

You want me to do *what*?

The story of Jonah has no documented or factual basis. It's a wonderful tale that the ancient Hebrews told, and although there've been multiple attempts to date the story, most scholars agree that it's best left to "move among the centuries" (New Interpreter's Bible, page 466).

As children's author Patricia Polacco said, "I used to say to my bubbe, 'Bubbe, is this story true?' And she'd say, 'Of course it's true! But it may not have happened.' What my bubbe was saying is profound: All stories are true. The truth is the journey you take through it – did it make you laugh, cry, seek and want justice? Then it's true."

https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/patricia_polacco

The story of Jonah can make us laugh, cry, seek and want justice.

That's not to say that Nineveh isn't historical... it was the capitol of the Neo-Assyrian empire, located just outside of modern-day Mosul, Iraq, situated on the east side of the Tigris River. It was huge. It was wealthy. It was ruled with brutal power – I read about truly horrid things that the ancient Assyrians did to their subjects. <http://www.bible-history.com/biblestudy/nineveh.html>

The Hebrew people were among those who lived under the brutality of the Assyrians. Any Hebrew would likely have had the same reaction as Jonah's – if not stronger. Jonah did not WANT to go to Nineveh. It was a feared and hated place, full of evil, hateful people. But at this point in the story, Jonah grudgingly goes. And his proclamation is short and sweet – to the point... "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The translation indicating that Nineveh will be destroyed is correct, but the interesting thing about this Hebrew word that has been translated "overthrown" is that it can also mean "alter" or "transform". Jonah wasn't interested in Nineveh's transformation. He wanted it destroyed.

Unlike other prophets, Jonah didn't warn the Ninevites. He didn't tell them to repent, turn around, shape up, believe in God. It was as if, when he had finally forced himself to GO there, it was all he could do to simply proclaim their destruction and get out. Now, here's one of the places in the story where we can laugh. To poor Jonah's chagrin, the evil people of Nineveh – all of them – simultaneously – believed God. They all decided – the whole, huge, evil city – decided to fast and put on the repentant sackcloth!

And that's not all! The story takes another comedic, far-fetched turn! Even though the people had already proclaimed a fast and had assumed a position of humility, the evil Ninevite KING then commanded national repentance (as if it had been his idea!?). The king also sat in sackcloth and ashes and commanded a nation-wide fast (that the people had already implemented). Except he one-ups the people, by proclaiming that all the animals will also have to fast and repent in sackcloth and with mighty crying out to God! He proclaimed that *everyone* (humans and critters) would turn from their evil ways *and from their violence* – in hopes that God might change God's

mind and NOT overthrow or destroy them. And sure enough – when God saw that they had repented, turned from their evil ways, God did change his mind and didn't destroy them!

And Jonah was completely incensed! His sense of justice was knocked off kilter! Messed up! Jonah was MAD! This is not fair! It's not just! Nineveh is evil. God knows it and the Hebrew people have born the scars of it. In this story God seems capricious and even mean in God's unwillingness to give Nineveh what Jonah thinks it deserves – death and destruction.

And Jonah feels that it would be better if he were dead. How does one trust in a God whose grace and mercy and willingness to forgive are so far beyond our human ability to comprehend. How does one embrace a God whose depth of love not only humbles, but humiliates us?

“I knew it!”, exclaims Jonah. “I KNOW, deep down, that your essence, God, is khesed”, this Hebrew word that means boundless love, compassion, grace, mercy. That's why I ran away to Tarshish; “for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent in punishing.”

“But, God”, Jonah asks through angry tears, “how can you forgive Nineveh? After generations of terror that they've imposed on so many people, how can you forgive them after just a few days of sackcloth and ashes? You have humiliated me. Let me die.”

Maybe there is some small comfort in this story when we remember that God did not ask Jonah to forgive Nineveh, only that he not question God's ability and desire to do so.

True to form, God leaves Jonah (and us listeners) not with answers to his questions, but with more questions. “Is it right for you to be angry that I am a gracious and merciful God? Should I not be concerned about all those people in Nineveh who don't know their right hand from their left?”

The ancient story of Jonah makes us laugh and cry, it makes us seek and want justice. But what kind of justice? And for whom? This ancient story communicates as much truth in the year of our Lord, 2018 of the Common Era, as it did to the ancients...there are, of course, still mean, wicked, evil people in the world that we might have our ideas of what justice would look like for them. But we might also agree that “they don't know their right hand from their left”. And God, being God, might ask, “Is it right for you to be angry that I am a gracious and merciful God? Should I not be concerned about all those people... who don't know their right hand from their left?”

Our hymn is number 326 rather than 576... 326. Verses 1,2,3, and 6.