



Jonah runs away

Colour me!



Jonah 1:1-15, 17

One day the Lord told Jonah, the son of Amittai, to go to the great city of Nineveh and say to the people, "The Lord has seen your terrible sins. You are doomed!" Instead, Jonah ran from the Lord. He went to the seaport of Joppa and bought a ticket on a ship that was going to Spain. Then he got on the ship and sailed away to escape.

But the Lord made a strong wind blow, and such a bad storm came up that the ship was about to be broken to pieces. The sailors were frightened, and they all started praying to their gods. They even threw the ship's cargo overboard to make the ship lighter. All this time, Jonah was down below deck, sound asleep. The ship's captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your God! Perhaps he will have pity on us and keep us from drowning."

Finally, the sailors got together and said, "Let's ask our gods to show us who caused all this trouble." It turned out to be Jonah. They started asking him, "Are you the one who brought all this trouble on us? What business are you in? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?" Jonah answered, "I'm a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." When the sailors heard this, they were frightened, because Jonah had already told them he was running from the Lord. Then they said, "Do you know what you have done?"

The storm kept getting worse, until finally the sailors asked him, "What should we do with you to make the sea calm down?" Jonah told them, "Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I'm the cause of this terrible storm." The sailors tried their best to row to the shore. But they could not do it, and the storm kept getting worse every minute. So they prayed to the Lord, "Please don't let us drown for taking this man's life. Don't hold us guilty for killing an innocent man. All this happened because you wanted it to." Then they threw Jonah overboard, and the sea calmed down. The Lord sent a big fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

Commentary

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the superpower of Jonah's day and Israel's arch-enemy. So when Jonah is told to go and tell the people of Nineveh that God's judgement is coming on them, it perhaps appears odd at first that he decides to run away. But Jonah realizes that God wants them to change their ways, so Jonah will, in effect, be giving them a second chance. As a patriotic Israelite, Jonah simply wants them destroyed.

On board ship in the middle of the storm, it is interesting to note how reluctant the foreign sailors are to get rid of Jonah, even when he offers himself to be thrown overboard. Jonah is discovering that outsiders are not to be hated, because God loves them and, in the case of the sailors, they can show compassion too. Even deadly enemies are given the hope of a new beginning. It is really Jonah who needs to change his ways as much as, and perhaps even more than, the people of Nineveh.

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Questions

- ▶ Why, do you imagine, did Jonah think he could run away from God?
- ▶ How might you react if God asked you to give a second chance to people you didn't like?
- ▶ Was Jonah being a hero by offering to be thrown overboard, or was he just trying to run away again?
- ▶ What do you think was Jonah's biggest mistake?



Visual aid

Use a model boat that you can float on some water, perhaps in the bath. Re-enact the storm through which, amazingly, Jonah managed to sleep.



Activity idea

Use any simple props on hand—chairs, a table, pieces of cardboard, fabric—and build a boat to act out what happened on board Jonah’s boat. Jonah sleeps; the sailors battle the storm; the crew pray and then throw cargo overboard; they wake Jonah and question him; they try their best to rescue him; they throw him overboard. Which part of the story do you think is the most important part?



Prayer idea

The sailors pray a lot in this story, but Jonah, who is God’s prophet, doesn’t seem to pray at all. On a large piece of paper, draw the outline of a simple boat with sails, oars, a prow and a rudder. Use each part of the boat as a focus for your prayers: the prow (ask God to guide you where you should go every day); the rudder (ask God to steer you away from places of danger); the oars (ask God to help you work hard for him each day); and the sails (ask God to fill you with the wind of his Holy Spirit).

Key verse

I’m the cause of this terrible storm (Jonah 1:12).

New Testament story link

Mark 4:35-41: The disciples find themselves caught in a storm, but Jesus rescues them.



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