

“Common Themes in a Common Text”

Jonah 3:10–4:11

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September 20, 2026

When we lived in Winston-Salem, I co-taught a common texts course at Wake Forest Divinity School with a Rabbi and Old Testament professor Neal Walls. It was primarily for MDiv students, though we had an MA student or two and one undergrad... but we also invited members of the church I served and the synagogue to join us and ended up with nearly one hundred of them doing so. It was a wonderful experience on which we based a common texts study here with Temple Beth Or.

The focus was on shared texts in which Jews and Gentiles interact, and when possible, texts used by both traditions in sacred rituals. The latter was not always possible. For example, the book Esther shapes the experience of Purim in Judaism, a kind of sacred Mardi Gras mocking the threat of genocide. We have no parallel use of that text, though earlier this year the Thirty-Niners went to the Esther Exhibit at the North Carolina Museum of Art. We older FBC folk are the trailblazers here!

Anyway... one of the books we studied was Jonah. It portrays Jews and Gentiles interacting, as the prophet is called to proclaim a message to the people of Ninevah. Furthermore, both of our traditions have used this book in sacred rituals. The early church viewed Jonah spending time in the belly of a fish and then being spit out as a sign of baptism. So, imagery of Jonah and the fish is found on baptismal fonts.

In Judaism, Jonah is read on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, because it demonstrates that no one is beyond God’s forgiveness, not even the people of Nineveh, a hated enemy, nor the petulant prophet who pouts when the Ninevites are saved. The verses we have read from Jonah were probably chosen for the lectionary because of their link to the reading from Matthew, both address the scope of God’s love, but it just so happens this year that Yom Kippur begins today at sundown. It seems appropriate, and it feels like we have an invitation to consider some common themes in a common text for Jews and Christians.

But before we do that, let's review the story. The action takes place in the middle of the eight century BCE, during the reign of King Jeroboam II. We know this because 2 Kings 14:25 places Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet, from Gath-hepher, in this time. Most scholars, however, think the book was written several centuries later, in the post-exilic period, because of language and content that fit that period better.

The story also seems to be mythic in character, not historical, like many of the stories Jesus tells, including the parable we have read today about workers in a vineyard. This is not to say it's just a big fish tale, though there is a big fish in it. It doesn't mean the story isn't true in deepest sense, it's just not an account of verifiable historical events.

But whether we embrace the best of scholarly insight or hold on to a more traditional view doesn't alter the message. When asked by a search committee if he believed this story was literally true, a mentor of mine said, "I have no trouble believing God could create a fish large enough to swallow a man without killing him, but the ultimate truth of this tale doesn't depend on it being a literal, historical account." Indeed.

So, the story, however we view it, begins with God calling Jonah to proclaim a message to the people of Ninevah about how wicked they are, but Jonah wants no part of helping those people. The prophet Nahum describes the city with these words, "Woe, city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of plunder – no end to the prey (3:1)!" While conquering much of the region, the Assyrian Empire destroyed the nation of Israel in 722 BCE and exiled the ten northern tribes. Under Sennacherib, they also pillaged Judah, the southern kingdom, and besieged Jerusalem in 701 BCE, but somehow it was delivered.

But the bottom line is that until they were eventually defeated by the Babylonians and the Medes, with Ninevah falling in 612 BCE (the remains can be seen outside Mosul in northern Iraq), the Assyrians were the big dogs in the region, as brutal as they were powerful, and hated by all they conquered. So, if this story is told during the post-exilic period, every reader understands why Jonah says not just, "No," but "___ no!" When God tells him to go East, he goes West, but as we recall, he cannot outrun God's providential hand. A storm comes on the water, he ends up in the belly of a fish, only to be spewed out, then God calls him again.

Realizing he can't get out of this job, Jonah goes to Nineveh and proclaims the shortest prophetic message on record. "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" There is no call to repentance, no hope expressed, their goose is cooked! But as we know, with God all things are possible. The king declares a fast for the city, over 120,000 people and their animals too. They put on sackcloth and repent of their evil ways in the hope that God might show them mercy. And as we join the story, God does, the people are saved, because of Jonah's message.

We might think the prophet is happy. Any mission board would be thrilled with Jonah's work. Over 120,000 conversions! But he is not happy, he is furious! He didn't want these people to live; he wanted them to die! But this is exactly what Jonah feared. He knew God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. He can't stand it; he wants to die!

"Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks, but Jonah doesn't give God the courtesy of a reply. He walks away in a pout, like a spoiled child not getting his way. He goes east of the city and sits down in the shade, hoping he has chosen a good spot to watch the city burn. Perhaps God will have another change of heart and give them what they deserve!

But alas, God does not. God gives Jonah a bush for shade, then sends a worm to eat it, along with a hot wind, and Jonah becomes angry again, wishing for death. God asks if it is right for him to be angry about the bush, to care more for it and getting his way than the wellbeing of over 120,000 people and their animals. But once again Jonah does not reply. The people of Nineveh repent and thus are saved, but Jonah's condition is unresolved. The story ends with God extending mercy to this petulant prophet once again, leaving no record of Jonah's response.

It is a fascinating story, filled with ironic twists and turns and a boatload of humor, but what is the message for us? For Jews and Christians alike, it is a message about the scope of God's mercy and love, and the nature of grace itself. No one is beyond God's forgiveness, the story proclaims, which is also the message of Jesus' parable about the workers. It is about the kingdom of heaven, not fair labor practices, and the point is that anyone who bristles at others being forgiven doesn't

appreciate the grace they have received. No one is beyond hope, the book of Jonah proclaims, all are embraced as God's children, which is a counternarrative in the Hebrew canon where Israel is called the chosen nation, but it is chosen to be a light to all nations.

Yet while this message about mercy lies at the heart of Jewish and Christian faith, there are a couple of more pointed parts of the message we need to consider. First, Jonah doesn't just proclaim God's mercy and love for all people, it does so explicitly for the enemy, and here enemy is not just personal, it is national, the Assyrians. Are we willing to view our enemies as included in God's concern, and as a result, put them on the list of people we are willing to include in our concern?

We don't have an analogue to Assyria. There are nations we have fought wars with, and times we have known significant losses, most recently at the hands of terrorists on 9-11, and now in the war in Iran. But Assyria wasn't just a combatant, it was a conquering nation far more powerful than Israel. The wounds were deeper than we can imagine.

But we do have wounds and thus hostility toward anyone with whom we have fought a war. My father grew up in England during World War II. Not surprisingly, his greatest prejudice has always been against Germans, though through a twist of fate or Providence, the company he was with in his later years of work was bought by Bosch, a German company, and he had to manage his feelings.

There were tensions after that war here with people from Germany and Japan. Imagine how Ukrainians feel about Russians, Israelis and Palestinians about each other, and many in our country about others here who embrace a radically different view not just of current issues like immigration and race but why the nation was founded and thus what principles ought to shape it. How can we love those people?

Jesus tells us to pray for our enemy. That is a start. It is difficult to hold someone in your heart before God for long and still cling to hatred. It also helps to see the humanity in the dreaded other, what we have in common, despite all our differences.

In his book *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum includes a story about a Sergeant Major in the Russian Army named Nicolai Pestretsov (pp. 31-33). His wife visited him when

he was stationed in Angola just as South African military units attacked the black nationalist guerillas there. She was killed and rather than flee for his safety, he remained with his wife's body. He would not leave her. He ended up in a South African prison, much to the amazement of his captors. In that moment, Fulghum says, Pestretsov was not a Russian or communist or soldier, but just-a-man who cared for just-a-woman for just-a-time more than anything else. We are more alike than we think.

But we can also be stubborn which leads to the second pointed part of Jonah's message. How do we deal with our own petulant self-righteousness? Jonah refuses to make room in his heart for anything good vis a vis the Ninevites, but surely we are not this stubborn... or are we? Are there not times when we refuse to believe that God could love them, and even if God does, we have any responsibility to do so?

So, what do we do? When children throw temper tantrums, sometimes the best course is to leave them alone. When I was young, cousins visited us in Louisville and one got upset about something and said she was running away. Her brother said – not to worry, she does this all the time – so, we packed her a lunch and sent her on her way. She walked around the neighborhood stewing for a while and came back.

Quite often God lets us stew, and we benefit from a cooling off period, but God does something else, God extends grace to us, with truth mixed in, but God extends grace. God extends grace to Jonah just as God extends grace to the people of Ninevah. God could have allowed the fish to kill Jonah or the heat to consume him, but while the book ends with Jonah's fate unresolved, it is unresolved. God has not run out of patience. Nor will God run out of patience with us, which ought to provide some incentive to stop pouting and start opening our hearts.

In December 2014 Chaouki and Maha Boulos spoke for our Global Missions emphasis. Now retired, they were CBF field personnel in Lebanon, where they grew up, and when they spoke here, they were mostly ministering to Syrian refugees. What many people did not know was that Chaouki's father was killed by a Syrian soldier in 1977 during the Lebanese Civil War that lasted fifteen years and took 150,000 lives. He carried a hatred for Syrians for years, until he became a Christian, and something changed in his heart. So, years later, when he ended up

back in Lebanon, ministering to Syrians, it just felt right, like behavior consistent with the radical love he had come to know in Christ. It is possible to let go of hatred and open our hearts to our enemy.

There is a Midrash that says when the Israelites fleeing bondage crossed the Red Sea, and waters poured over the Egyptians, the angels offered to sing a song of praise to God, but God replied, “My handiwork (the Egyptians) are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before me (b. Sanhedrin 39b).”

Even the angels can get it wrong. We are all God’s children. We are *all* God’s children. In the end, that’s all we really need to know, along with the truth that we all need grace.