

On the Rest of the Story (Beyond Chapter Three)

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The Church can do what it wants, but I think it missed an opportunity in today's first reading from Jonah. Here, we're given just six verses from Chapter Three. Huh? There are only four chapters in the entire book. As such, we're missing a lot. I love the Jonah story, though. I wrote a poem about it once. Wrote a song about it, too. So in a moment — as Paul Harvey would have said — the rest of the story...

For starters, God sends Jonah to Nineveh twice. In today's reading, it's the second time. The first time, Jonah balked and paid his way onto a ship sailing for Tarshish, which is *far away* from Jonah's assignment, and *far away* is where he wants to be. Why? Jonah tells us himself in Chapter Four. He bolted because he knows that God is gracious and merciful, "...slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish."

Get it? Jonah *wants* God to destroy Nineveh, and he fears that by preaching against it as God had directed, Nineveh might repent, and God might spare it. All of which comes to pass, but first God sends the whale (ok, the large fish). And even before the fish, God sends a storm and the Tarshish-bound sailors are terrified. But Jonah? He's asleep in the hold, so the captain rouses him, saying, "Rise up, call upon your God! Perhaps God will be mindful of us so that we may not perish."

Then the sailors cast lots to see who's to blame for their predicament, and somehow they single out Jonah, who fesses up, admitting that he's on the lam from God. "*How could you do such a thing?*" they ask. Remorseful, Jonah tells the crew to throw him overboard. They agree, crying out, "We beseech you, O Lord, let us not perish for taking this man's life" before pitching him into the sea. *Then* God sends the fish, and *then* Jonah spends three days and nights all swallowed up inside.

Next Jonah prays in thanksgiving, and God tells the fish to spit Jonah up on shore (as I rhymed it, "and jumpin' Jehoshaphat, the fish, *spat!*"). Today's reading begins with Jonah going to Nineveh, and it ends with God sparing the place. But as we learn also in Chapter Four "this was greatly displeasing to Jonah," because what he feared might happen, happened, and he tells God as much. He also tells God to take his life, but God asks, "Have you reason to be angry?" Then Jonah goes off, builds a hut, and waits under it in the shade to see what might befall Nineveh next.

God springs up a gourd plant overnight that shades the hut, and Jonah is thrilled. But the next day, God sends a worm that withers the plant, then a burning east wind, and then with the sun bearing down, Jonah grumbles that he'd be better off dead. God asks, "You are concerned over the plant...Should I not be concerned over Nineveh...?" *What a great story!* I tried to capture the larger lesson years ago in song, and even with today's Gospel having Simon, Andrew, James, and John responding to God's call immediately (unlike Jonah), the lyrics probably hold for most of us: "God comes calling/ Though we may not find enthralling what the ask is/ We can run and we can hide/ We can pretend we're justified/ But in the end it's foolish pride/ When God comes calling." So, the Church's missed opportunity aside, "Now you know...the rest of the story." Paul Harvey John Reynolds...Good day.