

50 DAYS

WEEK 4: Jonah—The man who didn't get away: a different fish story.

By Carol Duerksen

DAY 1

A skit to act out with your family from the book of Jonah.

PROPS

- a very large fish that Jonah can hide behind or a large pile of blankets or crumpled newspapers covering up Jonah.
- a strong fishy smell for participants to notice. Bring the smell into the space or give participants tissues dipped in fish oil to hold up to their noses.
- large name tag that says *God* for person to wear.

CHARACTERS

Jonah, a detective, God

(Jonah is behind the fish or under the pile of blankets/papers. He can move around and struggle under them.)

Jonah (hollering loudly): Hello! Hello!! God!!! Where are you?

(God walks in, puts hand up to ear, as if listening for the voice that's calling.)

Jonah: Look, God, I know I messed up. Now I'm stuck in this fish! Help! Help!!

Detective (runs in, looking around for who's calling for help): Who's hollering? Who's in trouble?

(God points at Jonah.)

Detective: (to God): What's going on?

God: Something pretty fishy, if you ask me.

Detective: Who are you?

God: God.

Detective: You are . . . *God*?

God: Yep.

Detective: But you don't look like (swallows hard). . . God.

God: So, what does God look like?

Jonah: *Help!* The smell in here is about to kill me!

Detective: (looks at God, then at the "fish", then back at God): I don't know what God looks like, but there's a man in there in trouble. Shouldn't you—God—help him *out*??

God: I can do that.

Detective: Well, of course, you can.

God: I will. After he has a few days to think about some things.

Detective: Why is he in that fish?

God: It's a long story.

Detective: Well, will it have a happy ending?

God: For the Ninevites, it will have a happy ending.

Detective: Who are the Ninevites?

God: The people that Jonah was running away from when he got swallowed by that fish.

Jonah (hollering): Hello? (pause) God? (pause) Where are you?

Detective: He sounds pretty desperate.

God: He'll be fine. Trust me.

Detective: Well, as a detective of divinity, I am always looking for signs of God. So, yes, I trust that you will take care of him.

God: Good. Then you are already one step ahead of Jonah. Because what got him in trouble in the first place was that he didn't trust me. He wanted to do his own thing.

JONAH (hollering): I sure could use some help here! God! Where are you? Can we talk?

ALL AGES: children through adults

What do you think you know about the story of Jonah?

Here are some starting questions: Add anything that you think you know about the story without looking it up in the Bible.

1. What was Jonah's job in life?
2. What assignment did God give Jonah?
3. Why didn't Jonah like that assignment?
4. Jonah got thrown off of a ship. Why didn't he drown?
5. Imagine being inside of a large fish. What would you see? What would you feel? What would you smell? Would be very still or would you move around a lot?
6. What would you DO if you were inside a large fish? Panic? Laugh? Sing? Pray?
7. What did Jonah do while he was in that fish?
8. How long was Jonah in the fish?
9. How did he get out?
10. What did he do when he got out?
11. Does this story have a happy ending? Do you know the ending?

To be continued. . .

DAY 2

The book of Jonah has to be one of the most interesting, unusual stories in the Bible. The story includes humor, lots of hurling, penitent livestock, a prophet who acts like a pouting toddler, a successful altar call that makes the preacher mad, a God whose mind is changed—and we haven't even talked about living inside a fish for three days and nights. So, here we go!

Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah. Jonah was a prophet, which is kind of like a preacher that travels around and tells people what God is telling him to say. The only

problem with Jonah is that he didn't want to tell the people what God wanted them to hear. So, instead of going to talk to those people, he ran away in the opposite direction.

Has that ever happened to you?

I will never forget one of the times when I was a child and decided to do exactly the opposite of what my parents told me to do. My cousin and I were outside playing in the mud after a rain, and it was time for her to go home. Her parents told her to quit playing, and my parents told me to quit playing. And I told my cousin to ignore them. I encouraged her to not pay attention to what they were saying. I openly defied my parents and told her to do the same.

Let's just say I paid a price for that behavior.

Has that ever happened to you? When have you disobeyed what you knew you should do? Did you pay a price?

So, back to Jonah. He did not want to do what God told him to do.

And what exactly was that?

God wanted him to go to a city named Ninevah and tell them that they are doing very bad things and they need to repent and ask forgiveness. Jonah didn't like those people who were doing bad things and he wanted nothing to do with them. So he disobeyed what he heard God telling him to do.

ALL AGES:

When have you not done what your parents or another adult wanted you to do? Children, if you are old enough, find a symbol of that time and show it to your parents. Can they guess what you are talking about? Talk about what happened. (For example, a symbol of my story would be to make some mud!) Youth and adults, find or think of a symbol of such a time. Consider why you preferred to do your own thing. What went into that decision?

DAY 3

Jonah did not like the assignment he got from God, so he ran in the opposite direction of where he was supposed to go. He got on a ship, and that's when the hurling began.

According to the story, God hurled a wind on the sea and the boat was close to capsizing. The sailors started hurling cargo off to lighten the load on the ship, and Jonah slept peacefully down below. When the sailors did some detective work and determined that Jonah's disobedience to God might be the cause of their distress (probably some hurling on their part too during the awful storm), they agreed that Jonah needed to go. They were afraid of God's revenge on them if they threw him overboard, and they were afraid they would die in the storm if they didn't. So they offered a quick prayer to God and hurled Jonah into the sea.

And the sea stopped raging.

The sailors gained a new respect for God, and they offered sacrifices and made vows. Jonah was saved from drowning because a fish viewed him as lunch.

And now Jonah is in a “time out” corner in the belly of a fish. Not much to do there except think about how he got there, what went wrong, and what to do now.

You might say he was in a wilderness. A wet, stinky, slimy, miserable wilderness.

And what exactly did he do in that fish for three days and three nights?

Read Jonah 2:1-9 to find out.

CHILDREN: Option 1: Discover what’s in the belly of the fish on the attached Activity Sheet.

Option 2: Supplies needed: white construction paper, white crayons, watercolor paints or watered-down blue tempera paints, paint brushes or sponges, newspapers. Draw a scene of what Jonah might have experienced underwater. Ideas would be seaweed, fish, starfish, sea shells, waves, sand, coral, schools of fish, etc. Another option is to write what Jonah might have been feeling, such as fear, anger, frustration, regret for not obeying God, asking forgiveness, etc. Be sure to press hard with the crayons. Then do a “watercolor wash” over the entire picture using the watercolor paints or watered down tempera. The paint will “resist” the wax from the crayons and the drawing will show through the paint.

YOUTH AND ADULTS: What is your wilderness right now? Draw a picture of you in your wilderness. What is surrounding you? What are you doing?

DAY 4

Spending three days and three nights in a large fish would tend to make a person think twice about their life, and it worked on Jonah. He spent considerable time praying to the God he had been avoiding, and sure enough (here it comes), the fish hurled him out onto dry land! (By the way, now the Jewish man who thought he was too good for Nineveh is himself unclean!)ⁱ

Then it was God’s turn to give Jonah another message. Second verse, same as the first: “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you” (Jonah 3:2).

So he does. Jonah marches into Nineveh and utters a one-sentence altar call: “Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

He doesn't mention God. He doesn't offer hope. Jonah's name in Hebrew is Noah's name turned inside out, and Jonah seems to expect something like the flood to destroy the people who don't repent. It's like he doesn't expect them to repent. ⁱⁱ

But lo and behold, they do! Not just the people, but the animals go into fasting, wearing sackcloth, and repenting! This has to be one of the most amazing altar call stories ever!

God's mind was changed. Nineveh would not be destroyed.

Hallelujah! Praise God!

FAMILIES: Prepare post-it notes with a key word from the story on each note: Jonah, God, ship, fish, Ninevah, sailor, wind, sea, storm, belly, etc. Put a note on each forehead—do not look at the word on your forehead. Players ask yes or no questions of each other to try to find out what the word is on their own forehead. Variations: use charades rather than yes/no questions. Rather than nouns, use feelings and actions like angry, disobedient, happy, repentant, frustrated, etc.

YOUTH AND ADULTS: When have you come out of a wilderness? Who and what were your guides coming out? What did you do to get out? What do you think God did? What did other people do?

DAY 5

Contrary to what one would expect, the astounding success of Jonah's call to repentance did *not* leave him doing the happy dance in the streets of Nineveh. "I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (4:2b), he cries, turning the Hebrews' ancient praise of God into a complaint. Melodramatically, he asks God to put him out of his misery.ⁱⁱⁱ

God doesn't grant him that wish, and Jonah ends up pouting on the east side of the city, watching to see what might happen. He sits on the hillside, hoping that even though he knows God is full of grace, God might still stomp on the Ninevites. Instead, God sends a bush to give Jonah shade, and he's thrilled about that; but then God sends a worm to eat the bush *and* hurls another nasty wind at Jonah, this time baking him in the heat. Jonah repeats that he would just like to die if this is what life is going to bring him.

Jonah is angry about the dead bush, and God says this—"You are 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?"(4:11).

And that's the end of the story.

FAMILIES: Read the Day 5 part of the story, and explain it as needed to children. Then work on an ending together: What do you think should happen? What do you think is the meaning of this story?

ALL AGES: (Adapt these questions to children based on their age and understanding)

- What is your “large fish?” What are some of the ways that God has been trying to let you know that God has not given up on you and still has a plan for your life?
- Who are your Ninevites? Who are some of the people you tend to avoid? Who are your enemies? How might God be calling you to reach out to them in compassion?
- Who are some of the Ninevites in your community or in our country today? Who are we are told to fear, hate, or avoid? How might God be calling you to reach out to them in compassion?
- When you have been angry with God? What happened? How might God be trying to reach out to you in compassion?
- Everyone (people, animals, even God) in the story repents—except for Jonah. Might God be calling you to turn your life around in some way? Things or behaviors that God might be calling you to let go of? Attitudes or behaviors in your life God might be calling you to change so that your life can more fully reflect God’s good purposes for you and others?
- Who do you identify with most in this story and why?
 - the sailors (who didn’t know God well, but responded in praise when they saw what God could do)
 - the Ninevites (who repented and received God’s mercy despite their past choices)
 - Jonah (who was not yet ready to accept what God was doing or how God was calling him)

DAY 6

This story really doesn’t have a tidy conclusion. Here is one commentator’s wrap-up for your consideration:

Does not our personal resentment of the extremely loving nature of God always involve a prideful lack of awareness about how God pursues each one of us, even as we complain about the generosity of God for others? How sad it is if those who have not been introduced to God's love act more compassionately than those who know that "God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love!"^{iv}

CHILDREN

Give children a bucket, large bowl, ice cream pail, anything similar. Pantomime with them, explaining as you go: We are going to fill this bucket with love. We will get love from God (reach arms up and pretend to pull love from above and put it in the bucket); and we will get love from your our own heart (hands on heart, cup them as if taking love out and put it in the bucket); and we will get love from each other (hands on heart, cup them and put in each other's bucket.) Now, this bucket is full of love. Feel how heavy it is! Let's share the love! Who shall we give it to? Encourage children to name who they want to share it with, and how to pantomime or symbolize that. Encourage sharing not only with friends and family, but also people that they don't know, or maybe don't like.

YOUTH AND ADULTS

Imagine you have two buckets sitting in front of you. One bucket contains the grace you have received in your life. How full is that bucket? The other bucket is for the grace you have given out in your life. A full bucket means you've given very little, and an empty bucket means you have given much. What level is the grace in that bucket? How do you feel about your buckets? What would you like to do in the future with those buckets?

DAY 7

The Sulking Bush, a Place of Transformation?

By Karen Ediger

"Someday you will have to answer to God!" Have you heard people say that to someone when they can't get them to act the way they think they should? It's a way of saying, "I can't mete out the justice you deserve, but God will!" Many of us have felt that way, even if we didn't say it.

Certainly, that was Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh. He knows Nineveh is an evil city, so when God tells him to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent, he refuses. He knows they are evil; he doesn't want to stand in the way of the justice they so richly deserve. Instead, Jonah runs off to sea. Of course, on the boat, he finds himself in a dire situation as a terrible storm threatens to destroy the ship and everyone

on it. Jonah interprets the storm as a message from God and jumps overboard to save everyone else. Having done his good deed for the day, he hopes God doesn't still expect him to go to Nineveh. But God isn't giving up on either Jonah or Nineveh; Jonah gets swallowed by a large fish. Three days is what it took for Jonah to fully repent and promise God to go to Nineveh. Jonah was one stubborn prophet!

In Nineveh, Jonah walks across the city proclaiming complete destruction in 40 days. To Jonah's dismay, the people (and animals!) repent and God doesn't destroy the city. Aaugh! Just what Jonah was afraid of! He goes out of the city, builds a small shelter and waits to see what will happen to Nineveh. As he sits there sulking, God causes a bush to grow to shelter Jonah from the sun making Jonah very happy. The next day, God causes a worm to eat the bush and Jonah becomes angry again. A sultry wind blows and Jonah is so hot he tells God he doesn't want to live. He admits that he is angry that the bush was destroyed. And God says:

“You are 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. ¹¹ 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 4:10-11

And that's where the story ends. We are left hanging, not knowing Jonah's response.

As you ponder this story, go sulk under Jonah's bush with him for a while metaphorically:

- Have there been times you avoided doing something you felt God calling you to do?
- What were the reasons you told yourself that you were justified in not doing it?
- What did you do to avoid doing what you thought God wanted you to do?
- Are there good things you have done to rationalize that you didn't need to do this thing you didn't want to do?

Did Nineveh get the justice it *deserved* or the justice it *needed*? Nineveh got justice, but it was God's version of justice, not Jonah's. God's version of justice is giving us what we need, not what we deserve, or what we want. And meeting the needs of people can be transformative.

In the story of Jonah, we see transformation as described by the Prophets. For Nineveh, (1) the world as they know it is coming to an end. (2) God is doing a new thing that is unexpected. And (3) the new thing God did is in some ways consistent with how God has acted in the past.

Nineveh is transformed. God then challenges Jonah to be transformed. The story is told to challenge us to transformation as well.

For us, during the COVID-19 crisis, the whole world is going through transformation. The world as we know it is coming to an end. Can we see God working in this process? What will be our part in that transformation? How can we further God's justice of meeting people's needs in the transformation? Will we allow ourselves to be transformed?

Prayer:

"[God,] you call us beyond ourselves;
you send us beyond our imagination;
you empower us beyond our capacity,
and we become your agents in the world,
day by day, doing justice and mercy and compassion."

--From the prayer "In Human Form," Brueggemann, Walter, *Prayers for a Privileged People*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, c. 2009, pp. 153-154.

ⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, year B, vol. 1, *Advent through Transfiguration* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 269.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bartlett and Taylor, 269.

^{iv} David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, year A, vol. 4, *Season after Pentecost 2 (Prophets 17–Reign of Christ)* (2009; repr., Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 78.

Parts of these reflections on Jonah are excerpted from "Smelly Camels and More," a 5-session unit of multi-age curriculum (preschool, children, youth and adults) available online from Springs Forth Faith Formation, Inc. See more at springsforth.com or email springsforthfaith@gmail.com