

**In a storm of evasion (Jonah 1)**

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**'I'm done, I'm dead': Man swallowed alive by humpback whale'**, read a headline in Yahoo News, dated 12 June 2021. 'A diver says he's lucky to be alive after being swallowed by a humpback whale', the article continued. *Michael Packard, from Wellfleet, Massachusetts, was lobster diving in waters off Cape Cod when he felt a huge shove from behind and everything went black. At first, he thought he'd been attacked by a shark, but quickly determined it was another creature's mouth he'd ended up in. 'I could feel compressions crushing my legs', he said, 'I was trying to swim but nothing was working'... 'I'm done, I'm dead', he thought. Packard estimates that he spent almost a minute in the mouth of the beast before it rose to the surface and literally spat him out. Incredibly, he remained conscious throughout, and his only injury, some tendon damage to one of his legs. He was taken to hospital for treatment but released to go home soon after. Jooke Robbins, from the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown, said it was likely the whale swallowed Mr Packard by accident.*

Well, you may've read this piece or seen Packard's interview on *60 Minutes* a year or so ago. It's an incredible story and I couldn't resist using it to introduce this little series on the adventures of Jonah the prophet. Though I must add, despite Packard's experience (and others like it), that I don't think the biblical book of Jonah (found amongst the Old Testament Minor Prophets) is first and foremost a precise literal account. A carefully crafted, humorous, theologically revealing literary piece – yes! I'm convinced of that, which is why dismissing it because elements of the story seem implausible is to miss the point. The real purpose of the text, I suggest, is to shake and stretch our perspective on God, our appreciation of the breadth of God's care and the creative ends God will go in exercising it. In his translation of the Hebrew text, Robert Alter notes that the patronym *amittai* (as in

son of Amittai) suggests 'emet in Hebrew, meaning 'truth'. A truth-tale, that's what I'd call it - a tense, testing, salty, side-splitting, gut-wrenching tale, full of grace and truth. It's worth our attention, and perhaps particularly in the season of Advent, so let's get into it!

Chapter 1, verse 1: *And the word of YHWH happened to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying: 'Get up, journey to Nineveh the great city and call out against her because their badness has come up in my face!'* This is how OT scholar, Jeanette Mathews, from St Mark's, Canberra translates the opening line and as you can see it contains a direct and sharp commission from God. Things aren't always this obvious when it comes to hearing God's call, but in Jonah's case it's crystal clear. And big!! 'Nineveh, the capital of the fierce Neo-Assyrian empire, is a great city, but for all the wrong reasons', says Matthew Anstey (2009.38). To outsiders, from small surrounding nations, Nineveh spells aggression, violence, and death. To use a contemporary analogy, it'd be like you or me being told to get up and go to Russia to tell Putin to back off from Ukraine. This is a challenging commission, including at the level of personal safety. It could go badly for Jonah in Nineveh; he could be eaten alive!!

Okay, so here's Jonah, more-or-less happily, living out his life in Israel when this challenging commission lands in his lap – '*get up and go to Nineveh (800's to the East) and call out against her*'. And what does Jonah do? He goes down to Joppa and books a cruise to Tarshish – 3,800's in the other direction!!

I told you this was a humorous tale, and here's a laugh – Jonah fleeing in order to dodge God's call!! So, how will that go, we ask? Not well, we suspect. And in the very next verse, things start to wobble. '*And YHWH hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great whirlwind in the sea and the ship thought herself to be bashed to bits*', we read. '*And the sailors feared, and they cried out, each man to his gods, and they hurled the wares which were in the ship into the sea to make lighter for them. But Jonah went down to the remotest part of the vessel and lay down and fell into a deep sleep.*

Jonah scarpers,

Yahweh shakes,  
the sailors shudder.

Yahweh throws a wind on the sea,  
the sailors throw cargo in the sea,  
Jonah throws a blanket over himself. (cf. Anstey 2009.38)

It's a picture of avoidance on Jonah's part and it's having consequences; and not just for Jonah. And surely this is part of the *truth* of this tale – that evasion, our reluctance to do what is called for (spiritually and in other ways) has consequences, and sometimes devastating. Think of the current ecological crisis – fuelled by wilfulness, a collective avoidance of reality. Or of the way a family or community can be torn apart by the refusal to address relational tensions. And the opposite is also *true* – our willingness to respond faithfully to what is called for, to lean into a necessary challenge, can be profoundly generative.

Let's hold that thought and get back to the story. On his rounds, the captain finds Jonah curled up in the hold of the ship: *'What's with your sleeping?'* he yells. *'Get up, call out to your god. Perhaps the God will consider us, and we will not perish'*. At the same time, the stricken crew were casting lots in order to *'know on whose account this bad thing is against us'*. Predictably, the lot falls on Jonah! *'What's your occupation and where are you from? What is your country and from which people are you?'* || *'Hebrew I am',* Jonah replies, *'and YHWH the God of the heavens I fear, who made the sea and the dry land. || And the men feared with a great fear and said to him, 'What is this you've done?'*

At this point, it's made abundantly clear that this disturbance is all to do with Jonah's evasive behaviour, the narrator adding: *'For the men knew that he was fleeing from the face of YHWH, because he had told them so'*.

In desperation, they ask what they should do, and Jonah replies: *'Lift me up and hurl me into the sea and the sea will quiet down from over you. Because I know that on account of me this great whirlwind is upon you'*.

As distressed as they are, the men are reluctant to do this, perhaps fearing even greater reprisal. They take to the oars and try rowing for shore, but they are constantly thwarted by the waves. Finally, exhausted and distraught, they cry out: *'Please YHWH, please do not let us perish on account of the breath of this man'*. They lift the prophet and hurl him into the water, and, we read, *'the sea stood still from its raging. And the men feared with a great fear of YHWH and they sacrificed a sacrifice to YHWH and they vowed vows'*.

And that's where the ancient Hebrew text, concludes the chapter - with pagan sailors vowing and bowing in worship, and the God-fearing prophet drowning in water. In our English versions, the chapter division comes one verse later, with the narrative addition: *'And YHWH appointed a great (lady) fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the insides of the fish for three days and three nights'*.

More of this next week. For now, a few comments on these dramatic opening scenes.

Of the cast of characters introduced so far, the chief protagonists are YHWH and Jonah. YHWH is the first to be introduced, and very quickly we discover that YHWH is a God who initiates contact and actively enlists human beings in his work in the world, a God who is attentive to and concerned for the operation of human communities, including those who do not profess allegiance to this faith, such as Nineveh (the great Assyrian city).

Jonah appears next, and though he's of the people of God (a Hebrew) and claims to 'fear YHWH', it's clear from the outset that he has no interest in following through on the task to which he's commissioned. Though twice called to *'get up'* and once *'lifted up'* (by the crew), Jonah wilfully goes *down* – *'down'* to Joppa, *'down'* into the ship, *'down'* into the hold, and into a deep sleep. This repeating downward emphasis underscores the prophet's deliberate effort to evade God and its depressing effect – dragging himself and others into a downward spiral. But as the story is also highlighting, defying divine imperatives is largely a waste of time and effort. To quote an iconic line from Star Trek: *'Resistance is futile'*. For a start,

this God (whom Jonah himself acknowledged is Creator of land and sea) has a cast of non-human characters (aka circumstances) to assist in bringing him to account – the wind, the waves, and a great fish to name but three that play a part in this tale (there are more to come). And, for another thing, God is unerringly persistent. Yes, Jonah is dogged in refusal, and God matches him every step of the way; equally determined in refusing to give up on the prophet and on possibilities for his life. In the Hebrew of the OT this characteristic is *hesed* – steadfast love.

So, at the close of a chapter brimming with *great things* – a great call, a great city, a great storm, great waves, great peril, great fear, and a great fish, Jonah is looking, well, not so great. At the close of the chapter in which he has made a daring bid for freedom, he is feeling more than a little, constrained. In Michael Packard's case, being swallowed by a whale seemed a chance and quirky accident of nature; in Jonah's case, it is pregnant with significance.

For more on this, stay tuned folks – same time, same channel, next Saturday!!

#### References

Robert Alter (2015) *Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, Daniel – A Translation with Commentary*, WW Norton & Co, New York.

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