

## Turn back, Jonah!

A Homily/Story written by the Rev. Lee Bluemel ©

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*“When you don’t give people the chance to say ‘I hurt’, they end up saying ‘I hate’.”*  
—Rev. Don Wheat, Unitarian Universalist

*“Each of us has a unique part to play in the healing of the world.”*  
– Marianne Williamson

Have you ever felt so angry at someone  
that you wished they would be punished somehow?  
Have you ever felt *that* angry towards an opponent or an enemy,  
a public figure, a person in power...  
...or a personal friend, co-worker or family member?  
Have you ever thought or said in a fit of pique or anger, “I wish they’d die!”  
If so, then Jonah’s story may start to make more sense to you.

In Jewish communities, there are three more days left  
to apologize, to forgive, to try to make peace with everyone one knows.  
Three more days to repent and atone, to try to make peace with God.  
Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins at sundown on Tuesday night.

Jewish folklore says that by the end of Yom Kippur,  
God writes the names of everyone  
who will live through the coming year in a Book of Life.  
In the Talmud, it suggests there are three books open before God:  
the Book of Life for the clearly righteous, the Book of Death for the clearly wicked,  
and another book for all the rest of us who are in the middle.

How a person acts between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,  
during the Days of Awe, can help determine one’s fate.  
So religious Jews take care to give to charities, avoid gossiping,  
to be helpful to others, to pray and to repent of their wrongdoings.

There is no easy forgiveness in this tradition, without sincere repentance.

You can look up and read all about the steps of repentance if you're curious.

In Hebrew, the literal translation of the word for repentance, Teshuva, is "return".

So in this tradition, to repent is to turn around, to return.

It means turning away from sin, from evil, from wrongdoing.

It means turning towards God, to one's source, to righteousness, to return, to reconnect with the holy.

One could say that the story of Jonah is about repentance because the Ninevites turn away from their sin and towards God.

But the story seems to be less about them than it is about Jonah.

Jonah has a unique part to play in the healing of the world, but it is a part he'd rather not play.

He turns away from God, runs away from God- or at least he tries.

What might we learn from his story about such an angry, stubborn, reluctant prophet?

I realized as I was thinking on these things, that it might be best to just go to the Source to find out...

**Lee:** Hey, Jonah? I have a question for you.

**Jonah:** Yes? Wait- who are you?

**Lee:** I'm Lee. I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister...

**Jonah:** (*interrupting*) Oh God, not another one of those.

**Lee:** ... and I was hoping for some clarification, because Yom Kippur is coming and...

**Jonah:** (*interrupting again*) Yeah, yeah, yeah. OK, so go ahead. What do you want to know?

**Lee:** What were you *thinking* when you ran away from God?

**Jonah:** I wasn't thinking. I was reacting. When I heard what God wanted me to do, I just wanted to get out of there. "Go to Nineveh" ... my foot!

**Lee:** Well, why not?

**Jonah:** Does the year 722 mean anything to you?

**Lee:** Let's see... Well, the year 722 was the year the Assyrians conquered Israel.

**Jonah:** Bingo! In 722, after demanding tribute and threatening us for years, the Assyrian Empire came in with their chariots and battering rams and conquered Israel, utterly destroying us. Then, they forced the ten tribes of Israel into exile, scattering the people throughout their empire- and they all *disappeared from history*. That's why they're called the Ten LOST Tribes of Israel. They LOST the war, they LOST each other and LOST their identity.

The point is this: the Assyrians were our enemies. And their capital city was *Nineveh*.

Have you ever been there?

**Lee:** No, I haven't. But I understand that it was located just across the Tigris River from what's now Mosul, Iraq. And I understand that the nation included land that's now part of northern Iraq, Northwestern Iran, Southeastern Turkey and Northeastern Syria.

**Jonah:** I bet they're still living high off the hog there today, aren't they?

**Lee:** Actually, they're not. There's been some more fighting and war there. A lot of people have died... including many, many children.

**Jonah:** (*hangs his head silently*)

**Lee:** Jonah?

**Jonah:** I just can't bear it. I don't know how you can just say that so casually. "A lot of people have died, including many children." That was the *one* thing that God pointed out to me that made me stop and think twice, when I was still hoping God would destroy Nineveh.

God pointed out that there were 120,000 people in the city who didn't yet know their right hand from the left, or right from wrong- in other words, *children*. If God destroyed the city, all those innocent children would die too. It should make us *all* stop and think about all our wars.

In fact, I bet there are children dying from war and from exile right now in your world. Don't you people rend your clothes anymore? Don't you put on sack cloth and ashes? It's the Days of Awe, for Pete's sake—you're supposed to be repenting!

Listen, I'm done talking. I have to go pray for a while. Why don't you go find someone else to talk to about all this, OK?

*(Jonah leaves and sits down. God gets up and comes forward.)*

**Lee:** Oh. OK. The end of that conversation was kind of abrupt.

**God:** That's Jonah for you.

**Lee:** God?

**God:** Yep. I was listening. You were talking about that whole episode with Nineveh? I can fill you in a bit more.

Jonah is right that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were enemies of the Israelites. They were also typical human beings. The leaders were power hungry, greedy, blinded by their desire to control land and resources, prone to violence and war.

The people in general were mostly just going about their own business, trying to survive. Although like most humans, they had an unfortunate tendency towards tribalism and a sense of superiority over others.

**Lee:** They felt superior to the Israelites?

**God:** They felt superior to everyone and everything! Typical humans.

Do you know that modern humans have only been around the last 200,000 years, and they started their little civilizations about 6,000 years ago? And look at the mess they've made—not only with each other, but the earth!

Sometimes I think they're *trying* to start a flood like the one Noah rode out so long ago. Meanwhile, some of my creatures like horseshoe crabs and jellyfish have survived for 450 to 550 million years without killing off each other or ruining their environment. Humans sure haven't learned to listen to their prophets.

**Lee:** Agreed. Hey- speaking of prophets, could you tell me *your* perspective on Jonah? He seems a bit, well, *edgy*.

**God:** Of all the prophets, Jonah was probably the toughest one. He was difficult. Resistant. Lacking in impulse control. Quite mercurial -- a bit of a drama queen. I mean, a lot of prophets are drama queens; they're good at getting attention - it helps with the job. But Jonah took the cake.

You all might want to put a label on him today, maybe say he had "oppositional defiant disorder" or was "manic-depressive". What's clear to me is that he was deeply hurt and afraid and angry, so he acted out.

He would get so angry that he'd practically be suicidal- and I was never quite sure if he was for real or if he was just trying to get attention. If things didn't go his way, he'd always be saying "*I'm better off dead!*" Good grief! Oh, that man could hold a grudge like you wouldn't believe.

Do you know he was the *only* one of my prophets, *ever*, to flat out disobey me? Moses and Jeremiah tried to beg off of prophet duty, but they never actually *disobeyed* me. But Jonah... he takes off and tries to hide—from me, an *omnipresent* God! As if that was even possible! Silly, misguided man.

I did love him though! He was so fiercely loyal to his people. He was so acutely aware of the injustices of history. He was righteous to a fault, and wanted to do the right thing by his people so badly that he was willing to choose *obscurity and death* over everlasting prophetic fame.

**Lee:** But if he was so difficult and disobedient, why did you choose *him*?

**God:** Well, I may be *omnipresent*, but I'm not *omniscient*, you know. Life and history are continually unfolding, so what happens is as much of a surprise to *me* as it is to *you*... and *so*

much depends on the choices people make. But back then, I did think Jonah would be a good prophet if I could just get him to use his gifts. And I was right!

He ended up being the most effective prophet ever! The entire city and the *leaders* of the nation listened to him! *That never happens*. To be honest, most of my prophets usually end up in prison or dead. Or they retreat into the desert out of frustration, because no one will listen to them, the stakes are so high, and the dire consequences are so obvious to them.

**Lee:** Wait- did you just say that most of your prophets end up in prison, or dead, or alone in the desert? That's not good.

**God:** No, it's not. Prophecy is risky business. So I choose my prophets carefully. Even Jonah. And despite his attitude, he was a good choice. The Ninevites not only listened to him, they were truly sorry for their wrong doing and their evil ways. And here's the kicker: they *acted* on their remorse.

Now, I didn't ask them to convert to Judaism. *All I asked* was that they refrain from doing evil, and do good. And that generation did. That generation changed their behavior! Do you know how unusual that is??!

Imagine a Truth and Reconciliation process- like the one they had in South Africa after Apartheid-- that involves *every* leader and citizen. Imagine a Truth and Reconciliation process in *your* country.

I mean, has your nation ever truly repented for the genocide of Native Americans or the horrors and the legacy of slavery? Or even the internment of the Japanese during World War II, or sending boats of Jewish refugee children back to Germany, or *any* of its less-than-noble history? Not that I've seen.

It's *so* unusual for a nation and its leaders to be truly sorry for the evil they have done, and to confess and change their ways. That's why I'm really proud of Jonah, and so glad that some folks tell his story every year.

**Lee:** Well, maybe we should get the two of you together and you can tell him that.

**God:** That would be lovely!

**Lee:** (*calls back to Jonah*) Hey, Jonah- God's here—(of course)-- and I was wondering if you'd be willing to talk to her?

(*Jonah gets up and comes over; Lee sits.*)

**God:** (*warmly*) Hi Jonah!

**Jonah:** (*grumpily*) Hi God.

**God:** What do you think... It's almost Yom Kippur. Time for us to reconcile?

**Jonah:** Why? Because it's almost Yom Kippur and you were planning to write me into the Book of Death?

**God:** Nooooooooo... I was actually thinking you'd be in the Book of Life again.

**Jonah:** Well, I probably don't deserve that.

**God:** Oh, Jonah. You are too hard on yourself-- and everyone else, too. You are always judging people! You even judge yourself. *All the time.*

**Jonah:** Yeah, well... I *AM* the only prophet who ever ran away from you.

**God:** This is true. And what did you learn from that experience?

**Jonah:** Next time I run away, try going by camel, not by boat.

**God:** Right... And how about the fact that you have unique gifts of prophecy that were needed to head off death and suffering for thousands of people? Or how about the idea that being an adult means sitting with difficult feelings, not running away from them?

**Jonah:** Feelings, schmeelings. Trying sitting in the belly of a fish for three days and then talk to me about "sitting with difficult feelings".

**God:** Ok, I know the fish was a bit nasty. But honestly, Jonah, you couldn't swim all the way back to shore. What else was I supposed to do?

**Jonah:** A lifeboat with someone to row it would have been nice.

**God:** (*airly, non-apologetically*) Well, I used what I had at hand.

Listen, Jonah..... Rev. Lee brought us here to talk about reconciliation. That means making peace with everyone we know and with each other. It means starting over, turning over a new leaf, finding serenity. And I want you to know how *proud* I am of you for convincing that entire huge city and its leaders to change their ways.

I know you've been preparing for the High Holy Days. For the last month, you've thought about your behavior, asked people if you've offended them, and offered others forgiveness. This past week, you gave to charities, avoided gossip, prayed and acted with kindness. So I'm afraid it's going to be the Book of Life for you again, Jonah!

**Jonah:** Great. Me and all the Assyrians.

**God:** Jonah, please don't get started...

**Jonah:** (*angrily*) My people bear the trauma of that conquest!

**God:** I know.

**Jonah:** What did we do to deserve it?!

**God:** Nothing Jonah.

**Jonah:** Well, why did You let it happen?!

**God:** Contrary to popular belief, I am not omnipotent.

**Jonah:** Well, you *should* be.

**God:** I know. That would make everything easier, wouldn't it? And everything bad would be *my* fault—humans would have nothing to do with it.

Here's the thing Jonah, you're trying to make sense of something that you can't. The world isn't fair, Jonah. Of course your people bore the trauma of that conquest. And yes, that kind of trauma is stored in the body, passed down the generations, and it needs space and time to heal.

I wasn't asking you to personally forgive an Empire that got away with murder. I *did* want to see if this *particular* generation of Assyrians had a moral center, though. And much to my surprise, they did. They repented *and they changed their ways*.

**Jonah:** Couldn't you have made them suffer just a *little* bit?

**God:** No one deserves suffering. Especially all the children.

**Jonah:** (*sighs loudly*) Oh, all right. You're right. You always get me with that business about children suffering-- suffering because of things that adults have done. Fine. I'm happy to be in the Book of Life with the Assyrian children. But next time, will you send me to my own people, not some lifelong enemy?

**God:** Sure. And next time, when you have a gift to use for greater good in the world, will you use it? And if you find yourself running away, will you turn around?

**Jonah:** Yes, I'll turn around... Thanks God.

**God:** Anytime. Love you, Jonah.

**Jonah:** Love you too, God.

(*They hug, and the homily/story ends.*)

*Note: Earlier in the morning, members of the congregation acted out the Book of Jonah, using the translation of The Message, which attempts to put Biblical stories into a more casual, modern words. Any version of the Book of Jonah can be read to understand the background to the above Homily/Story.*