to the reading and hearing of this Holy Word.

I think this second half of the Book of Jonah is one of the most interesting stories in the Bible. It is compelling and funny and gossipy and very human. To understand this story, you have to know the gossip, and I'm ready to dish it out this morning. You see, Nineveh was not just any city. It was not even part of Israel. It was the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire, and the Assyrians were historic enemies of Israel. They were the WORST: cruel in battle and cruel in victory! And here is where the gossip gets really down and dirty: You remember that after the great King Solomon died, Israel divided into two separate kingdoms – 10 tribes became the wealthy Northern Kingdom of Israel, called “Israel,” and 2 smaller tribes became the less wealthy, less powerful Kingdom of “Judah.”

Well, about 700 years before Jesus was born, the Assyrian army attacked the great Northern Kingdom of Israel and wiped them out. I mean that literally. They defeated them soundly and then did one of the worst things that any victorious army can do. They DISPERSED almost the whole population they had defeated all over the other areas of the world that they had conquered: a few people here, a few people there. So, the great Northern Kingdom of Israel vanished, and never EVER found its way home again, not to this day. This wasn't exile; it was annihilation. Just imagine how the people in the Southern Kingdom of Judah felt about Assyria and its capital, Nineveh. Fear, hatred, loathing. If you mentioned Nineveh to a Jew, he probably spat on the ground. So NOW you can imagine why Jonah might not have wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place, why he might have tried to run away from this assignment. You can imagine why he might be suspicious of this call from God, since God called Nineveh "that great city." But, after three days in the belly of a fish, Jonah at last did what God called him to do.

The text says, Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" If Jonah HAD to go to the capital of Assyria, you would think this is the kind of message he would want to proclaim – a poke in the eye. It was sort of like getting to talk back to the schoolyard bully: "Oh yeah? You think you're so great? Well, my God is going to get you!" So why would Jonah not want to do this?

The answer is that his sermon worked, and Jonah knew it would. In fact, it is probably the most successful sermon in the history of the world: In English it's just eight words, yet it turns around a whole city! The Ninevites repent of their wickedness and ask God's forgiveness. And the scripture tells us, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said would come upon them." And Jonah cried out, with an anger that is almost cartoon-like: "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish in 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."

Jonah was angry because he knew God's character, and he wanted God to be narrower of heart than God actually is. Jonah's rant sounds comical from this great distance in time. But I suspect it is a feeling we have all had at some point. Especially when we have been the victim of a great injustice or terrible harm, all we may have left is our sense of moral superiority over the person who abused us.

I have felt this way myself. You may have felt this way, too, in the breakup of a bad relationship or when a business deal turned sour, or any time you have been deeply wronged. Certainly, every nation that has lost its children in war feels this way about its enemy. Jonah hated the Ninevites so much he didn't want to give them a chance to turn around, because he knew that God would forgive them. Instead, Jonah wanted God to take HIS side against his enemy.

I actually think this IS a case of taking sides, but it is Jonah who must choose. The choices are not between "them" and "us" but between bitterness and forgiveness, hatred and love, human pettiness and divine grace, between the death that Jonah asks for over and over again and the abundant life that God wishes for all of God's children – even for our worst enemies.

At the end of Chapter 4, Jonah chooses bitterness, hatred, pettiness, and death. His bitterness eats the life out of him, just as the worm at the end of this story kills the vine from the inside. Now, it is human instinct to be angry at someone who has done you wrong, and it is a great emotional risk to give up that sense of moral superiority over them. It is hard work and full of grace. Jonah does not manage to make that turn in the story we have before us. But did you notice that this story ends rather abruptly? God says, "Should I not care about all those people, and also their cows?"

Their cows? This is where the story ends? It feels abrupt, like there is something important left out at the end. So, here is where we get to do a little midrash. We get to bring our own spiritual imaginations to bear on the silence in this book, we get to use what we know of God and of human nature to understand what happens next.

This story is all about God's persistent love for all of us. God never gives up on us. We see this in God's rescue of Jonah at sea, and especially in God's forgiveness of the Ninevites—the NINEVITES of all people! So, using my theological imagination, I choose to believe that one day, when Jonah has wallowed in his misery long enough, and when he finally remembers the undeserved love and faithfulness God has shown in his own life, THEN Jonah may leave that hill of bitterness at last, turn his heart toward the enemy he has despised, and open HIMSELF to God's life-giving forgiveness.

First John tells us that perfect love casts out fear. I would add that perfect love casts out bitterness and hatred, too. When we are sure of God's unending and undeserved love in our own lives, then we can – we must – turn that love even toward the one who deserves it least.

Perfect love – the love of our God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. May we always find ourselves just there, leaning on the everlasting love of God, and ready to share that love with all of God's children.

Amen