

October 16, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: A Minority Report

Jonah; Isaiah 56:3-8

“Come on over here, children. Yes, I know. The grown-ups are talking about Samaritans again. What? Oh, it’s Ammonites this time. Well, it comes to the same thing: first they’ll get loud, and then they’ll get angry. Shall we have a story instead?”

“Have I ever told you about the prophet Jonah ben Amittai? Oh, yes. He’s in the history books, way back before the Persians, even before the Babylonians. But this is a story that’s not in the histories. Then let’s get started.

“So it came about that God spoke to Jonah, and said, ‘Jonah, I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh and prophesy to the people there.’ Yes, Rivka, that’s right. Nineveh *was* the capital of Assyria. Who’s a clever girl? What? Why would God send a prophet to Assyrians? Well, maybe if you stop interrupting, you might find out. Shall we give that a try? Hmm?”

“Well, it seems that Jonah shared Rivka’s suspicion of Assyrians, because he decided he would run away from God – yes, Shmuel, I know; I said Jonah was a prophet, not that he was smart. Anyway, Jonah decided to run away from God, so he went down to the port of Joppa and got on the first ship he could find, a ship manned with Gentile sailors on the way to Tarshish. Jonah went below decks and went to sleep, but shortly after the ship left port God sent a huge storm, with winds that shook the masts and waves that crashed over the decks. The sailors all cried out to their different gods, but I suppose you know how much good that did. One of the sailors woke Jonah up, so that he could pray to his God, too, but Jonah didn’t want God to know where he was, so he kept mum. The storm got worse. At last, the sailors cast lots to see which one of them had offended the gods of the sea, and the lot fell to Jonah.

“‘What have you done?’ they demanded. ‘Who are you?’”

He knew he was busted. “‘My name is Jonah, and I am a prophet of the God of Israel who made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and I think this storm is my fault. I got on this ship to run away from my God, but my God can’t be run away from. If you want to stop the storm, throw me into the sea.’”

“Well, these sailors were decent fellows and didn’t want to do that, but when the ship was about to break apart, they decided they had no choice. They threw Jonah into the drink, and immediately the sea was calm and still. The sailors knelt on the deck and offered their thanks to the God of Israel. What, Shmuel? You know, that’s right. These Gentile sailors seemed to show more respect to God than his own prophet did. Funny that.

“But God didn’t forget Jonah. Instead, he sent a great fish to swallow Jonah whole, and Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Yes, Rivka? No, I don’t know how big the fish’s throat was. Or how Jonah lived three days inside a fish. Can I say one thing, Rivka? You’re a bright girl, but people who listen to stories learn a whole lot more from them than people who take them apart. Do you think I could go on?”

“After three days, the fish urped Jonah up on the beach. He stood and cleaned himself up as well as he could, and God said to him, ‘Jonah, I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh and prophesy to the people there.’ And this time Jonah went.

“Well, the city of Nineveh was massive. It took three whole days to walk around it. Jonah walked half a day into the city, then decided that was far enough. He stood at a street corner and said, ‘The Lord God of Israel has seen the sin of this city and in three days will destroy it!’ Then he decided, ‘That’s probably good,’ and he went back out of the city and found himself a hilltop where he could watch God destroy Nineveh. That would at least be some reward for his trouble.

“But then something happened. Someone who heard Jonah’s preaching told someone else, who told other people, and soon the whole city was talking about what Jonah had said. Even the King of Nineveh heard, and he issued a decree that all the inhabitants of the city were to put on sackcloth and ashes and repent of their sins. And they did. That’s right, Shmuel: just like the sailors. And God saw their repentance, and he didn’t destroy the city after all.

“‘See, God?’ shouted Jonah. ‘This is why I didn’t want to preach to the Ninevites. You always do this! You find any excuse to forgive! It’s so *irritating!*’

“‘Really?’ God said. ‘You’re angry because I’m merciful?’

“‘Yes!’ screamed Jonah, and he settled down on the hill to watch. Maybe God would come to his senses and destroy them, after all. One could always hope.

“It was hot up on that hill, and there was no shade, but God didn’t forget Jonah. He made a gourd plant grow out of the desert right where Jonah was sitting, and it arched over his head and gave him shade from the sun. Jonah loved that plant. But, the next morning, God sent a worm that nibbled right into the root of the gourd plant, and it wilted and died.

“‘God!’ said Jonah. ‘How could you let this happen! You killed my plant! I might as well just curl up and die! Take me now, God!’

And God replied, “‘Will you look at yourself? Crying over a gourd that you didn’t even plant, while you wait to see a city of human beings destroyed? You want mercy for a plant. Why shouldn’t I be merciful to my own creatures, over a hundred thousand souls who don’t have a clue? I made them, too, you know.’

“Anyway, that’s the story of Jonah. Yes, Rivka? Yes, I can tell it again sometime. As many times as you want. But I have other stories, too. Tell you what. Next time your parents start getting all gloomy about ‘The Samaritan Problem’ I’ll tell you the story of King David’s great-grandmother Ruth, who was a Moabite. You’ll like that one, too.”

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Over the past few weeks we’ve been telling the story of the Jewish people’s return from the Babylonian exile to re-establish the Jewish homeland, and while there have been some good bits of those stories, they have also been pretty harsh and exclusive. To the leaders of the returned exiles, the Jewish homeland was to be for Jews only. No foreigners need apply. But it seems that that wasn’t the only opinion to be found. During those years, a strange little story about the prophet Jonah began to circulate. In that story, the righteous Jewish prophet was an insufferable prig without mercy, and the Gentiles in the tale were the ones who actually humbled themselves before Israel’s God. Stories can be very subversive. But it wasn’t just an anonymous storyteller who questioned the nation’s prejudices. There was also an anonymous prophet.

We read Isaiah 56, verses 3-8:

³ *Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';
 and do not let the eunuch say,
 'I am just a dry tree.'*

⁴ *For thus says the Lord:
 To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,*

⁵ *I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.*

⁶ *And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
 and to be his servants,
 all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
 and hold fast my covenant—*

⁷ *these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

⁸ *Thus says the Lord God,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
 I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.*

A few weeks ago I talked about an anonymous prophet that I called the Prophet of the Exile, whose words are found in the book of Isaiah, starting with chapter 40. This prophet foretold salvation to the exiled Jews, promising that God would use Cyrus the Persian to save them from captivity, would lead them back to the promised land, and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. And, as we've seen, all that came to pass.

But in chapter 56, the book of Isaiah changes again. The prophecies from that point to the end still sound sort of like the Prophet of the Exile, and still proclaim some of the same messages, but now it seems that Jerusalem and the temple have already been rebuilt. Some scholars think this was yet a third prophet; others think that this is later work of the same prophet, but most agree that these words were proclaimed in the rebuilt Jerusalem to the returned exiles. But if that's so, this is a remarkably different message than the one that we've been hearing over the past weeks, isn't it? In this passage, the prophet says, "All you people who have been excluded from God's temple, take heart. God will welcome you. You eunuchs, whom the Law of Moses bans from the temple because you are damaged, hear what I have to say. Keep the Sabbath. Honor the covenant. God will make you fruitful. And you foreigners, come and worship the God of all the earth. You will be welcome in the temple. Your sacrifices will be received on God's altar. God is calling you, too. To God, there are no damaged people; there are no unclean

people. There are only the people God loves and the *other* people God loves. God's love is bigger than one race, and God's house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

We don't know anything about this prophet of the restoration except his words, but his words are dramatic enough. Earlier prophets had declared a coming "Day of the Lord," when God would save Israel from their enemies. This prophet says, in chapter 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me to proclaim good news to the oppressed, healing for the broken-hearted, freedom for the captives. This is the real Day of the Lord." And later on, in chapter 66, he returns to his theme of welcome to Gentiles and takes it even further: "Some of those foreigners," he says, "will even become priests in the temple!"

This was surely a minority perspective in post-exilic Israel. Poor Ezra would have broken out in hives if he'd heard this. But it doesn't seem to have been a solitary opinion. Someone saved these books, after all. Someone copied them down and put them with the other holy writings. And some four hundred years later, when Jesus of Nazareth stood up in his home synagogue to read, he chose this prophet's words. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me to proclaim good news to the oppressed . . ." he read. "Today," he said, "this prophecy's time has come." And when he overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple, he quoted from the passage we've just read: "My house shall be a house of prayer for everyone."

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As we grow in faith, God becomes bigger. Or, rather, we realize that God was always bigger than we had thought. Now, some people think of God in terms of power, and it is true that God is very powerful. But that means when they imagine a bigger God, they see a stronger God. People like Ezra and Nehemiah and John Calvin kind of went that way. But others think God in terms of love, and so when they imagine a bigger God, they see a God whose love reaches farther, to more people. We've heard some of those voices today, and thank God those voices are in our scripture as well.

Benediction:

God, bless the radical Christians,
the ones who see beyond the words to imagine worlds,
the ones who follow the spirit of the law,
even if it means ignoring the words entirely.
Yes, it can be dangerous. Yes, they can be a little wild-eyed,
but nothing changes without them.
Thank you for the prophet of the restoration, imagining the outcasts at church.
For Francis of Assisi, befriending the Sultan in the middle of a crusade.
For Father Damien, giving his life to care for lepers.
For John Wesley and Theresa of Calcutta, and Nadia Bolz-Weber.
God, bless your radical saints.
From their flint, spark a fire to refine us and purify us from our own prejudices. Amen.