

A Bush and a City

Every good story, or movie, or novel has a climax of some kind. A point to which the dramatic tension builds and builds, until the entire plot hangs in the balance. The book of Jonah is that kind of a story, and I invite you to picture it for a moment as a full-length movie.

So where is the climax in this movie? Is it when Jonah gets tossed into the ocean by the ship's crew? The tension had already been building for some time. It started of course when he chose to disobey God's initial command, and decided instead to set sail in the opposite direction. It continues to build alongside the storm that soon threatens to destroy the ship. The fact that God "appointed" this storm certainly adds to the tension, right? So when the sailors, with great consternation, throw him into the raging seas, we're on the edge of our seats. What will become of Jonah? Will an angry God allow him to perish?

Or is the climax delayed just a bit when God sends the infamous "large fish" to swallow him? And the writer tells us that Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights! Again we wonder, what will become of Jonah? Will he be okay? Or will he end up as undigested fish waste? Jonah's impassioned prayer from the fish's belly, which comprises all of Chapter Two, does little to comfort us, as we're meanwhile watching the clock, and hearing the fish's digestive juices at work.

But then, the fish spews him onto dry land, and the word of the Lord comes to him a second time. "Let's try this again. Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." What will Jonah decide? Will he buy himself another ticket on the "Mediterranean Cruise Line," headed for some remote port of call?

He doesn't, and boy are we relieved! Finally, he decides to obey God's call. He goes to Nineveh and proclaims God's word to its people, a word of divine devastation. Yes! Bring it on! All we have to do is sit back in our seats and wait.

But then, the people unilaterally decide to repent. Neither God nor Jonah had said anything about repenting. Might that possibly change the fate of the Ninevites? Or was it too little, too late? The suspense is prolonged when the Ninevite King joins his people's penitence by calling a fast. And he even says, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." Okay, surely this is the real, final climax in the story of Jonah! As we were told at the beginning of today's passage, after all of Nineveh repented, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had planned, and did not do it. End of story. They lived happily ever after.

Only, not everyone lived happily after. The writer tells us that the whole business was "very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." Are you kidding me, Jonah? Drop the shovel and walk away! Let it go. Don't go there.

So it all comes back to Jonah. What's going to happen to him? Will he be okay? One miraculous bush and one mischievous worm later, and we still don't know. Jonah is still angry. And that's where the writer leaves us. I want my money back!

God's question to Jonah is also our question. Why exactly is he angry? Was it simply that he had wanted to—and was looking forward to—seeing the Ninevites get what was coming

to them? C'mon, admit it. This is human nature. We want to see blood and guts and revenge and all manner of human conflagration. Why else would we watch all those graphic movie thrillers, and TV shows such as *The Game of Thrones*?

Keep in mind that Jonah would have had a particular vendetta against the city of Nineveh. It was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were the arch enemies of Jonah's people, the Israelites. In the year 722 BCE, the Assyrians annihilated the northern kingdom of Israel. As to their alleged wickedness, that was well documented, both elsewhere in the Bible and in extra-biblical sources.

So yes, Jonah would have wanted to see them get theirs. But that satisfaction, that pleasure was stripped away from him by God. We'd be mad too if we were Jonah. Mad at Assyria, and now, mad at God also!

Jonah says to God, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." We can almost hear the distaste and disgust in his voice, as if he were practically spitting the words out. It's ironic, and almost comical. Jonah appears to have forgotten that it was precisely because God is merciful and gracious that Jonah was still alive. Remember the "large fish?" You can't have it both ways, Jonah. And neither we can we. We can't expect God to be merciful to us, and at the same time merciless to our enemies. We can't ask God to relent from punishing us, at the same time we ask God to go head and punish people we don't like. (Well, we can. But that would be fundamentally and ridiculously and embarrassingly inconsistent.)

It really comes down to a very fundamental question, a question at the very heart of the Book of Jonah: what kind of God do we want? Do we want a God who is forgiving, or condemning? Gracious, or unbending? A God who sticks to his guns, or one who changes her mind? A God who is wishy-washy? Or decisive? A God who loves with extravagance? Or careful calculation?

Here is the unavoidable flip side of that question. Who—or how—do we want to be? Because we can't expect one thing out of God and another out of ourselves. Do we want to be firm, or flexible? Hard? Or soft? Consistent? Or ready to change?

Turns out that the real climax in Jonah still remains unresolved, and unsatisfied. The book ends, and leaves us completely hanging, with one final question by God: "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 now know their right hand from their left?" And God adds almost as an afterthought but it's not: "and also many animals?" Because the way a nation or society treats its animals is usually the way it also treats its people.

There are a lot of cities out there like Nineveh. And a lot of people like the Ninevites. What do we want God to do with them? Think very carefully. Because how we want God to deal with them should also be how we expect God to deal with us. And how we want God to be is also how we should be prepared to be.

So, which is it? Have you decided? The entire plot hangs in the balance.