

Playing God  
Jonah 3:1-4:11  
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Maybe it's been a while since you read the book of Jonah, or at least the entirety of the book of Jonah. Yes, there is more to the book of Jonah than the more famous part where he is swallowed by the great fish, but it is far less well-known. So let's hear the second half of the story, and see what comes up interesting.

Last Sunday, I mentioned that a certain professor Snodgrass is fond of saying that parables are “imaginary gardens populated by real toads,” and that what this means is that the purpose of a parable is less about painting an accurate picture of the scene in which the characters reside, and more about helping us to see something about ourselves in one of those characters, or see something about God in one of those characters. Last week I offered the example of Harry Potter, another kind of story in which the elements of the imaginary garden allow us to see the real toads we are in real life. This week, let me suggest that another way to think about Biblical parables is that some of them are very much like those great Latin American works in that genre called magical realism, like the books “One Hundred Years of Solitude” by Gabriel García Márquez, or “Like Water for Chocolate” in which the reader must let go of preexisting ties to conventional storytelling, plot advancement, linear time structure, scientific reason, and all the

other elements that help Western readers make sense of a story, to strive for a state of heightened awareness of life's connectedness or hidden meanings. In these kinds of stories, there are elements of the phantasmagorical, the fantastic, and the mystical, not to mention simply great imagination filled with great exaggeration.

Many people claim that Latin America owns the intellectual property rights to the idea of magical realism, but I'm here to tell you that it is, in fact, the Bible that should get the credit for this genre, and a special prize in the category for the book of Jonah, a parable even if we don't usually label it one. If we tend to think only of the big fish when we think of Jonah, it is for two reasons, the first being the power of hyperbole, of great exaggeration, and the second because we are not accustomed to reading Jonah as a parable, but rather as history, and so we kind of get stuck on the biological aspects of how a human being could survive three days in the belly of a whale, and never get around to the bigger issue of how human beings wrestle with what seems to be a conflict between God's justice and God's mercy, which is really what Jonah is struggling with here as he makes his way into Nineveh, makes his five word prophecy, and waits outside for something terrible to happen.

Jonah, you see, has no love for the Ninevites. He wants them to reject his message so they can get what *he* thinks they deserve. In the ancient world, Nineveh, the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire had a reputation as being as brutal, immoral, and violent a place as you could imagine. And historically,

Assyria, and by association, Nineveh, did some very awful things, including overthrowing Israel, the Northern Kingdom of God's people, in the year 722 BC. This city, Nineveh, then, is code for big, bad, and ugly, and on top of that is the history of its direct involvement in the destruction of the very people who wrote Jonah. No wonder Jonah wants nothing to do with them. No wonder he wants God's message of grace and forgiveness nowhere near them. But as if the real reputation and history of Nineveh aren't enough, the parable exaggerates the size of its city, the rapidity of its repentance, the depth of its piety, and so we must ask ourselves why. Well, for one, if the story were just history, we would have a hard time seeing past our own prejudices to see God's purposes, even if they are a little hard for us to understand. Jonah can't. He's too stuck on the real Nineveh. But when we allow ourselves to enter into a world which is depicted as absurd, we can see more clearly some of the ways in which we act pretty absurdly when we try to play God.

If you've ever walked through San José, or Manhattan, or Toronto, or any other major city, you know that Nineveh couldn't possibly have taken three days to cross. A hundred and twenty thousand people may have been a lot in one city in those days, but they didn't make for a city so big you couldn't pass through in a just a few hours. If you've ever read the books of Isaiah or Jeremiah, or even one of the shorter books like Micah, you know that prophets rarely bring about the repentance they preach, and never in less than a few pages of our Bibles. And yet

here is Jonah, winning over the hearts of the evil Ninevites with a single, brief, and uninspiring, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” He doesn’t even say, “Thus says the Lord,” to introduce his word of condemnation. And when is the last time you saw farm animals fasting in sackcloth and ashes, the traditional forms of demonstrating repentance? No, it’s all very absurd and surreal, reality distorted, roles reversed, all of it is very strange, even by Biblical standards, all but Jonah’s reaction, maybe the most typical reaction we human beings have, to be resentful when things don’t go our way, to begrudge others the blessings they have received because we don’t think they have earned them, to judge both God and others according to our absurdly narrow notions of merit, and fair play and national pride, instead of the wide open grace of the God who created the universe and can do what ever the creator of the universe pleases!

You see, all of God’s grace and power revealed in this story brings into sharp focus our age-old desire to play God, and our failure to be able to do so. As much as we or Jonah might want one, there is no simple answer to why bad things don’t happen to bad people who deserve bad things to happen to them. As much as it sometimes seems intolerable to live in a world where God’s justice doesn’t seem to be fairly distributed, the answer isn’t just to check out of reality like Jonah wants to do. And for as often as we talk about celebrating changed hearts and transformed lives, we usually don’t celebrate them. Think of the older son’s reaction when the prodigal son returns home. He’s upset that *he* never got a party!

Think about what happened when the man filled with so many demons he called himself Legion was freed from all those demons which fled into the pigs which then ran into the lake and killed themselves. Did the townspeople rejoice that this man had been freed from his demon possession? No, they were afraid for the rest of their livestock and wanted to run him out of town! How many institutions with plans to build facilities to help people who desperately need help meet resistance from their neighbors who organize to keep them out, but then continue to complain about the social problems those institutions are trying to address? No, we are not always aligned with God's perspective on a whole host of matters, but the good news of the Gospel is that God doesn't give up on us either.

The book of Jonah ends with Jonah still sitting out in the hot sun with no real answer to God's question about what he thinks God's reaction to the Ninevites should be in light of his experience with the bush. Maybe that lack of an answer is because Jonah didn't have one, but more likely the parable simply ends this way to challenge us with the same question, to confront us with the same issues. Most of the time, our desire to have God join us in all our prejudices and ignorance doesn't cause much harm to anyone but ourselves. Usually, it will just mean that we end up disappointed or depressed like Jonah, held back from experiencing the joy of celebrating God's grace revealed, and lives truly transformed, preaching love and joy but not really experiencing them. However, if that weren't tragic enough, sometimes our delusions that we are in fact God have very real human

consequences. How many parents play God with their children, acting like tyrants, expecting the kids to be their servants, subjecting them to verbal humiliation, physical violence, or sexual abuse, all in the name of parental authority, but in reality because they are little terrorists themselves, wounded by others trying to play God in their own childhoods? How many employers and businesses play God to their employees, subjecting them to inhumane working conditions and terms of employment, trying to squeeze every last drop of productivity out of them, all in the name of efficiency and free enterprise, but in reality because they know they can be easily replaced by others desperate for work and willing to be exploited? How many governments play God to their citizens and impose themselves into areas of their own citizens' lives where they have no business being, while overlooking true threats to societal welfare, all in the name of public safety or national security, but in reality because there is a lot of money to be made in a perpetual climate of fear?

While all of those experiments in playing God come with a terrible cost, there are some who pay for those experiments with the ultimate price. Some of those deaths we can put down to individual delusions of grandeur, but many more of them we must attribute to a Jonah-like cultural blindness about God's priorities, even in what are claimed to be Christian societies. As we come to a close tonight of the parable of the pouting prophet, let's take a look at one area in which a simple recognition that we are not God could bring about the kind of divine justice

Jonah should have been seeking, and that we truly seek, even if we usually go about it the wrong way. (Please watch Ray's story at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVGcpOkYXfc>).

I strongly sympathize with the often heard lament that in these matters it seems that more attention is given to the perpetrators of crime than to their victims, that the law, in the US at least, seems to bend over backwards to ensure that the defendant gets a fair trial at what seems like the expense of grieving families who have lost a loved one, or suffered in some way. A lot more should be done to make sure victims and their families are not revictimized by the judicial process.

Nevertheless, I am more sympathetic to that old saying, that even though it does not appear in the Bible, probably should be found right here in Jonah, that two wrongs don't make a right. It may not seem fair to spare the life of a convicted murderer who did not spare the life of his victim, but in this case, and in so many more of the situations that plague our consciences, there does exist an alternative that lets God be God, and lets us off the hook for that awesome responsibility.

“Is it right for you to be angry?” God asks Jonah, and the question hangs in the air after all these years. At the risk once again of making it seem like it is really all about us, kind of like Jonah thought, God's question to Jonah reveals to us once again that the way we define fairness and justice may come back to bite us, if we do not look at them with the eyes of grace with which God looked upon Nineveh. None of us are really any more deserving of being spared than any of Nineveh's

120,000 inhabitants, and all their cattle. But in God's wonderfully absurd way, we are saved, or we can be, because God is God and we are not. And praise God for that. Amen.