



Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Jonah
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; August 2, 2026
 10th Sunday after Pentecost
 Jonah 3:1-10; 4:1-11; 10:25-37

Throughout the summer, we've been keeping company with the prophets—listening to voices that first spoke nearly three thousand years ago—yet still speak with startling clarity into our world today. Isaiah reminds us that God still calls ordinary people who answer, "Here am I; send me." Amos insists that worship without justice is empty noise. Hosea shows us a love that refuses to let go, even when it has every reason to walk away. Micah distills faithful living into three simple practices: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Jeremiah urges the exiles not merely to survive difficult times but to build houses, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the city, and trust that God is not finished with them. Ezekiel carries us through exile with strange visions that ultimately proclaim hope: dry bones can live, rivers can flow through deserts, and God is always on the move.

This morning we come to the most unusual prophet of them all—Jonah. Unlike Isaiah, who volunteers, Jonah spends much of his time running away from God. Many of us learned Jonah's story as children. We remember the storm. We remember the sailors. We remember the great fish. But that's a small part of the story. In fact, Jonah spends only three days inside the fish, while the rest of the book explores something much deeper than an unusual rescue at sea.

The setting is the great city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. Assyria is Israel's enemy. They are feared for their military brutality—conquering nations, destroying cities, and carrying people into exile. If there were ever a people Israel believes deserves God's judgment, it's the Assyrians. Considering their reputation and their relationship with Israel, it's no wonder Jonah is reluctant to obey God's command to go and preach judgment. But here's the thing: it's not because he's afraid to go to Nineveh; it's because he knows God so well. He knows God is merciful and he fears that should the Ninevites repent, God will forgive them. And the very idea of it is more than he can stomach. So, he boards a ship headed in the opposite direction. Then comes the storm, the fish, Jonah's reluctant prayer, and finally the word of the Lord comes a second time, "Get up, go to Nineveh..." and Jonah sets off in that direction.

Still as mad as an old wet hen, as my grandmother used to say, Jonah walks into—**stomps** into might be more accurate—one of the largest cities in the ancient world and preaches the sorriest sermon you've ever heard: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." One sentence. No invitation. No compassion. No explanation. Jonah proclaims the bare minimum—not because he has had a change of heart but because God refuses to take no for an answer. Even so, the impossible happens. The king repents. The people repent. Even the animals end up wearing sackcloth—it's almost comical. And the result is that God sees their change of heart and chooses mercy.

Now, most prophets would celebrate. If a Presbyterian pastor today—yours truly included—received such an overwhelmingly positive response to a sermon, we'd be doing cartwheels down the aisle. But not Jonah. No. Jonah sulks. More than that, he's so furious he wants to die. I can just picture him stomping around, pitching a fit, and shouting, "I knew it! I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. I knew this was going to happen. That's why I ran away in the first place!"

Think about that for a moment. Jonah is angry because God is too loving. Ultimately, Jonah's problem is not disobedience. It's prejudice. You see, he has drawn a circle around God's love, and he wants God to stay inside it. God's mercy is perfectly fine for people like Jonah, but not for people like "them."

While centuries have passed since Jonah's story was first told around campfires, we still live in a world eager to divide people into categories—us versus them. Every day we are flooded with messages telling us who to fear, who to blame, and who does not belong. And for decades, news organizations have operated with a simple mantra: "If it bleeds, it leads," because they know that conflict captures attention, and attention translates into profits. Some days, with the constant stream of "Breaking News" alerts, it feels as though the only thing that is breaking is us. We are left wondering why the loudest voices belong to those shouting anger, anxiety, and fear into the world. It can make us feel hopeless and it can leave us asking: "What can I do? What difference can one small voice possibly make?"

What difference can one voice make? While it's true that one voice might not make much of a difference, if we were to join our voices to other like-minded people—*gentle* voices that speak of kindness and inclusion and love—voices that speak the truth of Jesus as the light of the world and us as his light bearers—well, that would be something altogether different. To help us imagine what that might look like, I've asked Kerry Antoniewicz to give us a hand. [Invite Kerry to the microphone.] You'll notice you have an index card inserted in your bulletin. Let's take those out and look them. On one side are the words to the children's song, "Jesus Loves Me"; on the other, the words to "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Using a microphone to symbolize the louder voices we hear in our society that keep us feeling small, Kerry is going to recite "Jesus Loves Me." At the same time, without the aid of a microphone, all of us together are going to recite the words to "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Kerry, how about you start us out and then we will add our voices. [Repeat several times.]

Let's pause a moment to reflect on what just happened. Yes, a microphone amplifies a single voice. But an entire congregation—well, we don't have to rely on magnification. When our voices unite and our choices reflect the love of Christ—welcoming the stranger, defending the vulnerable, refusing to demonize those who are different from us—we become a witness that isn't easily ignored. We become a different kind of breaking news. In a world that expects anger and division, we announce mercy. In a culture that profits from fear, we proclaim love. In a society that measures human worth by race, gender, wealth, nationality, or any other human distinction, we bear witness that every person is precious in God's sight.

That is the lesson Jesus teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer wants to know, "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, "Where are the boundaries? Who is inside and who is outside the circle?" But Jesus refuses to draw the circle that narrowly. Instead, he expands it to make clear that the real question is not, "Who counts as my neighbor?" but "Will I choose to **be** a neighbor?" Jonah never wanted to be a neighbor to Nineveh. He wanted God's mercy to stop with his own people. But God refuses such a limited vision of the world. And Jesus follows that same path, refusing to let us place limits on the reach of God's compassion and mercy.

As followers of Jesus, may we resist the temptation to be like Jonah—arguing with God over who deserves mercy and who does not. Instead, may we be the neighbors Jesus calls us to be, adding our voices to the great chorus of God's love. For when our many voices proclaim one gospel with courage and compassion, we bear witness to this truth: every child is precious in God's sight, and there is room for everyone in the circle of God's love. Amen.

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