

“Surprise, Surprise, Surprise”
Jonah 3:1–5, 10
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I have shared with some of you before an experience I had as a guest lecturer in a class at Wake Forest University nearly twenty years ago. It was a class taught by my friend Charles Kimball which explored different views of afterlife from the perspective of various world religions, and I was there to talk about the Christian perspective. I decided to begin with an insight of one of my mentors, Ron Higdon, that the three most profound words ever spoken about judgment day and the afterlife came from Gomer Pyle — surprise, surprise, surprise!

It is difficult to argue with this assertion, especially if we are familiar with the parables Jesus tells about sheep and goats and caring for the least in need, about messianic feasts where the guest lists include outcasts and exclude good, solid folk. Whatever happens at the end of this life, there will be a number of surprises because our ways are not God’s ways, and our thoughts are not God’s thoughts.

But before I shared the punchline, Charles stopped me and asked the class, about twenty students, including two Wake Forest basketball players, “How many of you know who Gomer Pyle was?” Two hands went up... what is the world coming to? Or how old and out of touch have I become? Surprise, surprise, surprise — that was my experience even before I got to my punchline.

And yet, life is full of surprises, some of them good and wonderful, some of them painful and shocking, some of them just surprises, not what we were expecting. Today’s reading from Jonah is like this, the entire book of Jonah is like this, it is full of surprises. In numerous ways, it provides a counternarrative to the dominant narrative of the Hebrew canon and much Christian thought as well. In the process, it provides a helpful reminder that no single perspective can tell us everything about the nature of God and the Divine will. And it offers a corrective to some thinking we need to adjust.

One surprise we find in Jonah is that God's concern is not only bigger than we think; it includes our enemies. We know the basic story about a reluctant prophet who at first refuses to proclaim God's word to people he hates but ends up doing so and realizes his worst fears. This is a mythic narrative, not a historical one. The trouble is not just with the part about a man being swallowed by a fish and surviving, though God could make a fish large enough to do this, and the fact that the fish spits Jonah out is understandable and hilarious. But the story reads like a novella and it has too many inaccurate details to be history.

2 Kings 14:25 places Jonah's ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II (785-745 BCE), some forty years before Nineveh became the capital of Assyria and thus a great city, which it did during the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 BCE). And even at its height of power, Nineveh's circumference was 7.75 miles. It would not take three days to walk across the city, as our text says. If this is history, it is bad history, but it is not. It is a historical novella, probably written after the exile.

The storyteller sets the story generally in the time when Assyria is known to be the enemy. Nineveh is its capital, the center and symbol of a foreign oppressor which has devastated our people, Israel. And God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach a message about judgment. Jonah fears that the people will repent and then God will forgive them and thus refrain from judgment, and Jonah wants no part of this. So, he doesn't say "no"; he says, "___ no!" Lynn Lingafelt suggested earlier this week that I could euphemize here, saying, "Whale no!" and there is no whale in the story, only a big fish, but you get the point.

Jonah says — no! God calls him to go east, but he goes west, causing a storm at sea. The sailors throw him overboard, the fish spits him out on dry land, and Jonah ends up back home, being called by God again to go to Nineveh. So, he goes, this isn't really a request. He preaches the most pathetic sermon ever preached, just five words in Hebrew — Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown! And as Jonah feared, the people repent, and God forgives them.

The dominant narrative of Hebrew scripture is clear — God chooses one nation, God favors one people, even to the point of protection. But there are trajectories of a broader scope of concern in the canon. Isaiah says Israel is

chosen to be a light to the nations, a source of salvation for all (42:6; 49:6). And now Jonah is sent specifically to help save Nineveh, not just other people, Gentiles, but the enemy!

The message for us is also clear. God's concern is bigger than we think. God loves not just all people, but the very people we think are beyond God's concern — the Russians, the Palestinians and the Israelis, legal and illegal immigrants and those who welcome them and those who demonize them, the people who vote for the other party, cheer for the other team... dare we say even people of other faith traditions — Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, etc.?

This is not to relativize all faiths nor is it to normalize all behavior. God's concern for Nineveh does not mean that the people don't need to change their ways, they do. The same would be said for all who commit hostile acts toward other human beings, all who demean and belittle other human beings, all who fall short of God's requirements of justice, righteousness, and truth. God demands repentance, but God's love extends to all. That is a counternarrative not just for faithful Jews but for faithful Christians as well. God's love is not just for people who look, think, and believe like us. God's love is for all! Surprise!

Another surprise we find in Jonah is the view of God as capable of change. We think of God as the one fixed reality in an everchanging world. The dominant narrative of scripture is that God's nature and intent are unchanging. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever," says Isaiah 40:8. But after Jonah preaches the shortest sermon in history and the people repent, Jonah 3:10 says, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." God changed God's mind.

It is a counternarrative, but this is not the only place in scripture where God does this. In Exodus 32:12-14, Moses talks God down from the desire to let loose the Divine wrath on the Israelites. It is a word of corrective to a view of providence in which not only is God's mind fixed, but because it is, everything else in life is predetermined. If God's mind can change, the future is more open.

I think of the time Lyman Beecher arranged a pulpit exchange with a colleague who held a rigid view of predestination. When the two men met each other on horseback in between their churches on this particular Sunday, Beecher's colleague declared, "Doctor Beecher, I wish to call to your attention that before the creation of the world God arranged that you were to preach in my pulpit and I in yours on this particular Sabbath." "Is that so?" said Beecher, glaring at the man. "Then, I won't do it!" And turning his horse, he returned to his own church (*On Being a Real Person*, Harry Emerson Fosdick, p. 15).

Nothing is fixed. There is such a thing as free will. Even God's mind can change. There is hope in this reality.

But note that in the reading from Jonah, it is when the people of Nineveh repent that God changes, and even though God does, God's basic character remains the same. God is righteous and just but also abounding in mercy and steadfast love, as the psalmists say over and over again. God is always searching relentlessly for some window through which to extend grace. God is capable of change, surprise, but in response to human actions and in keeping with God's basic character.

One other surprise we find in Jonah is the central reality that God chooses Jonah for this missions venture, Jonah, the man who goes kicking and screaming every step of the way, the man who wants the Ninevites to die in agony, the man who preaches a sermon with no opening to grace for this very reason. In fact, the book ends with Jonah still unrepentant, angry that God has saved the city.

The play "East of Nineveh" underscores this reality as an old man who is struggling to hold onto his faith because of his anger toward God ponders the statement that Jonah sat down east of the city. "East of the city, east of the city," the man says reflectively, "Why did he go east?" Because it was a high elevation from which he could see the city burn if God changed God's mind again and decided to do the right thing!

Why in the world does God choose Jonah for this task? The dominant narrative of scripture is that God calls the faithful to service. A prophet may seem unlikely in terms of background, age, and standing, and may be resistant as well. But God doesn't call belligerent opponents to God's will. The fact

that God does here, and the mission is successful, in spite of Jonah, speaks volumes about the nature of God’s will, but it also says something about how God can use us, in spite of all our weaknesses and shortcomings. If God can use Jonah...

Will Campbell was a renegade Baptist preacher and civil rights activist I had the privilege of knowing. In his book *Brother to a Dragonfly*, he described a time when he experienced a deep personal crisis in response to a young nephew’s death. He was consoled by a relative with whom he had intense arguments about civil rights. Reflecting on that experience, he said, “Until the dawn, I sat in the redemptive company of a racist Jesus (p. 151).”

We never know who might help us in a time of need, sometimes the last person we would consider. We never know how God might use us to help someone else. If God can use Jonah, God can use anyone.

Surprise, surprise, surprise — this is the message of Jonah. It is a counternarrative about whom God favors, everyone; whom God is, One willing to change; and whom God uses, all of us. The bottom line is that just when we think we know how things works, God turns everything upside down.

In his commentary on Jonah, James D. Nogalski references the refrain of a Harry Chapin song to illustrate this reality (*The Book of the Twelve: Hosea – Jonah*, p. 444).

Have you heard of the Legend of the Lost and Found,
Tales of a world turning upside down,
Where all the kings become the clowns,
And beggars are crowned?
The Legend of the Lost and Found.

Nogalski adds, “When God takes hold of a situation, all bets are off. God offers compassion to those in need, not those who live in privilege. Jesus was born in a stable, and God turned the world upside down.” Indeed, God did, and continues to do so to this day, thanks be to God!