

The Reluctant Missionary – a story of Jonah

Patrick: (6 minutes)

1. Introduction and welcome to Sara.
2. A quick retelling of the story. Points to be made: the fish motif, the reluctance of Jonah, and the oddity of a book of prophecy that only has one sentence of the sermon.
3. Assume that God wants us to notice something odd about this story – something a lot more odd than the fish.

Sara (2 minutes)

This is the ultimate Sunday School story. It captures a child's imagination. It is short. It has sailors and foreign lands and of course, the big fish. It's one of those stories that creative children's ministry people can leave indelibly marked in a child's memory. My husband John can remember literally crawling around in a big fish that had been built for VBS. I realized while preparing for this lesson that my child's mind somehow meshed Jonah's experience inside the big fish with Pinocchio's similar experience inside a whale. And, I had to remind myself that it wasn't Jonah who built a fire inside the fish so that he would be sneezed out.

So, this is a great Sunday School story. But, we haven't done a lot with it in the adult setting. IF time has been spent on the Jonah story with adults, it has probably been focused on proving scientifically that a man can survive inside a fish for 3 days.

Patrick: (2 minutes)

1. There are lots of sea stories about people swallowed by whales, sharks, or sea monsters who were then recovered alive (but insane). Problem is – there is no evidence that any of those stories are true.
2. Was Jonah's fish a whale? The words are problematic. I have no problem with the story since "God prepared a sea creature" takes care of any objections we might have about the size of whale gullets.

Sara: (6 minutes)

There have been considerable arguments between skeptics and believers on that discussion, sincere speculations about whether a shark or a whale would have been the more likely host for Jonah's journey to the beach – and for

some believers it has been a point of faith or disbelief in the trustworthiness of Scripture.

But, today, we aren't spending time on that discussion. Today, no one is going to roll out a life size whale into the auditorium for all of us to crawl through. And, we aren't getting out any charts to show the circumference of a whale's throat.

Today, instead, we want to ask different questions of the story. We want to ask "What is this story *really* about? What are we supposed to learn from Jonah that will change us?"

It's important to point out that Jonah was a popular story in early Christianity. Jesus himself taught about the sign of Jonah as recorded by both Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew 12, we hear Jesus say of Jonah -

40For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

So, in this sense, Jonah is a Christ figure, and we should sit up and pay attention to him.

It could also be mentioned, in showing what an important story this is, that Jonah is popular in Muslim and Jewish traditions. Christianity doesn't have the market on Jonah, and there are fascinating interpretations throughout the religious world.

So, we have to ask, if the story of Jonah has been relegated for the most part to Children's literature, what is there that drew early Christians to the story, what is there that draws Muslims and Jews to the story? And, what brings us to the story today?

Of all the ideas of this Jonah story, there is one interpretation that Muslims, Jews, and Christians share and it could be summarized as this - all prophets have their weaknesses like all common human beings, but this does not affect their status and function as messengers.

Said another way, Jonah is a great man, a prophet, a missionary, a survivor – a saint to be emulated – but in this midst of all this great prophet and missionary stuff, Jonah can also come across as a real loser.

Don't you wonder sometimes when you read Scripture, why God couldn't have picked out better representatives in the world? Why did God choose Noah if he knew that after the great miracles of the flood, Noah would get drunk and behave so shamefully that we want to close our eyes to the drunken and naked scene in Genesis 9 and forget that it happened? Why did God choose Moses and make him great if he knew Moses would strike that rock in rebellion and miss out on the promised land? Why did God choose David if he knew David would shack up with Bathsheba at Uriah's expense? Why would God choose Jonah and save him from the sea if he knew Jonah would make such a pathetic preacher (everyone knows a good preacher says more than one sentence). Does it seem, sometimes that God has a knack for choosing less than quality candidates for his work?

Or, could this story lead us to ask, if God has important missionary work to do in this world, why does he put up with any of us?

I think when God looked at the redemptive work he wanted to do in this world, starting way back with his choice of the underdogs of Israel, he made a radical decision to use less-than perfect humans in the project. He decided to use *us* for his purposes even when he knew we would run from him on stormy seas and curse him over withered vines.

So, as we think of this story of Jonah, I think, all of us must realize, that when it comes to doing the real work of the Lord that each of us has been commissioned to do, we are all more like Jonah than we are different from him. We have to admit that sometimes, we are a bunch of losers.

Patrick: (4-6 minutes)

1. Why do we have this book? It isn't because of its great sermon. It isn't because Jonah is some model missionary we should all emulate.
2. Could this be God sending up a flare? Could this be His announcement that He cares for and loves more than the people in our group? Jeremiah (31:31-34) told the people that God would make a covenant with the people that wasn't based on the law given at Mount Sinai.

3. Jesus told the people “I have sheep in other folds.” (John 10:16) That would have been a scandal, a shocker, to be sure. Do we view the “others” on this planet as God’s children? Even if they are our sworn enemies? Would we be scandalized, frustrated, or angry at God extending grace to them? I think this 3rd point goes really well with the theme of how God uses humanity for his purposes.

Sara – (6 minutes)

I think everyone here knows my husband and I were missionaries. And, Patrick and Kami were missionaries.

I think that at times, there are some people who tend to hold up missionaries as heroes – and in some ways, they are, I guess – I tend to think of the Bairds and Bogles and Manrys as examples to all of us in their sacrificial service overseas.

But, having been a missionary, I am always uncomfortable when people think highly of missionaries. I know that I spent less of my missionary time being noble or selfless or faithful or prophetic – and more of my time being, well, a little too much like Jonah.

I remember one instance early in Uganda when I was especially vulnerable to culture shock. I was struggling intensely with the poverty and need around us. And, I was sick of it. I was tired of answering the door only to find that someone else had a request for money. I was tired of arriving in villages for Bible studies and feeling that people were more interested in a ride in our vehicle than they were in the Bible study. I wanted to go home to America, where no one I knew had malaria or scabies or babies who didn’t wear diapers.

I remember around that time, that someone had sent us some Oreos. Yes, this story is, pathetically, about Oreos. I don’t even eat Oreos now that I live in America again, but at that time, Oreos were gold. One of my teammates had even gotten a recipe for homemade Oreos and tried to create them from scratch. They were terrible, so that made *this* package of Oreos even more important. They represented all that I missed about the ease of life in the US. And, we had received this package of Oreos, and I was hoarding them. But, I had someone working in our house at that time, and he ate some of the Oreos. I was so angry because I did not want to share those Oreos, and I had a long talk with him about asking me before he ate any of *my* food from America. It’s embarrassing. I can blame it all on culture shock or junk-food

withdrawal, but really, with all the needs around me, and knowing the work God had for me to do as his missionary, what was wrong with me that I got mad over a couple of Oreos?

I could tell even more embarrassing stories, but I'll stop with that one.

Even in the middle of what was good work for God, I continually got pretty caught up in my own world of materialism and selfishness and self-righteousness.

But, I want you to hear another part of the story. I was continually amazed during our years in Uganda, that despite my inability to give of myself and live for the Ugandan people, God still took my little offerings and half-hearted efforts - and he worked miracles out of it. God still used me.

Churches were planted. People came to Christ. Lives were made better through me and in most instances, in spite of me.

And, that's not just true for foreign missionaries. Since all of us are missionaries - "members to missionaries" - we are all called to be saints and prophets and God's representatives and God's spokespeople and God's ambassadors - but we're just human and lots of times we get upset about little things like withered vines and we forget great lessons like being saved from great fish - and we think we have God's idea of salvation all figured out - but we don't. We're just humans. We're all a little bit too much like Jonah. So, that's why we're talking about him today.

Patrick: (2-3 minutes)

1. That is why Jonah is important today. Not only does it make us look beyond our group, our time, and our place and accept that God's grace will go places - and take us places - that we wouldn't have expected...
2. It also reminds us that sometimes we have running days; sometimes we have fish days, and sometimes we have vine days, but God's grace continues - not only for those who aren't in our group, but for us.
3. Our reaction to that grace should be faithfulness and, as the old carol goes, comfort and joy.
4. For if our God can love the Ninevites and Jonah, and if He could find a use for them, will He not love you and give you a mission, moving you from member to missionary?

5. Because it really isn't about a fish. It isn't about Jonah, either. It's about God.