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MARTHA E. STORTZ

Jonah: The Anti-Hero of Vocation

The following essay was originally given as a chapel talk on September 16, 2016 at Augsburg College in Minneapolis as part of a series called Vocation 2.0. Here vocation becomes a civic calling, a summons to be public, to be in public, and to participate in public life. This talk looks back on a season of violence in cities across the country: the Dallas police shootings in July 7, 2016, escalating murder rates in the city of Chicago, and, closer to home, the deaths of Jamar Clark in North Minneapolis on November 15, 2016 and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota on July 6, 2016. Now, in the wake of a divisive presidential election, violent rhetoric enters the public square, polluting cities with hate speech and hate crimes. Ever relevant is Jonah, the reluctant urban prophet, whose story underscores the importance of the city to the people—and the many animals!—in them, but also, and especially, to God.



In this series on Vocation 2.0, Jonah seems an odd subject. After all, Jonah may be the great anti-hero of vocation. He's also the person we need to pay attention to even—and especially—now.

God calls Jonah; Jonah runs in the opposite direction. God asks him, a good and upright Jewish man, to "Go to great city of Nineveh and tell them to end their wicked ways." Now, to a Jew Nineveh lay in enemy territory; it was in the country of the Assyrians. Nineveh was the Paris, the Mexico City, the Shanghai of the ancient world, an "exceedingly large city," a city of "a hundred and twenty thousand people—and many animals," a city it takes "three days to walk across."

Maybe Jonah thinks this calling is beneath his pay grade. Maybe he crosses borders with difficulty. Maybe his passport has expired. But he's quite certain the God of Israel should not bother with the Ninevites and Assyrians, because they're not part of the "chosen tribe." They don't

worship the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel and Leah. So Jonah boards a ship heading across a different sea. He thinks he can outrun God's call.

A huge storm comes up and threatens to sink the ship. The sailors row mightily against the waves, then determine some god among their passengers is angry. The question is: whose? Only under pressure does Jonah say who he is, whom he worships, and why this God might be a bit upset with him. He recommends the sailors pitch him overboard.

"So Jonah boards a ship heading across a different sea. He thinks he can outrun God's call."

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The sailors do not worship Jonah's God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they strive to save their entire cargo. They struggle valiantly against the wind and the waves. But finally, and only as a last resort, they do as Jonah urged and throw him into an angry sea. Immediately, the waters calm, and the sailors give thanks to Jonah's God. Meanwhile, under a sea grown suddenly quiet, Jonah is gobbled up by a great fish.

From the belly of a whale Jonah pleads to his God for deliverance, promising to do anything he's asked. It's a beautiful prayer—and heartfelt. Distress has a way of focusing devotion. The great fish spits Jonah out onto dry land.

God has other plans for Jonah.

Again, the call comes to Jonah: "Go to the people of Nineveh and tell them to end their wicked ways." And this time, Jonah does as he promised from the belly of the whale. He goes to the great city of Nineveh; he walks around the city for three days, preaching repentance.

And lo! It works. The king decrees a city-wide fast, and the people comply; the king decrees that all the people—and all the many animals, put on sackcloth, and they wrap up like hot dogs. The king decrees wailing, lament, and loud expressions of repentance, and there's lots of noise.

And now we come to the crucial passage:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over

his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "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?" (Jonah 3:10-4:11)

Gone are the sailors and the big waves; gone the king and his urgent decrees; gone all the people and the many animals bound in sackcloth. The story ends with only three characters left standing: the great city of Nineveh, God, and Jonah. There's a worm-eaten bush, but that's only a pedagogical device. What could this odd trio—a city of 120,000 people and many animals!, a God who changes his mind, and the anti-hero of vocation—possibly have to tell us about Vocation 2.0?

"Cities were places where trade bustled, arts flourished, and people of all origins and colors and gods forged a common life. Yes, it was messy and yes, it was contentious."

First, the great city of Nineveh. It's the whole reason for the story in the first place. In the end, Jonah is not even the hero of his own story; the great city of Nineveh is. For in the ancient world, great cities mattered. Cities were places where trade bustled, arts flourished, and people of all origins and colors and gods forged a common life. Yes, it was messy and yes, it was contentious. Yes, violence erupted, but on those rare occasions when it worked,

great cities sparked human hope and divine delight. Great cities mattered, and all the lives in them—black and white, yellow and red, four-pawed and two-legged. Talk about public calling; this is the public to which God calls Jonah.

Now, let's turn to God. Nineveh is not only the public to which God calls Jonah. Nineveh is the public that calls God. This great city commands divine attention. When God regards the conversion of the great city, God's own heart softens. Nineveh's repentance converts God, daring God to display in it the full sweep of divine mercy. For in the end, God's mercy always outruns God's judgment.

And then finally, there's Jonah, that anti-hero of vocation. He wants God to be merciful to him and to his tribe—and judge everyone else. He'd rather die than believe in a God whose mercy extends into enemy territory.

So Jonah tries not only to outrun his own calling, he even tries to outrun the plot line of his own story, attempting to close it out in an overseas escape, in an angry sea, in the belly of a whale, and finally, in an outright appeal to God to end his life.

And do you know what? That's OK: the story is not about Jonah anyway. He's not going to lose his identity; he'll just lose the privilege of having God all to himself. He's not going to lose his life, he'll just lose his story. But if he can stand it, he'll gain a dazzling display of divine compassion.

Because in the end, the story of Jonah is not a story about Jonah, his gifts, his calling at all. It's a story about the vastness of God's mercy—and the futility of trying to dictate it or even resist it. It's not a story about public calling. It's a story about being called by the publics in our midst. It's not a story about a hero at all, but a story about the compassion of God for a great city—and the dare to be similarly moved.

"The story of Jonah is not a story about Jonah, his gifts, his calling at all. It's a story about the vastness of God's mercy—and the futility of trying to dictate it or even resist it."

Vocation 2.0? Maybe we need a new operating system for the human heart, an operating system that opens us to the great cities in our midst. Think of Ferguson, Baltimore, Dallas, Chicago, North Minneapolis, Falcon Heights.

May we all be called by the cries of the great cities in our midst.