

**Live from Nineveh, it's Saturday Night!**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. **Jonah 3:1--10 (NRSVA)**

**Sermon:**

I think one of the first Bible stories most of us learned was the story of Jonah and the Whale. However, the consensus among mainstream biblical scholars is that the book of Jonah is a parable or as the rabbinical scholars call it, a Midrash, a homiletic story. However, I can say with great confidence that this story is absolutely true.

Biblical scholars are reluctant to set a precise date for the writing of the Book of Jonah. It was most likely written sometime after the Babylonian Exile. Jonah is not portrayed as a typical Old Testament prophet who confronts God’s people and makes divine predictions; rather, he confronts one of Israel’s greatest enemies with words of impending doom. Also, unlike other Hebrew prophets who may have tried to beg off their calls, Jonah literally runs away from his.

I understand the book of Jonah to be a satirical parable written sometime after the Jewish exiles had returned to their homeland in 537 B.C.E. I believe it was written as a response to some of the Jewish returnees’ long-standing hatred toward those nations or people who had dealt harshly with them in the past. In their hatred they longed for God to wreak havoc on those nations. It may have also been in response to the strident reforms instituted by the Temple priest Ezra in his zealous prejudices against people classified as outsiders or others. Ezra was calling for radical religious identification and exclusivity by telling Jewish men, including some priests and members of the aristocracy, who had married non-Jewish women or unsanctioned women, to get rid of them along with any children by them. Furthermore, the righteous were called to sever their relationships with those Jewish folks, be they family or not, who had remained in Judea during the Exile and were viewed as having been corrupted by pagan influences, especially the Samaritans. Therefore, what we glimpse in the book of Jonah, I believe, is a satirical critique of many of the post-Exile Jewish people's and their leadership's attitudes toward foreigners or people labeled deviants or out groups.

Against such a background the author of the book of Jonah is giving vent to a more universal dimension in the Jewish consciousness by spinning this satirical tale aimed at the hypocrisy of Israel and its leadership using humor and irony. If you will, the book of Jonah is sort of a religious "Live from Nineveh, it's Saturday Night!" How many of you watch Saturday Night Live? I don't watch as often as I used to because it comes on too late on Saturday evening for someone who gets up at 5:00am. And, besides there is too much adult material in the show now, it gets a little too raunchy for me these days.

Anyway, the book of Jonah spoofs the prevailing piety of the religious-political leadership of Judea not unlike many of the Saturday Night Live episodes spoof our nation's religious and political leaders. It particularly spoofs the people's recently arrived at belief that God was the compassionate Creator/Sustainer of all life and all peoples on earth. However, the author is not advocating a broad, all-inclusive touchy-feely universalism, but rather an understanding that the Jews were to be a light to the nations. Remembering the physiology of the ancients, light shined out of a person onto the world; thus, the Jews and Jerusalem were to be the centers of God's light shining out on the world to the glory of God, the honor and prosperity of God's people, and as a blessing to those nations friendly to the Jews.

You all recall the story. God looks down upon the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh, which by the time of our story would have been destroyed, but in the collective consciousness of Israel would have epitomized the historical humiliations and victimizations of God's people by foreign powers. God sees such wickedness in the city that God decides to destroy this evil place. However, God, always just, compassionate, and merciful, decides first to warn the people and give them a chance to repent of their evil ways. The idea that God wants to warn one of Israel's greatest oppressors and enemies of an impending destruction is just plain ludicrous.

In the parable, God calls an obscure Jewish prophet named Jonah, believed to be a reference to the Jonah, son of Amittai, mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against the wickedness of the city. If you will remember, contrary to popular opinion, at no point does God or Jonah call for the inhabitants of the city to repent or convert. At no time does Jonah tell the people of Nineveh that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, is going to zap them and overthrow the city. All Jonah says or appears willing to say is that in forty days the city will be overthrown - the assumption is destroyed.

Remember also that Jonah had initially refused to go to Nineveh and had boarded a ship, most likely a non-Israelite merchant ship, heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh, the modern city of Mosul in Iraq; which incidentally is nowhere near an ocean. Possibly the author had in mind another neo-Assyrian city near the ocean. The ship according to some scholars was headed toward Tarshish or modern-day Spain.

Along the route of Jonah's retreat, God, the Lord of all Nature, causes a storm that threatens the ship upon which Jonah has taken passage. Nothing the sailors do make a difference and no amount of placating the gods abates the storm. Finally, they cast lots to learn if someone has offended an unknown god. They roll the dice to discern the will of the gods, and Jonah's number comes up on the first roll and in a subsequent roll - Jonah, as they say in Las Vegas, "craps" out.

Jonah finally admits his offense against his god and volunteers to be thrown overboard to save the ship and the sailors. Jonah was willing to sacrifice himself for a bunch of non-Israelite sailors, but he was not willing to go and simply warn a huge city of its impending destruction even upon God's orders. Can't you just sense the humor and irony? This would not have been lost on the first audiences to hear Jonah, nor should it be lost on us. We should hear the same irony and concomitant condemnation that we hear in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which

was not lost on Jesus' audiences. It is amazing what happens when the nebulous "they", "those people", "not our people", or the "enemy" become face-to-face individuals in our lives.

As the story goes, God sends a big fish, or as we may have learned the story, a whale, to swallow Jonah. While in the belly of the whale, Jonah prays a beautiful Psalm of Thanksgiving for being spared a watery death. (*Folks, Jonah is in the belly of a whale, and he is thankful that he hasn't drowned - how funny. Not even the writers of Saturday Live could have done this well. Funny though, Jonah's song of thanksgiving is not unlike the one the returnees sang when they were allowed to go home.*)

The whale barfs Jonah up on the shore not far from Nineveh. Can you imagine Jonah stomping up the beach to Nineveh bleached white from being inside the whale's belly with bits of seaweed hanging off him, little sea critters running in and out of his beard and hair, all the while looking back over his shoulder at the open ocean in fear? God again calls Jonah. Having finally gotten the message, Jonah half-heartedly tromps around Nineveh proclaiming that in forty days the great city would be destroyed.

However, before Jonah is half way through his task, the people begin to repent in droves. We are not told by whose standards of morality their repentance is based upon. Remember, we and the author's audiences are aware of a context the author doesn't need to spell out.

Although I am not sure our context of understanding would have been the same as the original audiences. Soon the word of impending doom reaches the king of Nineveh and even he sheds his trappings of power, putting on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance and contrition.

The king of Nineveh declares a total fast - no food, no water for man or beast - and the people and all the animals must don sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance. (*I would like to have seen them put ashes and sackcloth on my cat.*)

Another irony, who would have guessed that the people of Nineveh would have turned their backs on, overthrown their way of life instead of planning for war or evoking their gods' help? Furthermore, the people of Nineveh, who had no history with the merciful and compassionate God of Israel, repented of their ways simply on the warning of an unknown prophet, who may have been a representative of some unknown god. All the while Israel is stewing in her hatred and desire for divine, violent retribution. The irony is that Israel in the recent past had been the recipient of God's judgement and later God's compassion and salvation and allowed to go home. At this point, in the minds of those early Jews, this story is ridiculous as only a Saturday Night Live episode could be. I mean a Blues Brothers skit doesn't have anything on this story.

In all fairness, it sounds as if God, "God!", was the only one in the story, who was surprised that the people repented; so, God changes the divine mind about destroying the city. Jonah wasn't surprised, he was just madder than an old wet hen at the people's response to his prophecy of doom. I can just hear Jonah saying, "I knew it, I knew it, I knew this could happen." Jonah says that he knew that the God of Abraham, the God of All Life, was merciful and compassionate and most likely wouldn't destroy the city if the people stopped their wickedness.

What Jonah next says will knock your socks off: he asked God for death because he didn't want to live in a world where God's compassion and mercy were greater than his own sense of justice.

Jonah goes off in anger to pout and to await the fate of Nineveh - still hoping for the worst. God, ever compassionate, even to those who are angry with God, causes a gourd plant to grow up overnight and give Jonah shade in his vigil of anger and disappointment. Here again, the first audiences would have seen this as some sort of an onstage special effect for the benefit of the storyline. That night, however, the God of all nature, creature, and humankind, sends a

voraciously hungry worm to destroy the gourd plant and the next day Jonah is again baking in the sun, nursing his anger and disappointment. Jonah misses the shade of the gourd plant, laments the tragedy that the plant so soon alive is now dead, but he takes no joy that an entire city has repented and been saved.

In Jonah's grief over a plant, God reminds those who are hearing this story across the ages that God is the God of all life. We often grieve over minor tragedies in the grand scheme of life - the death of trees or bushes, our lawns, flowers, or vegetables in our gardens, or even the death of a beloved pet; however, we register little grief or sorrow over the deaths of thousands of people, who according to many deserve to die because of who they are, what they have done to us, to others, or to themselves.

The story of Jonah reminds us in satirical and vivid imagery, that God is the God of all people, all creatures, and all creation. God desires that all people enjoy the blessings of creation, the freedom of self-determination, and the joys of life. Human, self-serving governments, religions, and other enterprises may define who is in and who is out, but lest we forget, God is the God of all people, "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight."

To this end, the writer of the book of Jonah gives witness to the spiritually corrupting effects of self-serving rabid nationalism, rabid religious sectarianism, and the insanity of un-reflected upon religious beliefs, especially when measured against the standards of God's universal love and concern for all people. Therefore, any nation or religion that advocates violence against others in pursuit of their national or sectarian goals is infected by the demonic and needs to take the cure by learning to love the neighbor as the self, doing unto others as one would wish done unto them.

However, it is a sad and tragic reality that sometimes people are forced into situations where they must employ violence against others. Let the Christian know that this is never right or holy, only a necessity forced upon them. The use of violence must be an admission of failure on the part of all involved - a failure to build a world predicated on the teachings of God, where violence is no longer an acceptable option in human relationships.

I know when people do us great harm, our natural reaction, as the people of Jonah's day, is to want them to suffer in kind or worse. I experienced such feelings in Vietnam and on 9-11. However, as the Apostle Paul tells us, in Christ we can resist the tendencies of the natural person and rise to a higher plane of existence where compassion and understanding rule our lives. In Christ, we must stand ready to assert that compassion and understanding, when the last shot of necessity is fired, the last bomb of necessity is dropped, and the last prisoners of war go home.

The story ends with Jonah apparently not getting it. In a world that often seems hell bound with nations declaring national and religious enemies all about, I hope and pray that this great nation and its people do not lose their souls to fear, hatred, vengeance, and blood lust like some in Jonah's day. I hope and pray that we get it. So, Live from Calvary, It's Sunday Morning in Albuquerque, NM!