

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?¹
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10
Mark 1: 14-20
A Sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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In a time of economic downturn and flagging church attendance in all denominations, is it impossible? This call, I'm talking about. The call of God for the church to be salt and light; the call of God for the church reach out and minister to those whom the Bible calls *the least of these*; the call of God to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. This call is couched in different images and stories in the Bible, but it is consistent: God's people are called to make a real difference for good in the world. It is a great calling, but is it an impossible task?

I

This is where I call your attention to the story of Jonah. It is a satire. It is truth couched in the great rabbinic heritage of telling funny stories with a serious message. It all started with someone coming up to an ancient rabbi and asking something like, "What do you think God wants me to do in this world?" And the rabbi, instead of answering the question directly, says, "Did you hear the one about Jonah...."

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Jonah is pictured as the type of person who would NOT join in singing the hymn,

*Here am I, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

He would not have sung it, for when God did call him, God said, *Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.*² Jonah was dumbfounded. Nineveh? The very name of Nineveh made him gag. Capital of the dreaded world power Assyria, Nineveh personified all that was evil. For Jonah, Nineveh was the evil empire, the headquarters of terrorism. In his view, Nineveh deserved no mission of mercy; it deserved no hope. Clearly, he was muttering under his breath, “No way, Yah-wey!”

For Jonah, there was no sympathy with anyone who would sing, *I will go, Lord, if you lead me; I will hold your people in my heart.* When God said, “Go east, Jonah,” he hops on the first ship headed west! The destination of the ship was Tarshish, which was located in present-day Spain, the end of the known world. He wanted to get as far away from God’s call as he could.

² Jonah 1: 2.

Then comes the only part of the story that most people remember. A storm arose, and the sailors are frightened for their lives. They cast lots to see whose god is angry, and the dice fell on poor old Jonah. He says to them, “It’s all my fault. Throw me overboard!” So the sailors oblige Jonah and toss him into the angry sea. Then the sea is calmed, and the sailors are converted to Jonah’s God on the spot! The text says that they worshipped God, made sacrifices and vows.³

To show how the rabbis used this story over the centuries, some of them would embellish this part of the story. They would tell it with the sailors repeatedly throwing Jonah overboard. Over he goes and the sea calms. They retrieve him back on board, and the storm starts up again! Into the sea he goes again, and the storm stops. They pull him back on board and the storm gets going again. This is repeated several times until the great fish ends the foolishness and gobbles Jonah up.

The next scene in the story takes place inside the great fish. The text never calls it a “whale.” It says “great fish,” species undefined. We have filled in the word “whale” because we are so hung up on making this story literal, when it was never intended to be taken literally. Of course, this part of the story has generated more foolishness than just about any part of the Bible.

³ Jonah 1: 16.

Sincere people have gone to great lengths to explain just how Jonah could have survived in the belly of a whale. But in going through such gyrations of logic, they have missed the whole point of this little story!

The point of the story is this: Jonah could not believe that God could love Nineveh. He would rather die than to live in a world in which God loves the likes of Nineveh. And God, who loved both Nineveh and Jonah, could not let Jonah so easily consign himself to death at the bottom of the sea.

Jonah, who had done all he could to escape God's call, is like many of us who spend an enormous amount of time and energy trying to escape the clear leading of God. It is part of the rabbinic humor of this story when the great fish vomits Jonah out on dry land, right on the very shore where Jonah left in the first place! After all his running from God, Jonah ends up precisely where he began!

And when Jonah opens his eyes on the beach, there is God waiting for him. And God says, "Jonah, maybe you didn't get it the first time: *Get up, go to Nineveh...and proclaim to it the message that I will give you.*" Jonah still doesn't like it, but he is through fighting God. He gets up and goes to Nineveh, which is described in the text as an *exceedingly large city*.

Jonah walks into town and delivers his entire sermon in five Hebrew words which can be loosely translated: "Forty days more—Nineveh's toast!"

No illustrations, no poems, no alliteration, no altar call, not even a single verse of “Just As I Am.” It’s like he is saying to God, “There...satisfied? I preached. I did what you asked me to do. It’s done! Now let me out of this despicable place!”

And the response to the world’s shortest sermon is the greatest response in the entire Bible! The entire population of Nineveh repents! Then the story says God’s mind changed about destroying the city. But that was not good news for Jonah. He is pictured as a preacher who takes glee in the thought that God would destroy Nineveh. When Jonah finds out that God has decided to spare the city, he pitches a fit and gets depressed! God has made a fool out of him. He told the citizens of Nineveh that they would be toast in 40 days, and now he must eat his words! Jonah is humiliated, and he rages at God: “Why do you think I went to Nineveh in the first place? I knew you wouldn’t do it! I knew you were a pushover! Don’t you realize that these people aren’t like us? How can you love people like this?”

Then the story of Jonah ends with a question. It is the only book in the Bible that ends in a question. It is a question that God asks Jonah: *Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons?*

II

So in the great rabbinic tradition, the story ends in a question for us to ponder. Should God be concerned about the Nineveh's of our culture? And of course, there is the further implication: if God is concerned, what about us? So the crucial issue coming out of this story is this: what constitutes our Nineveh today? Whatever our Nineveh is today, two things are obvious: first, today's Nineveh includes those whom people consider to be outside the range of God's love. And second, it means that reaching out to them will not be easy.

What or who is our Nineveh? Or maybe there are multiple Nineveh's to which God is calling us. Maybe your Nineveh is as small as one individual, a person who has wronged you to such an extent that you can hardly bear to hear that person's name without feeling sick and disgusted. Or maybe our Nineveh is an ethnic group, or even a nation, or a political ideology, or those of a different sexual orientation, or a different race or philosophy. Identify your Nineveh and look again at the story of Jonah.

Once we recognize that God loves the Nineveh's of the world, then we have two choices. We can walk out of the church in a snit like Jonah, angry that God dares to love people with such disregard to our opinion; or, we can take heart! If God loves the Nineveh's of the world, then perhaps we too are called to love the Nineveh's of the world!

III

Against our propensity to divide the world up between us and them, friends and enemies, God hurls out this playful but serious tale about Jonah. And when we hear Jesus' call to follow him, we are called to a mission that may be inconvenient, impractical, improbable, and maybe even impossible.

But God is consistently pictured as calling people to do the impossible! To impotent Abraham and Sarah God says, "You will have a son," and they laugh so hard at the impossibility that they name the baby "Isaac," which means laughter. To a young virgin named Mary God says, "You will give birth to a Savior," and it was so. To an exclusive early church God says, "You will welcome Gentiles," and it was so. To a young man named Francis in the town of Assisi, God says, "You will become an instrument of peace," and it was so. To a monk named Martin Luther, he said, "You will challenge a pompous and money-hungry Pope," and it was so.

To a young Roger Williams God said, "You will challenge the Puritan government of New England and establish a church where the conscience is free from interference by the state," and it was so. To a handful of Baptists in Worcester, Massachusetts 200 years ago, God said, "Make me a church founded on freedom of conscience," and it was so!

God's call is always to the impossible! Otherwise, when something is accomplished, we would be tempted to say, "Look what WE did!" Instead, God calls us to the impossible, so that we can say, "Alleluia! Allelluia! Look what God has done!"