

**Convocation Worship Service
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Jonah 1:17 – 2: 10

No Prayer for Nineveh

How could Jonah pray such beautiful words in the belly of a fish? Does it help to know it was a large fish? Surely he didn't have a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1928 edition. The text does indicate that it took him a while: "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. THEN Jonah prayed to the Lord." You and I could probably think up a fine prayer if we had three days and three nights. Of course many have insisted that the prayer is a later addition to the text. Jonah didn't think up the prayer. Somebody who had plenty of time wrote it and inserted it here, interrupting the narrative. It's clear that the story could proceed without the prayer, going directly from Jonah being swallowed to Jonah being spit up.

Whether the prayer was there all the time or added later on, here it is. Did someone want to redeem Jonah, to show his change of heart? "*I called to the Lord out of my distress,*" he prayed, "*and the Lord answered me.*" But Jonah hadn't called to the Lord when the storm was raging -- it was the sailors who cried out to the Lord. Jonah hadn't called to the Lord; Jonah had run when the Lord called. In his prayer, Jonah strings together verses from several psalms. We might try it...

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want
I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help?
God is our refuge and strength
The Lord is my light and my salvation
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil

Jonah knew the words. He could sing the hymns by heart. But he didn't mention Nineveh.

Nineveh, the great city. Capital of Assyria, sacked long before Jonah prayed. The ruins of Nineveh are now within the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. The Mosque of Younis (that is Jonah) is there, on the left bank of the Tigris River. If you go to www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul, you will learn that there is a room inside the mosque that is the prophet Younis' shrine. "On the walls of the room one can see the whale bones." (1)

Of course Jonah wouldn't mention Nineveh. He was trying to forget Nineveh, hoping that God would forget, too. *"As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple."* Jonah would rather be in the sanctuary of the great fish than in the streets of that wicked city. *"Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay."* Have the readers forgotten? It was the sailors who offered a sacrifice to the Lord. It was the sailors who made vows. In case we've forgotten, Phyllis Tribble reminds us: "Between the genuine worship of the sailors and the genuine repentance of the Ninevites comes counterfeit piety from loquacious Jonah." (2)

I called to the Lord...
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried...
I went down...
I remembered the Lord...
I will sacrifice to you...
 What I have vowed I will pay...
 I, I, I, I – I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi!

Jonah was grateful to be saved from the watery deep, from the weeds that wrapped around his head. "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" he cried. (My deliverance is what he meant.) God had heard enough of this liturgy. The Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. The text doesn't say where Jonah landed, but he had some walking to do!

Nineveh was not on the coast, not in Israel. Nineveh was inland in what is now Iraq. The ruins of Nineveh are within the city of Mosul, third largest city in the country. Several US military bases are there: Camp Performance, Camp Leader, Camp Strike, Camp Top Gun. "Camp Performance offers a café with a variety of both American and Iraqi cuisine including the Sunday special of a double cheeseburger with fries." (3)

"The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city..." When Jonah forgot the name, God remembered. So it was that Jonah picked himself up and made his way to the great city. After a day's walk, he proclaimed God's message. Like the sailors, the people of Nineveh believed. Everyone fasted -- from the king to the cattle. Not only that, but everyone dressed in sackcloth – from the king to the cattle. It must have been quite a sight!

Jonah never prays for "Nineveh." God is the one who remembers the vast city. Jonah gets out of town as fast as he can. He builds a booth outside the city, a little chapel where he watches and waits to see what will happen. Perhaps God will yet destroy the city (though Jonah fears this isn't likely). For Jonah knew that God wasn't fair, and he had told God so: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." Jonah knows that God will spare the city and it makes him so mad he wants to die. Then God appointed a bush – even as God had appointed a large fish – and Jonah is happy again. Safe in the shade of the leafy bush, safe from the burning wind, safe as he felt in the belly of the fish.

But when God causes the bush to wither and die, Jonah is furious all over again. What good is sitting in the chapel if you have to look out on a wicked city not going up in smoke?

God has the last word in the story: “You’re concerned about the bush for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Jonah never answers God’s question. That question is still hanging in the air today. How do we pray in the belly of the fish, in the innards of the sanctuary? Three years ago when we gathered in New York City to pray, “God bless America” came from a place of deep grief and fear. We sang in the light of votive candles in Union Square Park, surrounded by the flyers of the missing. “*Have you seen my father?*” We prayed for our beloved, broken city, our traumatized country. I don’t know when the prayer turned, when the words began to sound different. The date is no more exact than the dating of the book of Jonah. We wrapped the prayer around us and shut out the rest of the world. “God bless America, land that I love.” We didn’t mention Nineveh.

Nineveh is the name of both an ancient city and a contemporary province in northern Iraq. The ruins of the Assyrian capital are now encompassed by the city of Mosul. A street in Bridgeport, Connecticut has been renamed in memory of Tyanna Avery-Felder killed April 7th in Mosul.

Attacks in Mosul averaged 60 per week in September. (4)

How do we pray in the sanctuary, in the belly of the Empire? Perhaps we no longer need to pray. In 2003 our country had a military presence in 153 of the 189 member countries of the United Nations. (5) Prayer shapes us even as we shape our prayers. Jonah might have been changed if he had prayed for Nineveh as fervently as he prayed for himself. How shall we pray, you and I, sitting here in this chapel in the belly of the Empire?

God bless the world we love,
Stranger and friend;
Go before us, restore us
With a hope that despair cannot end.
Ev’ry people, ev’ry nation,
Mighty ocean, heaven’s dome.
God bless the world we love,
Our fragile home.
God bless the world You love,
Our fragile home.

Notes

1. www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm (October 10, 2004), 3

2. Phyllis Trible, Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 172
3. www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm (October 10, 2004), 3-4
4. "Bridgeport street renamed Tyanna Avery-Felder Boulevard": Many sources including www.newsday.com. Statistics about attacks in Mosul from AP article by Jim Krane, "Iraq violence eclipses rosy declarations": Several sites including www.bismarcktribune (September 24, 2004)
5. Chalmers Johnson, The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 288

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