



10. Humbly

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We come before you in a world that grows more diverse every day.
While we are grateful for the words of the Bible that help us recognize
that we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe,
we also recognize and affirm
that people who are not part of our religious community
are also created in your image
and every bit as beloved and valuable as we are.
Help us learn to live faithfully, responsibly, and lovingly
with all your children.
Amen.*

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God's love is not limited to our particular faith community.

There are earnest and sincere Christians on our campuses and in our communities who believe that some religions are "right" and others are "wrong." Most of us are aware of people who believe that God's attitude toward individuals and communities depends largely on how they choose to worship, serve, and talk about God. For many among us, the notion that God loves people from other religions is a source of confusion and anxiety.

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Many tend to adopt a sort of “zero sum” attitude toward religion. “Either we’re right or they are—it can’t be both.”

After prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that it’s not quite that simple.

There are places in the Bible that suggest that God’s love is limited to certain communities. The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** strongly suggest that the people of Israel, the heirs to God’s Covenant with Abraham, are superior to other communities with different religions (see, for example, **Ezra 9:1–4** and **Nehemiah 13:23–25**).

There are verses in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, that suggest that only Christians authentically know God (see **John 3:16** and **14:6**).

But study of the entire Bible in an increasingly diverse context has led Presbyterians to hesitate to speak definitively, on God’s behalf, about persons who use different vocabulary than we do to talk about God.

Presbyterians try to speak confidently, faithfully, hospitably, and humbly about God.

We believe the scope of God’s love is bigger and more extensive than we are ever able to completely articulate or explain.

1

Consider the book of **Jonah**.

There’s a lot more to see than just a strange story about a hungry fish.

CHAPTER 1

JONAH 1:1-2

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”

Nineveh was the capital of the ancient nation of Assyria.

It was located very near the contemporary city of Mosul, Iraq.

Given the way this story starts, it seems clear that Jonah knew about Nineveh. And since this story is in the Hebrew Scriptures—what many of us call the Old Testament—it’s clear in the context of this conversation between Yahweh (the God of Israel) and Jonah that Jonah thought Nineveh was a huge city full of people who were Not Like Us.

So ...

JONAH 1:3

Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah has no interest whatsoever in going to preach to people who are Not Like Him.

So he takes off.

JONAH 1:4-5

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god.

This is evidence that there was religious diversity on the boat.

Different people were calling on different gods.

They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

While the other sailors are trying to keep the ship from sinking, Jonah decides it would be a good time to take a nap. Hmm . . .

JONAH 1:6

The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

Note the captain's presumption that there might be a lot of gods potentially involved in this storm.

As a good captain, he's trying to get everybody on board to pray to their particular gods.

"We need help from all the gods we can get."

JONAH 1:7

The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

You can't ignore it: that's just weird.

Everybody on the boat assumed that the storm was *somebody's* fault.

Remember that this text comes from a pre-scientific context. The author(s) and original readers of this book knew all about storms. But they knew little or nothing about meteorology.

In this story, everybody apparently just assumed without question that casting lots would be the best way to find out which one of them was to blame.

It's funny how this little detail goes by in the story without comment.

And it looks like Jonah drew the short straw—or however “the lot fell on him.”

JONAH 1:8

Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where did you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

“Fess up, man. What's your story?”

JONAH 1:9

“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

Jonah steps up and introduces his God—who he believes is really the *only* god—into this diverse community.

JONAH 1:10

Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

“Why have you dragged the rest of us into this little drama you're having with your god?”

JONAH 1:11

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

“Your god is clearly causing this storm.

What’s it gonna take make it stop?”

JONAH 1:12

He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

There are two interesting things in this verse:

- Jonah also assumes/knows that his God is really in charge and causing the storm.
- And he’s apparently prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of the others on the boat.

JONAH 1:13

Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

The others hesitate to just chunk a fellow passenger overboard.

It’s easy to miss the notes of compassion and mutual respect in verses 12 and 13. Jonah was prepared to sacrifice himself in verse 12 but the others were reluctant to do that in verse 13.

JONAH 1:14

Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”

“You made this storm. We’re just minding our own business.

“Don’t kill us just because this guy doesn’t have the guts to do what you want him to do.”

JONAH 1:15

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

In a moment of fear-based self-preservation, the other sailors throw Jonah overboard to his certain death.

People will do some pretty extreme stuff if they're scared enough.

But it works. The storm stops.

JONAH 1:16

Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

The sailors who had been praying to various gods figure out that Jonah's god is not to be messed with.

JONAH 1:17

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Mark this. It's important.

Don't get too hung up about how big a fish would have to be to swallow a person.

That's not the point.

The point is that Jonah would have drowned if he hadn't been swallowed by that fish.

This would be a short and boring story without the fish.

The fish is an instrument of God's salvation.

The fish is how God keeps Jonah safe.

So, in chapter 1, three things happen:

- 1. God calls Jonah;**
- 2. Jonah responds (by running away);**
- 3. God acts to save someone in danger.**

CHAPTER 2

JONAH 2:1-2

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

**“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.**

“Sheol” is where dead people are.

JONAH 2:3

**You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.**

In most Hebrew literature, including this text, water represents chaos, disorder, and terror. Remember how Genesis 1 says creation began as the Spirit of God was moving over the waters?

Water is chaos.

That’s what was so daunting and intimidating about the Red Sea in Exodus.

In the thought world that gave rise to this text, nothing is more terrifying and chaotic than being hopelessly immersed in water.

That’s where Jonah is at the beginning of chapter 2.

JONAH 2:4

**Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?’**

Jonah began to realize that he’d made some poor life choices and should have known better.

JONAH 2:5-6

**The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the root of the mountains.**

More spooky water stuff.

**I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.**

After assuming that his god had caused the storm, Jonah reaches the conclusion that the fish must have come from God as well.

This is huge.

The fish is on Jonah's side.

Without the fish, this would just be a story about a drowning coward.

JONAH 2:7

**As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.**

This is a theologically triumphant moment in which Jonah recognizes that God has saved him ("remembered") and he makes clear commitment to the God who he had learned to worship in the community in which he was raised ("holy temple").

JONAH 2:8

**Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.**

As Jonah is feeling good about God, this looks like a reference to people who are Not Like Him.

Jonah is exhibiting a bit of criticism toward people who don't worship God the way he and his community do.

JONAH 2:9

**But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.**

Jonah's response to God's saving action is to thank God for saving him.

“Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”

This is foreshadowing.

JONAH 2:10

**Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out
upon the dry land.**

Apparently God was satisfied that Jonah had learned his lesson.

So, in chapter 2, Jonah responds to God's saving action.

He says a passionate prayer and vows to do what God calls him to do.

3

CHAPTER 3

JONAH 3:1-2

**The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,
“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the
message that I tell you.”**

This is the same call as in chapter 1.

JONAH 3:3

**So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word
of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a
three days' walk across.**

So this time Jonah—who probably still smells like fish guts—responds differently to God's call than he did back in chapter 1.

JONAH 3:4

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

"My God says it's about to get bad for all you people who are Not Like Me and my tribe."

And then something completely unexpected happens:

JONAH 3:5-8

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Humans 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.

So the whole Ninevite society, from the king to the nobles, even to their animals—they all figure maybe it's time to straighten up and fly right.

They don't seem to question Jonah's message.

By the way . . .

There's no historical evidence that royal pronouncements in Assyria ever came from "the king and his nobles" or that animals were ever used in Assyria in acts of public mourning.

The Persians did that stuff a few centuries later, but the Assyrians never did.

Could it be that the author of Jonah knew more about Persia than Assyria?

Could it be that this is not a historical account of an actual event?

Could it be that this is some other kind of literature?

Could it be that the author of the book of Jonah was not live-Tweeting these events as they happened?

Does that even matter?

Anyway, the next thing the king of Nineveh says is fascinating:

JONAH 3:9

Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

It’s worth a shot, folks.

JONAH 3:10

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 [God] would bring upon them and [God] did not do it.

Sure enough, God decides not to destroy Nineveh after all.

So, chapter 3 is a lot like chapter 1:

1. **God calls Jonah;**
2. **Jonah responds—although this time not by running away but by going where God tells him to go; and then**
3. **God acts to save someone in danger (the Ninevites).**

4

CHAPTER 4

JONAH 4:1

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

The fact that God decides *not* to destroy Nineveh is what makes Jonah mad.

This guy who would have drowned at the end of chapter 1 if not for God’s saving act is now mad at God for having perpetrated a similar saving act that benefited people who were Not Like Him.

JONAH 4:2

He 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 and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.

This is arguably the key verse to the whole book.

Note that there are five first-person singular pronouns in this one verse.

“I said”;

“I was still”;

“my own country”;

”I fled”;

“I knew”.

This verse clearly emphasizes Jonah’s selfishness.

And the phrase at the end is more significant than might be obvious.

As was discussed in the first Bible study in this series, “Bible,” the phrase “Gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” occurs seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures—in **Exodus 34:6**; **Nehemiah 9:17**; **Psalms 86:15**; **Psalms 103:8**; **Psalms 145:8**; **Joel 2:13**; and **Jonah 4:2**.

Most biblical scholars believe that those words are the oldest words in the entire Bible. They were probably a sort of creed that existed in the Hebrew community’s oral tradition before the Hebrew Scriptures were ever written down. Some say that it was first written in **Exodus 34:6** while others say the words first showed up **Joel 2:13** but the consensus is that this description of God—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—dates back farther in the history of God’s people than any written documents.

It’s the single oldest theological statement in the entire Bible.

So it’s ironic that—when Jonah uses this phrase—he’s complaining to God.

In **Jonah 4:2**, Jonah chastises God for behaving exactly how the entire Hebrew tradition had always said God behaves.

At the end of this verse, Jonah is essentially telling God:

“Dadgummit! I just knew you’d be like this—all gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Jonah is mad at God for proving to be exactly who Jonah had always been taught God was.

And then Jonah pitches a fit.

JONAH 4:3

And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

A nice, dramatic little tantrum.

JONAH 4:4

And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

“Hold on there, fish food.

Are you sure you want to go there?”

So, understand that Jonah is mad at God for choosing to save the Ninevites.

JONAH 4:5

Then 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.

Jonah continues his tantrum and goes and plops down on a hill outside the city.

And then God starts just messing with him.

JONAH 4:6

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.

Jonah likes it when God does something that makes him comfortable.

JONAH 4:7-8

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When 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.”

Another selfish, melodramatic tantrum.

JONAH 4:9

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.”

Again, like a foot-stomping toddler.

JONAH 4:10–11

Then 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. 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?”

“Get over yourself, fish food.”

So, just like in chapter 2, here in chapter 4 Jonah makes a dramatic response to a saving act of God.

But his response is very different when God saves others instead of him.

5

There is much that suggests that the reason the book of Jonah is in the Bible at all is because it contains important lessons about how people of faith should interact with people who are Not Like Them. It holds important lessons about what God thinks about people who are Not Like Us—about people who are clearly not part of the same faith community, or don’t have the same world-view—as the Israelites.

“Jonah” is actually the Hebrew word for “dove” and doves are a commonly used symbol for Israel in the Bible.

Perhaps the book of Jonah contains important lessons for Israel.

Perhaps the book of Jonah contains important lessons for those of us who are part of the majority religion in an increasingly diverse country today.

CONCLUSION

The book of Jonah teaches us that we should not be surprised or resentful when God proves to be who we’ve always said God is—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—even among people who are Not Like Us.

In a world and a nation that grows more diverse every day, Presbyterians think it’s not particularly helpful—or faithful—to focus exclusively on the things that separate us from others.

Presbyterians believe that those of us who take the Bible seriously are called to do the same things we've always been called to do:

- do justice,
- love kindness and mercy, and
- walk humbly with God (which includes letting God love who God loves).

Presbyterians strive to rejoice and not resent, get mad, or worried, or jealous when God blesses and saves people who are Not Like Us.

We know that's exactly what we should expect, and exactly what we should pray for.

Because that's the gracious, merciful, patient, and abundantly loving God who we've known all along.

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God's love is not limited to our faith community.

We believe God loves people who are Not Like Us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you believe God loves non-Christians as much as God loves you?
- Why or why not?
- How does this study of the book of Jonah—and especially the discussion of chapter 4—affect the way you think about people whose religious faith is different from yours?
- How often do you interact with people who are religious but not Christian?
- What resources are available to you to help you engage in interfaith dialogue on your campus or in your community?
- In the discussion of the aftermath of Noah and the flood in Genesis 9:13–16, God says:

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy

all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

This means that the first covenant mentioned in the Bible is “between God and every living creature.”

Does that affect how you think about God’s relationship with—and attitude toward—people who are Not Like Us?
