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Jonah and the Great Fish

Jonah 1:1–4:11 · Bloom · Ages 13–19

Jonah is the only book of the prophets that is mostly a story about the prophet rather than a collection of his messages, and the prophet is the one who comes off worst. Everyone else in it obeys God: the wind, the sea, the fish, the plant, the worm, the pagan sailors, even the king of Nineveh. Only Jonah resists.

The setting: Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the brutal empire that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. When God sends Jonah to warn it, Jonah boards a ship for Tarshish, the far western edge of the known world. A storm, the lots that single him out, his confession, and his own request to be thrown overboard follow. God sends a great fish; inside it Jonah prays a psalm of thanks (Jon 2), and after three days the fish returns him to land. Sent again, he delivers a bare warning: forty days. Nineveh repents from king to cattle, and God spares it. Jonah, enraged, admits he ran because he knew all along that God would rather forgive than destroy. God's last word is a question about his care for the city and its animals, and the book never records Jonah's answer.

Honest questions:

Did a fish really swallow a man? The Church has not defined the literary form of Jonah. Many Catholic scholars read it as an inspired teaching story, close to a parable, partly

because of its style, its exaggerated touches (the animals fasting in sackcloth) and the absence of any record of Nineveh's conversion outside the Bible. Others read it as history. Either way it is inspired Scripture, and the Church reads it with attention to its literary form (CCC 110). Jesus' use of the "sign of Jonah" for his own Resurrection (Mt 12:39–41) holds either way.

Does God change his mind? The book says God saw Nineveh's change and did not send the disaster. The Church teaches that God himself does not change (CCC 212). What changed was Nineveh. God's warnings are invitations to turn back, and his mercy was there from the start, which is exactly what Jonah complains about (Jon 4:2).

Why is Jonah so angry? Assyria's cruelty was real. Jonah wanted justice for his people, and mercy for the enemy felt like betrayal. The book does not mock that feeling; it asks whether God's mercy has limits we would set for him.

What the Church sees here: God's power shows itself most in forgiving (CCC 270), and he wants everyone to be saved (CCC 1058; 851). Real conversion is a change of heart that shows itself in signs like fasting (CCC 1430–1431; 1434). God cares for his animals too (CCC 2416). Above all, Jonah points to Jesus, who called himself greater than Jonah (CCC 590) and spoke of his Resurrection as the sign of Jonah (CCC 994). The three days in the fish are a figure of the three days in the tomb; that reading comes from Jesus himself.

Jonah's story is ours: the call we dodge, the God who pursues us through storms, and the question of whether we will rejoice when he forgives someone we resent.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: literary forms (CCC 110); God does not change (CCC 212); God's power shown in forgiving (CCC 270); God wills all to be saved (CCC 1058, 851); conversion of heart and its signs (CCC 1430–1431, 1434); care for animals (CCC 2416); 'greater than Jonah' (CCC 590); the sign of Jonah and the Resurrection (CCC 994; Mt 12:39–41; Lk 11:29–32). Jonah son of Amittai: 2 Kgs 14:25. Assyria's fall of Samaria in 722 BC is historical context. Verse numbering: RSV-CE 1:17 is 2:1 in the NABRE, and RSV-CE 2:1–10 is NABRE 2:2–11.

Talk about it

1. Everyone in the story obeys God except the prophet. What is the book trying to show?
2. Jonah ran because he knew God was merciful. Why might someone not want God to be merciful?
3. How does Jesus use Jonah to explain his own death and Resurrection (Mt 12:39–41)?

4. Catholic connection: read CCC 1431. What does real repentance look like, according to the Church?

Key verse: Jon 4:2. Look it up in your Bible.