



**“Limiting God’s Love”**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**August 8, 2010**  
**Jonah 1:1-4, 11-12, 15&17, 2:10-3:5, 3:10-4:4**

A ship is engulfed by the perfect storm, the sailors struggle to survive the gale force winds and ferocious waves, but the ship threatens to break apart. They toss a man overboard and he bobs in the turbulent sea. Out of the depths a whale surging toward the surface opens his enormous jaws and the man disappears. Immediately the furious winds calm to a gentle breeze. The ship and its crew are saved, and all is not lost for the poor soul who was swallowed. He survives three days in the belly of the whale until he is unceremoniously spewed onto the beach.

Drama on the high seas. Yet, a story that seems more fitting for children than adults. When I heard the story as a child, I linked it to Disney’s Pinocchio. I envisioned that cute little wooden puppet with the long nose being jostled around in the belly of a whale. Does that pretty much represent the gravity of the Book of Jonah. Is it basically a child’s tale with a nice moral?

If we take this story seriously, we discover that it conveys a truth that most of us do not find altogether palatable. Perhaps we relegate Jonah to juvenile status because we would rather not grapple with its message.

Not surprisingly, we moderns are not the only ones who have sought to avoid the message of Jonah. A bitter fight erupted over this book in the fourth century that kept the focus on a trivial side issue rather than the heart of the matter. In the fourth century, Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. In the final chapter of the Book of Jonah, where we read that God prompted a bush to grow in order to provide shade for Jonah, Jerome translated the name of this bush as “ivy.” This was something new. The traditional translation of this bush had always been “gourd,” so some people took issue with him. A bishop in North Africa vehemently protested, saying that Jerome was clearly off track. The plant was a gourd, not ivy. As preposterous as it may seem today, a grand controversy ensued. Strongly worded letters were sent back and forth until two opposing parties emerged – the “gourdites” who defended the traditional translation and the “ivyites” who supported Jerome’s contemporary version. Jerome became so incensed by the challenge that he declared his opponents to be drunkards. He claimed that the only reason they insisted on calling this plant a gourd was because they wanted to have a place to stash their liquor! Today, if you check the footnote in the NRSV Bible, you will see that current scholars think it was neither a gourd nor ivy, but possibly a castor bean plant. Such silly controversies can make the church seem foolish and irrelevant.

Is Jonah a child’s tale or is it fit for adult consumption? Was it ivy, a gourd or a castor bean plant? How long do you suspect someone could actually survive in the stomach of a whale? Was Jonah an historical person or a created character? Questions and controversies

swirling around this little book deflect our attention from its core message: is God just a little too forgiving?

Some scholars believe the Book of Jonah arose in the fifth century BCE when the Jewish people were circling the wagons and their intolerance of outsiders was widespread. Many Israelites had recently returned home after surviving decades of exile in Babylon. Bitter from their captivity and struggling with their nation in ruins, many were now asserting their Jewish identity and superiority. However, in the midst of these narrow mindsets, the Spirit of God prompted some unknown author to lampoon them. He was persuaded to tell a story filled with humor and satire to puncture their pomposity and to remind them of the true character of God.

Our story begins with God calling Jonah to journey to the city of Nineveh where he is to tell the people to repent of their sins. His task sounds like a reasonable assignment for a biblical prophet. "Go to sin city and tell them to clean up their act."

Jonah immediately sets off on his journey. There's only one problem. Instead of heading east to the city of Nineveh he buys a ticket on the next ship heading west. Immediately it becomes obvious that Jonah is a reluctant servant of the Lord.

Perhaps that puts Jonah in good company. After all, he is not the only person in the Bible to resist God's call. Moses tried to persuade God that he would not be a good spokesperson to Pharaoh; Elijah tried to run away from confronting King Ahab. Jeremiah protested that he was too young for the job. Jonah also resists, but his defiance is a notch or two above the others. Every step of the way, he attempts to shirk his responsibility.

First, he boards a ship heading in the opposite direction. He figures that if he goes to the far western city of Tarshish, God will have no option but to find a substitute to go to Nineveh. Wrong. After learning that Jonah is a reluctant prophet, we discover that God is a very persistent God. As Jonah is sailing to Tarshish, a storm whips up at sea. It may not be a full blown hurricane, but it is a dandy of a storm. The wind and waves are so ferocious that the ship threatens to break up. The sailors toss their cargo into the sea and cry to their gods to save them. Eventually, they determine that Jonah is the source of their problem and they begin to quiz him. Jonah comes clean and says that God wants him to do something that he can not bear, so he's running away. He had thought he could subvert God's plan, but with the great storm about to overwhelm their ship, Jonah realizes that God has won this round.

However, Jonah does not relent. He does not say, "That's it, God, you win. I'll go to Nineveh and do as you say." Instead, he concocts another plan. He whips out his trump card. He shows God just how determined he is to reject his assignment. He tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He figures he will be remembered with high praise for his noble act of sacrificing his life to save others, and selfishly, if he is dead, he avoids going to Nineveh. Initially, the sailors refuse, but as the storm intensifies and their doom appears certain, they finally toss Jonah into the drink.

At first glance, Jonah has avoided his dreaded assignment. But, wait! God has appointed a huge fish to swallow him. And there, in the belly of the fish, Jonah lives for three days. Not surprisingly, once the great fish spews Jonah onto dry land, Jonah realizes that he might as well comply with God's command. So, he finally sets out for Nineveh.

Why was Jonah so stubbornly determined to avoid Nineveh? Because the city was known for violence and terrorism. The Ninevites had burned the crops and slaughtered the livestock of neighboring communities. Their armies had killed the sons of other nations, and had raped the daughters. Nineveh was a dreaded enemy of ancient Israel.

However, the reason Jonah so stubbornly resisted going to Nineveh was not what we might first expect. It was not because he feared for his life; neither was it because he feared failure. He feared something else. He feared success. He was afraid the people might heed his warning and turn from their ways and God would forgive them. That was the last thing Jonah

wanted. He yearned for God to give them a taste of what they had been dishing out to others. He did not want God to be merciful.

So, despite the fact that Jonah finally goes to Nineveh, he is not really a changed man. He figures it is useless to resist God, so he decides to do the bare minimum. Most prophets were quite verbose, speaking long discourses. But not Jonah. His pronouncement is a mere sentence. He does not call on the people to repent nor does he hold out a sliver of hope. He simply declares: “Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Jonah hopes no one will listen and God will unleash divine wrath. However, Jonah’s worst nightmare comes true. The people of Nineveh repent and Jonah is so incredibly successful that even the animals wear sackcloth and repent. God forgives all the people and the animals.

Jonah is furious! He starts kicking everything in sight. “I knew it! I just knew it!” Jonah says. “This is why I took off in the opposite direction in the first place, because you are gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing.”

Jonah is incensed because he thinks God is too soft on sin. According to Jonah, God is way too quick to forgive. As one commentator puts it: “Whereas some prophets complained about the wrath of God, Jonah protests the love of God.”<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, it sounds ludicrous. But I suspect there is a touch of Jonah in all of us. We fully embrace God’s compassion and forgiveness when we are the recipients, but we are prone to limiting God’s love when we think it is headed for the wrong people. We are quick to rejoice in our own special status with God, but we often want to limit it to people who believe and act as we do.

Jonah is so begrudging that he says, “Take my life, God. I’d rather be dead.” He would rather be dead than to see his enemies forgiven. And the book ends with God asking Jonah a question: “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh in which there are 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left?”

A colleague, Bill Carl, says he will never completely understand Maake Masango, a black South African pastor whom he met when Masango was studying in the U.S. This was during the time of Apartheid in South Africa. Carl says it was remarkable how this man could be so forgiving to his tormentors even when he was heading back to South Africa and the probability of being thrown in jail. Carl says that Masango had a vision of the wideness of God’s mercy – a vision that allowed him to transcend the natural human hatred he must have felt for the Afrikaner. Masango’s model was not Jonah, but Jesus. His creed was not “Punish them, Lord,” but rather, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>2</sup>

There are times when we have a bit too much Jonah in us. Times when we are too self-focused, too narrow-minded and too insistent in having a voice in who is worthy and who is not. Thankfully, God is a fountain of mercy and forgiveness, and seeks to transform us so that we can experience the joy that springs forth when we are loving and forgiving.

## NOTES

1. Phyllis Tribble, “The Book of Jonah” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume VII*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.481.
2. William Carl, III, “Tickets for Tarshish,” on the *Day 1* website, November 9, 2008.