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Out on the Ledge and Ready to Jump: Living in the World Envisioned in Jonah

DAVID FLEER

Prelude

The following sermon is composed of five moves and is generally cast in the image of “witness,” to use Lance Pape’s language from his essay in this issue. More specifically the sermon works in the “testifying voice,” to adopt Bob Reid’s category, which intends to be persuasively indeterminate in its rhetorical appeal, attempts to bring the congregation into the world envisioned in the text, and hopes to end with the audience saying, “This conversation matters. Let’s keep talking.”

Although the sermon is not rooted in apocalyptic literature and is positioned in the prophetic tradition (of which Lance warns us not to typecast all biblical genres), it is a narrative with strikingly visual images. Consider the livestock in sackcloth, pagans in their boats at sea making sacrifices to God, not to mention fish and gourds and a worm. Visual images, indeed, which Lance and Rollin remind us are at the heart of apocalyptic literature. But if apocalyptic literature is an “anti-imperial document” then Jonah is an “anti-anti-imperial document,” if the empire is the enemy.

The sermon begins with a full-throated reading (or performance) of Jonah attempting to articulate the tone of the three characters, which is an effort for the characters to reveal and advance the plot. For example, the cool and seemingly dispassionate voice of the narrator sets up the voice of God who, with almost parental concern, asks, “Do you have reason to be angry?”—which, of course, is most sharply set against the character whose language reveals that his anger is so intense he longs for death. Thus, the reading is meant to be so real that it allows the life within the text to be more interesting and real than any analogies or metaphors that find their way into the sermon.

The First Move: Reading Jonah 3.10–4.11

When God saw the deeds of the people of Nineveh, that they turned from their wicked ways, God relented concerning the calamity which God declared he would bring upon them. And God did not do *it*. But that greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to God and said, “This is what I said while I was still in my *own* country. That is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness, and relenting from sending calamity. Therefore, O LORD, take my life from me, death is better than life.”

God said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”

Then Jonah left the city and sat down east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what *might* happen in the city. So God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But when dawn came the next day God appointed a worm and the worm attacked the plant and the plant withered. When the sun came up, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that Jonah became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.”

Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?”
 And Jonah said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.”
 Then God said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, not to mention the animals?” (italics added)

The Second Move: Misreading Jonah

And that should be enough. Just the reading of the text for those of us raised on the tale that currently circulates through the volume lodged in our church’s nursery. I’m talking about the little book with quarter-inch-thick pages where preschoolers are told, “Jonah is running.” Open the flap. “There he is, high tailing it toward a ship bound for Tarshish.” And the last page of this fun romp through the first two chapters of Jonah ends when the whale spits Jonah onto the white sandy beach decorated with seashells and a sign pointing to Nineveh and a happy smiling whale in the background. And that is the conclusion of the children’s book.

But, now that we’ve read the fourth chapter, you now know the adult ending. Of course, you already knew that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and you are now reminded that Jonah is cast as an eighth-century prophet when Assyria was the “evil empire,” the “axis of evil,” and the “archenemy” of God’s people.

Eighth-century Assyria who impaled upon stakes their war victims outside Judea city;¹ eighth-century Assyria who skinned alive their prisoners in Israel; eighth-century Assyria whose foreign policy, in a word, is terror, whom the prophet Nahum describes with this graphic poetry:

Swords flashing,
 spears gleaming,
 many slain...
 countless dead bodies....”²

For a generation raised on this truncated version of Jonah we should be happy with a sermon experience where we leave with more information, pleased to know more of Jonah’s character.

Having read the full story, we now remember that Jonah didn’t want the Assyrian people to repent, that Jonah wanted the wrath of God to fall upon the Assyrian capital, that Jonah resented their salvation. He wanted revenge and retaliation, to repay evil with evil. In other words, Jonah believed in “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

We could call it a day, now that we know the children’s book is misleading. And the song is out of key too. Do you remember singing the camp song that makes Jonah into a hero, in league with Daniel and Moses and Abraham?

But Jonah is no hero. If we look closely at Jonah’s prayer inside the fish, we discover it’s all about Jonah’s righteousness and the wrongness of those like the Assyrians who “worship vain idols” (2. 8). And we should be happy that we now know the truth.

The Third Move: Following Irony and Hyperbole into the World of Jonah

So, I am hesitant to move further into the world imagined in Jonah. I hesitate to look closely at the remarkable amount of irony and exaggeration in this narrative for instance. Irony is to mean the opposite of what you say. Describing your palace, your 20,000-square-foot home, as “our humble abode” is ironic. Irony is when an event occurs opposite of expectations. The lifeguard drowns. That’s ironic.

1. For quick reference to the impaling and for images of Assyrian prisoners taken from the palace reliefs, see <http://www.biblepicturegallery.com/Pictures/AssyrianA.htm>.

2. Nahum 3.3.

Jonah is thick with irony. There's irony in every scene. The prophet sleeps while the pagans pray. That's ironic. The pagans wake the sleeping prophet and beg him to pray. That's more ironic. Irony pushes the edge, ridicules and exaggerates.... And irony is often the building block of humor.

Comedians love irony in their routines. Listen to the irony and exaggeration in Rodney Dangerfield: "I get no respect, I tell ya, no respect at all. When I was a kid I got lost at the beach and a cop helped me look for my parents. I said to him, 'Do you think we'll find them?' He said, 'I don't know, kid. There's so many places they could hide.' I get no respect, I tell ya, no respect at all."

This is irony in service of a joke. And comedy is one way to deal with material that strikes too close to home, uncomfortable stories that make demands on our lives.

Have you seen Jonah in Gary Larson's *The Far Side*? Single framed cartoon. Bedraggled Jonah returns home to his wife. Dripping wet, pant leg gnawed up to the knee, and pop-eyed. Jonah's wife greets him, "Three days late, smelling like fish, and what tale have I got to swallow this time, Jonah?"

Humor captures irony but holds at bay the challenging truth. Humor is an avoidance strategy that allows us to successfully dismiss Jonah's message from our thinking, our conversations, and our lives. It works just like the other strategies:

- 1) The children's book misrepresents the entire tale and ends halfway through!
- 2) The song "reinterprets the story" and makes Jonah's ego-centered prayer into a model!
- 3) Or we who argue over matters of no consequence to the story ("Was Nineveh really this big?" "Can a man really survive three days in a fish, let alone a whale?") that keep us away from the heat of the real issue.

But the story in Jonah shouts out, "God's tender mercies go far beyond our comfort zones." God is quite capable of loving and forgiving people whom we hate...and whom we hate for good reason! And irony and exaggeration in Jonah move us closer to the terrible truth of the narrative:

- 1) Jonah's five-word *negative* sermon *converts* more than 120,000, not counting animals. That's ironic.
- 2) The prophet's *success* makes him *angry*. That's ironic and that's not funny.³
- 3) Jonah is *happy* over his deliverance (from the fish and from the heat) but is *angry* at Nineveh's deliverance from the wrath of God. That's ironic and that's not funny.

The Fourth Move: Postcards and Film Clips Lure Us In

If we look to Jonah again, as if for the first time, with its difficult message, perhaps we can do little more than receive a postcard from this imagined world. A postcard created from a snapshot in this story, a still photograph in black and white, a study in contrasts. A photograph that shows that when it comes to others we tend to think, "God's justice should outweigh his mercy." But you can see it better than I can say it.

Look at the image of God in the aftermath of Nineveh's repentance. "God changed his mind and did not send calamity to Nineveh as he had promised." Do you see that? This bright image is set in bold contrast with Jonah who is "extremely angry" and says he is angry because of God's *slowness* to get angry. Now that's ironic. Jonah says, "If this is how it works, if you forgive people like *this*, then I'd rather not be alive."

Do you see the contrast? Look at God (forgiving) and then look at Jonah (angry). The black-and-white postcard doesn't just sit on our mantel. It enters our consciousness and stirs old film clips that we've stored from other texts and other times when we learned that an eye for an eye...leaves a lot of people blind.

After the Sunday sermon a young woman, recently divorced and with three young children in tow, comes forward. She confesses her sins that led to the divorce and the troubles she brought on herself and others and how her back is against the wall and that she needs our help. The elders then stand up and say they've met with her and know her to be sincere and accept her back and urge us to support her as well.

3. An excellent discussion of irony in Jonah is at the heart of Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 51-60.

The following Sunday, at the sermon's invitation, the woman's former father-in-law comes forward. He grabs the microphone and announces that his former daughter-in-law's repentance is a sham, that she *cannot* repent because she has remarried and that the elders are wrong and shouldn't be considered elders anymore. And on the next day this man begins an expensive media blitz sending tracts and letters to every person in the congregation attempting to convince everyone of the truth of his position.

But, before the next Sunday arrives, I become aware of a remarkable reality: the former father-in-law, married to his current wife for more than thirty years with children raised into adulthood, has himself been married and divorced and remarried. This is so ironic.

These film clips remind us of our skepticism toward those who get mercy. Remember the man who is out in his father's field after another long day of work and is heading home when he notices a party in the house with music and dancing and laughter and joy?

When the father comes out to the field to urge his son to join the party for his younger sibling just back from a port city with ladies in lipstick on the street corners and every third door a tavern, the older son says, "A party for him?"

And his father says, "Do you begrudge my mercy?"

The black-and-white postcard and the film clips are studies in contrast that show when it comes to others we tend to think, "God's justice should outweigh his mercy." But when it comes to us, "God's mercy should outweigh his justice."

The Fifth Move: Out on the Ledge with Jonah

Since we are in this far let's walk into the conversation that appears at the close of this story. God is now listening to Jonah whose anger is "suicide-strong." He's standing out on the ledge threatening to jump, "If this is how it is, God forgiving people who deserve to be punished for their sins, I want no part of it."

That's you and me out on the ledge. God is inside the building, leaning out and urging us not to jump. He's keeping the conversation going, explaining his motives. We say to God that we want a god of vengeance to simply punish the people who have harmed us and those who threaten us. We're talking about ex-husbands, homosexual insurgents, illegal immigrants, nations, political parties, and modern-day Assyrians who threaten to harm us.

God says we are making a huge mistake, marking his grace like we do with bright yellow paint and cyclone fence with razor wire to show just how far God goes and exactly where God stops. God says, "That's why I describe the Assyrian repentance with such extravagance, from the king to the commoner, including livestock in sackcloth. I do that so you'll take down the fence and wire."

Out on the ledge, wanting to jump, we confess that we have a powerful urge to reduce God's character that appears to us to be too large in this world, too wide in scope. We say we want God to focus on our local issues and our national interests.

God says, "There is a wideness to my mercy that extends beyond your borders." God says, "I cannot be limited, my love is mysterious and deep and not confined to you." God says, "My love extends even to your enemies." And then God says, "Come in off the ledge."

Before we move we might consider that this sermon may be about twenty years too late, at least. Because twenty years ago when the first war with Iraq broke out, the Gulf War, a young student at a Christian College wrote a letter asking, "Why are Bible-believing Christians in the U.S.A. supporting the war instead of preaching Christ to the millions of Iraqis who've never heard?" One person offered the student this answer, "The reason Christians in the U.S.A. support the war instead of preaching Christ to the millions of Iraqis is because Christians in the U.S.A. have exchanged their Christian story for Caesar's story and therefore have forfeited their ability to preach the Gospel in Iraq."⁴

What are we to do with this exchange? I don't know. That was twenty years ago. We are out on the ledge, high above the street, and a terrible storm is starting to blow. It is a storm, I tell you, because in the

4. This exchange is based on a letter referenced by Fleming Rutledge, "It's About God, Not You," in Michael A. Turner and William F. Malambri III, eds., *A Peculiar Prophet: William H. Willimon and the Art of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 25.

United States some say they can sooner tell we are Republicans or Democrats than they can tell we are Christians. I know it is a storm because some say they can sooner tell we are Americans than they can tell we are Christians, that we are more ready to drop bombs than we are to pray. What makes these days so troublesome is that we forget our stories, lop off whole sections, rework parts entirely, and twist the rest into a joke. We forget that in the world God envisions forgiveness and mercy outweigh vengeance in every instance.

It would be a lot easier to just read this story and stop. In some times and in some places that might be enough. But we are in the midst of new boundaries, and we are encouraged to keep alive the conversation with God. We do this because so much is at stake. Not once does God challenge our faith. Not once. God challenges the way we look at things, our worldview. God challenges our theology because he doesn't want us to jump. God doesn't want us to jump. God wants us to step in from the ledge...so that we can act like him.

Reflections on This Much-Preached Sermon

This sermon was written about nine years ago, during the administration of George W. Bush. I preached it and put it on the shelf. A couple of years ago I took it down from the shelf, dusted it off, and decided to take it on the road to discover how it might be heard. I preached this sermon wherever I was invited—more than two dozen times.

I entered this project assuming the reactions would affirm the hypothesis that Churches of Christ have now locked into the Evangelical orbit although sermon responses shed no light. I assumed I'd hear comments that would reveal if the hearers were from a political red state or blue state. This did not happen.

Some comments were deflecting. "Do you know who you remind me of? Garrison Keillor." I was flattered. The next Sunday, "Do you know who you remind me of? Al Pacino." I was scared.

But some responses were reflective and sincere. "That was refreshing." Or "I'd not thought of that before." Or "What are the implications?" Once, in Chicago, a Gulf War vet challenged my patriotism and asked a question, "How would you have handled the terrorism?" I heard that as an affirmation that this conversation matters and we should keep talking.

I preached the sermon in a Presbyterian church and to a seminar of Christian Church ministers. I preached it in Churches of Christ in Tennessee, Dearborn, Michigan and then, on the Sunday before Veterans' Day, in Washington, D.C. Immediately prior to the sermon, the man leading our minds in preparation for the Lord's Supper asked that all the veterans stand and then he asked that all families of those now in the military stand. By then there were a lot of people were standing. Then, deeply emotional, he exclaimed, "As our men and women in the service are asked to make the ultimate sacrifice, so our Lord made the ultimate sacrifice. Let us pray."

As he prayed, I remembered the homiletic wisdom of Fred Craddock—"Don't just get it said, get it heard."—and did some serious sermon-editing, completely removing all the material on war and bombs. The sermon seemed to go over "okay."

Then I took the sermon to Alabama on Memorial Day weekend to a church that cancelled Bible class because...it was Memorial Day weekend. The song leader's white shirt helped "pop out" the American flag that functioned as his tie as he led us in *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *God Bless America*. I resisted the temptation to edit and preached the sermon in its entirety. I was not invited to dinner.

Then I took the sermon to Mississippi. As the Sunday neared, the preacher emailed me, asking for my sermon title and text. I wrote back, declaring that the title of the sermon would be "Out on the Ledge and Ready to Jump: Living in the World Envisioned in Jonah" and the text, Jonah 3.10—4.11.

The Sunday in Mississippi arrived and I preached the sermon in its entirety. As soon as I finished, the resident minister entered the pulpit, made a few comments, and then led the congregation in this prayer:

Grant us, Lord God, an understanding of your desire: that people will come together to hear of your ways and walk in your paths.

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of your re-creation begun in Jesus: swords beaten into plowshares, spears refashioned into hooks for pruning vines, nations laying down their weapons, a human amnesia concerning the whole practice of violence.

Grant us, Lord God, a participation in your world as your love would have it: a world where the weak are protected and none go hungry or poor, a world where the riches of creation are shared and everyone can enjoy them, a world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect, a world where peace is built with justice and justice is guided by love. Give us the inspiration and courage to embrace it and embody it, to hope it through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After the *Amen*, I made a beeline to the minister and said, “This is the most appropriate prayer I’ve ever heard after any sermon I’ve ever preached or heard. May I have a copy?”

“Sure,” he said and handed me the manuscript of the prayer.

I looked at it and discovered that the prayer had been typed and printed. So I asked, “When did you compose this prayer?”

“Last night,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, “You must have found the sermon online?” (With the number of times I’ve preached this sermon I’m sure it’s floating around.)

“No,” he said, “This is the first I’ve heard this sermon.”

“How then did you know to write *this* prayer for *this* sermon?” I asked.

He said, “You sent me your text and title. I read the passage and wrote the prayer.” “Oh.” Which leads me to the following conclusion: there is hope!

These narratives are sufficient unto themselves for conversations of deep significance. If pockets of careful and reflective preaching and reading of the text are happening in places like Mississippi, they must be happening in many churches—to the glory of God!

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