

The Worst
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The Jonah story is a classic, now not normally the ending of the Jonah story but the story as a whole is what I would consider one of the great Classics of the Bible. It is also one of the most clear-cut examples of humor in the Bible. The silliness of Jonah is there on purpose. The idea of a prophet running away from God, something that the JPS Bible commentary pointed out, is very funny. Jonah is continually running from God, only to have the gentiles and the other people around him be the ones to bring him back to God or follow God's will, even though Jonah is a prophet of God. So even though we just went over this in our time with children let's go ahead and really quickly go over the different things that Jonah has done throughout this story that get us to what is literally the end of the book, this very abrupt question from God that ends our time with Jonah. Jonah is told at the beginning of our book to go to Nineveh and immediately heads out to Tarshish, which is basically in the opposite direction of Nineveh. As the trip gets underway a great storm begins to threaten the boat, and as the sailors struggle they decide to cast lots to see whose fault the storm is. The dice are cast and everything points toward Jonah, who was sleeping in the boat, the man is brought up by those people who don't worship God and he explains to them that this is his fault. He is thrown into the ocean at his request telling the others that, basically my God will begin to calm down if you throw me into the ocean. This leads the gentiles to prayer, first of forgiveness for throwing Jonah in, but then of awe at the storms passing. By running away from the thing God is telling him to do Jonah is almost running toward death,¹ but instead of dying still not having done what God told him to do, so potentially completing his goal of not warning Nineveh, though maybe not the way he wanted. Jonah is instead eaten by a fish. Here we actually see Jonah have a little bit of a turnaround. We see a very remorseful Jonah in the prayer that he says to God. A Jonah that is thankful that he will not be dying any time soon, and then of course at the end of this prayer we see Jonah thrown up on the dry land to go into Nineveh and start his preaching Journey. Again God tells Jonah to go do it and Jonah does go in and spends 3 days walking across this entire city exclaiming that they have 40 days to get their act together if they don't want to be destroyed by God. The king hears this and tells everyone to fast in repentance (including the animals) and to wear sackcloth (again including the animals). This portion of the story always makes me think of a cow in a sack cloth vest. As the people reading this story in the future know and as Jonah expected, God is merciful to the people. That brings us to where we started our story today. Jonah is angry with God, because of God's mercy for Nineveh.

We might ask why Jonah hated Nineveh so much. It's a very powerful city, part the Assyrian empire that had either taken over the northern kingdom or were going to in the future. Either way, not friendly with God's people. Another reason I read in the JPS Bible Commentary on Jonah is that Jonah wants to see justice; the kind of justice that we as humans desire, and God is not giving that. Jonah seems to be waiting just to see if maybe the people will slip up before that 30 days is up, but of course we don't get to see any of that.

The story of Jonah is one of the more humorous books of the Bible, and a very quick one to read. I highly recommend it if you ever have a free hour or so. You could easily read through Jonah. Jonah is also a book about the redemption of people. It is a book about who could be outside God's grace. We have the very blatant example in the people of Nineveh. this

¹ again pointed out by the JPS Bible Commentary

is a city that is in the Assyrian Empire a civilization that did not worship God, yet those people are so important to God that God sends Jonah on a journey that put him into the mouth of a whale and then a three-day journey across the city. God goes through pretty extreme lengths here to save the city to help the city turn itself around from where it was going. However I don't think this is the main redemption story in Jonah. I think that there is a more important character that we see here being Redeemed by God. There is a character in the story that we have been with since the start that is having some kind of a redemption arc.

It's a stretch to call Jonah's story an arc. From what we see Jonah doesn't seem to change, and we don't know if he ever does. Yet God persists with him God is spends this whole time not only telling Jonah you are the one I want to do this work, but also trying to get Jonah to understand the actual breadth of what is being accomplished here. God is trying to get Jonah to understand that he has helped to save a multitude of people and their animals and their children, and God never gives up on him. Even as Jonah gets angry and sits under a bush. Even as Jonah reminds me of teenage Joe getting mad at his parents over their requests to do things that, maybe I should have done, and I have a feeling that everybody here remembers being a teenager, and probably being meaner to your parents than they deserved. God's redemption continually is reaching out towards Jonah. This reveals that no one in our current day and age is outside of God's redemption. Looking externally that means that those people that are outside our doors who are probably never going to step in-we don't get to give up on those people. Looking into the news, the people that are on either side of those political debates, while we may disagree with them and have good reasons to disagree with them, those people are not outside of redemption. As people that follow God we are called upon to believe in the potential redemption of everyone. God is still going to be using everyone and God is still capable of redeeming every single person that we encounter and every single person that we talk to. I think it's really easy for us to write off people that disagree with us, people that say harsh things, and this isn't saying go out there and let them be harsh to you. This is saying that as we think about that person and as we try and think about the people in our lives to remember that even the people that seem like they might be the furthest thing away from a person that God would desire that they are still children of God and are still desired by God and still can be redeemed by God. As things get heated and as we head into yet another presidential election year the good news is to know that everyone there is still redeemable. God Is Still Loving them and still working with them.

This too can be turned into ourselves for another message of hope. There's been a lot of talk about not doing self-deprecating humor, you know talking down about oneself, people talk about no cell negative self-talked, you know where you get like a why did you do this why did you forget to do that you knew that you had to do that. I think that we can get those kinds of negativity in our Christian Journey. We think why would God want to use me I forgot to do my Bible study for like the last 2 months, you know what's be honest a year or so, or why would God want to use me I still haven't made it to a service opportunity at this congregation, or why would God want to use me I constantly forget to do blank for this church, or I have this idea for this congregation that I haven't done yet - God's got to be mad at me. Those things can drive you to turn into yourself to think that you aren't worthy, that God won't use you. I had no great real world example of this until yesterday's Cubs game. As we watched our second pitcher throw 1, 2, then 3 balls the crowd started to boo him. I wondered about how that must have felt and the pressure he must have been under. However, after that he threw his first strike, and the crowd erupted in cheers. God thankfully doesn't wait for us to throw a strike. I think that the really wonderful message of Jonah is that as we are doing all these things and trying to be a church together, God loves each of us and is hoping for us to do better. God doesn't give up on Jonah as he sits under the bush and tries to wait for Nineveh to be destroyed. God doesn't even

give up on Jonah as he wishes for death. Jonah is acting like I did as a teenager and like my parents loved me anyway in response, God too reacts loving us in the midst of our issues. God is still with us as we get back up and try again. God is there guiding us as we are trying to do better. God is also there trying to guide us to do better even as we intentionally do the wrong thing. Even as we get things wrong we God is still there trying to help us do better. So friends I hope that what you take away from this morning is that even as you make mistakes even as things seem to go wrong not a single thing you do can take away God's redeeming love for you and that no one is ever outside of God's Redemptive power Amen.