

**“ENRAGING GRACE”**

***Jonah 3:1-5, 10***

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Jonah breaks into the stream of prophetic books in the Old Testament like a jester barging into a boardroom meeting. This is why we all love the story so much. Tell it to adults, and they laugh at Jonah pouting about God saving all those people he hates, because adults have lived long enough to have enemies. Tell it to children, and they laugh when the fish swallows Jonah for three days and three nights before spitting him out like broccoli, because they don't like broccoli either, but they do love fantastic funny things. I still remember being a child and imagining myself inside the belly of a whale, wondering around inside, holding a candle up to its insides to see where the best place to sit might be, and trying to ignore the suffocating stench I was sure must be part of the experience of dwelling inside fish guts.

If Jonah could be a Hollywood movie, these are the scenes I'd include in the 2-minute trailer. It would begin with God saying to Jonah, "Get up and go to Nineveh, and cry out against it!" But the very next scene would show a big fish looking like it's about to throw up—the literal word in the text is "vomit." And then we'd see a rather haggard man flying out from beneath the surface of the sea, soaring over the waves, and landing with a belly flop on the sand. Then we'd see Jonah getting just past the city limits of Nineveh as he launches into the shortest, most effective sermon in human history, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" (yes, I'm aware of the connection between brevity and effectiveness). And then, because the text says even the livestock repented, we'd see a cow chewing vigorously, then considering its past sins, and then, in sackcloth and ashes, mooing. And finally, we'd see God talking to Jonah again: "Are you mad because I saved your enemies?" And Jonah, staring blankly into the camera, saying, "I wish I were dead." [End trailer]

The weakness of this commercial, however, is that it fails to capture the true depth and context of the excruciating origins of Jonah's humor. Before we judge Jonah for his resistance to God's call to mission, let's consider who the Ninevites were, and why Jonah was so much more interested in going to Tarshish. The Ninevites were Assyrians. The Assyrians were virtual artisans of cruelty. The Israelites weren't above committing high crimes and misdemeanors. But the Assyrians made them look tame. The worst things you can possibly imagine were commonplace in Assyrian warfare. It was Assyrian brutality that inspired that most difficult biblical prayer, Psalm 137, in which the Psalmist says to her enemies, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!" (137:9).

To speak of Assyrians to Jonah would send the same shiver down the spine as mentioning Barbarians to recently sacked Romans, or speaking to the Aztec survivors of the Spanish Conquistadors. It would be like mentioning Belgium to the grandchild of a Congolese man who's severed head had been affixed to a spear for decoration. Imagine God coming to a rabbi during World War II and telling him to go to Berlin and cry out against it. This is not a story

about a newly minted pastor reluctant to minister in some forlorn small town. It's an ironic invitation into the territory of your worst enemy.

The memory of horror is actually what makes The Book of Jonah a true comedic and prophetic masterpiece. It allows the oppressed to mock their oppressors while also recognizing their enemies still fall just inside the boundaries of God's loving-kindness. You see both of these deep realities expressed from beginning to end. The last line of the book is both endearing and insulting. God Almighty calls for concern for the Ninevites, while also calling them ignoramuses "who don't know their right hand from their left..." (4:11).

This has to do with what author Jacqueline Bussie calls "tragic laughter." Bussie says tragic laughter "interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief."<sup>1</sup> In other words, when you have been traumatized, either as a person or as a people, laughter can work like what St. Paul calls "sighs too deep for words." For the oppressed, laughter serves as a means of resistance and survival—tragic laughter is *laughter as hope*.

You may be thinking, "How could anyone laugh about the Holocaust?" The Jewish comedian and co-writer of *Seinfeld*, Larry David, found this out the hard way on a recent opening monologue for *Saturday Night Live*. He attempted to place laughter too close to the horror. He bombed. Nevertheless, there are many documented accounts of the hope of laughter in concentration camps. It was one way prisoners reminded themselves they were human. Don't forget that when Jonah prays in the belly of the fish, he accuses God of sending him to Sheol—the place of the dead—which we would call hell. We don't often associate Jonah with the Holocaust, but it's there.

There should be no surprise, then, that so many of the directors of the top Top 100 Funniest Movies (according to the American Film Institute) are Jewish. It's no accident that the people who've been the most shaped by suffering are also the funniest people.

I believe the proudly Jewish Mel Brooks must have had The Book of Jonah in mind when he wrote the 1974 film, *Blazing Saddles*. This is a movie about Rock Ridge, a Wild West town led by a corrupt attorney general, Hedley Lamarr, who gets entangled in a real estate deal, and wants all the Rock Ridge residents to leave, thus driving down land prices for a railroad project. After Lamarr unsuccessfully tries to remove the townsfolk by force, he gets the governor to send a new sheriff—Sheriff Bart. Lamarr's cynicism leads him to believe Sheriff Bart, a black fugitive, will finally throw the all-white town of Rock Ridge into chaos. But what Lamarr doesn't count on is that the white townspeople, who one protagonist affectionately calls "morons," actually embrace Sheriff Bart. Not unlike Jonah, Sheriff Bart comes to the town of his oppressors and offers them a way of salvation. Though such a film may not be the sort of humor America wants right now, it's the kind of humor America needs...

...Jonah pouts. "I don't *like* my enemies. And God, I don't like you for saving my enemies." You can almost hear Jonah, like a child, stomping into his room and slamming the door. "I don't *like* it."

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007)

We are like saboteurs. We want to sabotage God's love for our enemies. It is as if we could be watching our enemies move in the landscape in the dark toward a cliff that we know is there, but they don't, and we do nothing to stop them from falling over it like lemmings. But God is pulling us out in front, and using us like tripping logs, stumbling blocks, to make sure they won't fall, so that they may be saved. Jonah teaches us that God sabotages our attempts to sabotage our enemy's salvation. God is a counter-saboteur.

This is one of the most prominent plot lines in scripture. Remember when Jesus was on the cross, and he called for forgiveness of the people who were crucifying him? "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!" Do you hear the echo from the last line of Jonah? These people... "who don't know their right hand from their left." Forgive them!

The good news today is that the narratives we hear in our time about who our enemies are, who our enemies should be, who our enemies have been. All of these narratives are—and I mean this in a positive way—beneath us. These enemy narratives are beneath us as a people. God scrambles the categories of enemies and puts the boundary lines so far out that we can't reach them to put divisions between ourselves. I don't like it any more than you do!

And though I've gone a bit longer than Jonah today in my sermon, and though I may have left some of you flummoxed (I know a good movie that you can watch instead). Truly, I know a good book that we can read instead...The Book of Jonah. It is supremely funny.

But beware of the good news: the main character—God—sure does take all the fun out of hating.

