

## **“A fabulous story”**

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Jonah 3:1-10

“Fake news” is all the go these days. President Trump early this month tweeted that he was planning to give out Fake News awards, saying he would announce prizes for “the most dishonest and corrupt” media stories, and that recipients would be labelled as losers rather than winners. And this week, among quite some outrage, he named various media outlets as the losers, or winners, of the awards.

For centuries there was deep controversy over whether or not the Bible contained fake news or was all literally true. Was the world really created in just six days? Did the waters of the Red Sea really divide? Did the walls of Jericho fall down? Did miracles of healing really take place? Did Jesus really come alive again three days after he was crucified? Is there a sea creature big enough to swallow Jonah whole?

Most of us know that the distinctions between literal truth, myth, story, parable do not hold up. Truth can be communicated not only as factual accounts of something that’s actually happened, but also as teaching which comes through fable and legend and story, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. The parables of Jesus are not fake news, they are stories deliberately created to teach us truth, meaning, purpose. The story of Jonah is that too, a fabulous story which has lots of truth to teach us about God and God’s will and God’s call. Wondering whether or not you could actually survive in the belly of a large fish for three days is immaterial, irrelevant.

Let me remind you of the story of Jonah. In just 48 verses it conveys lots of fascinating story and lots of teaching. Jonah is a prophet who receives a word from the Lord, but refuses to follow it. God wants him to go to the hated Assyrians in their capital city of Nineveh to proclaim a word of judgment and call them to repentance. Our recalcitrant prophet, however, heads completely in the other direction, taking ship to the west towards the mythical city of Tarshish. After the well-known bout with a storm and a big fish, Jonah is told again “Get up, go to Nineveh, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you”. He knows now that God has his measure, so this time, reluctantly, he goes.

And the people of Nineveh respond, they repent. Our grumpy prophet, however, does not rejoice. He’s mightily annoyed with God. I knew it, he says, I knew you’d be a softie God, I knew you were gracious and loving and merciful, I knew you’d relent and not punish them. Why do you think I didn’t want this job!

The story concludes with God teaching Jonah a lesson. Jonah decides to wait around a bit, so he sits outside the city in a little humpy he builds, all in a huff, suffering from the heat. God quickly grew a bush to provide him with shade and Jonah was pleased. But the next day God made a worm attack the bush, so it withered, and Jonah suffered greatly under the hot sun. Jonah was angry, again. The story finishes with God saying “you are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour 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?”. And that’s it.

Now we know this is a parable, a story made up. Big fish don’t cough up people they’ve eaten, undamaged. The city of Tarshish is unknown. There never was anyone called the

king of Nineveh. There is no record of the people of Nineveh ever repenting and following the God of Israel. The information given in the story about the size of Nineveh is grossly inaccurate. It's a fabulous story, created to teach its listeners and readers. It's a Hebrew parable, written as a good-humoured story with a message.

And what a message! The story of Jonah comes to us, as best we can tell, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It's written by some unknown but brilliant teacher to make the Hebrew people stop and think! It's the time when leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah were in charge in Jerusalem. It's a tough time, when the Hebrew people are trying to re-establish themselves back in their promised land after 70 years or so of banishment and exile imposed on them by the Babylonians. Nehemiah and Ezra take the view that in order to survive the people must close in on themselves. They rigidly reintroduce the laws of Moses, they forbid marriages with non-Jews and they compel those who've already married non-Jews to divorce them, they call for strict adherence to ritual and racial purity, non-Jews are shunned.

Enter Jonah. The story of the petulant prophet is crafted to remind the majority opinion of the day that God loves all people, even terrible people like those gentiles of Nineveh who used to oppress them centuries ago. The breadth of God's love does not allow for exclusivism, for narrowness, for intolerance. Jonah is called to share God's love with people who were hated by the Hebrews, whose background and culture and lifestyle were different from theirs, to show God's love to them, to accept them as people loved by God and who deserve therefore to be treated lovingly. It's a gospel message - the teaching in the story of Jonah resonates very closely with the teaching and example of Jesus. God's love is there for everyone.

It's a sad and terrible fact that every generation of Christians and every generation of humanity need constantly to learn and relearn this message, for we humans are terribly prone to prejudice, judgmentalism, racism. Homeless people are loved by God. Unemployed people are loved by God. Mentally ill people are loved by God. Criminals are loved by God. Asylum seekers are loved by God. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians are all loved by God. God does not love everything we do, for God is horrified by our selfishness and prejudice and injustice, but God offers his love to everyone and calls us to live more lovingly, less selfishly, more compassionately.

There are secondary messages in the story of Jonah too. Last week Alistair preached on God's call to Samuel and God's call to us. Among many wise things Alistair said was "God continues to call us until we answer". That is certainly borne out by Jonah, whom God called again and again until he felt compelled to do what God had said. There are also key messages about the nature of God, not just that God loves all people but that he wants us to live better, to be more faithful, that he forgives, cares, looks after us, teaches us personally. And there's even a message relating to animal welfare, for God's care for the animals in Nineveh comes through in two or three verses, and the very last word of the book is "animals".

A fabulous story. As we move into this new year, take to heart the teaching of Jonah. Prejudice is out, disobedience is out, a narrowness of heart and mind is out. Love for all is in, care and compassion is in, God's love and forgiveness are in.

To the glory of God, Amen.