



Lastman Pieter. *Jonah and the Whale* (1621)

Greetings!

Please read the [Book of Jonah](#)



Richardson, Jan. *Ash Wednesday Cross*

Jonah is not widely thought of in the Lenten narrative, but I would like to suggest we should add it to our reading for reflection. Lent is a season of self-denial, of taking up our cross and following Jesus. Jonah is an interesting story. Some scholars have debated whether the story is fact or a fictional allegory.¹ While this may be an interesting discussion it is not the purpose of this devotion. The story of Jonah is a wonderful narrative of a particular human problem. All humanity must address this problem. And Lent is a great time to think seriously about the impact of this problem and how it effects your life.

But before we get to what Disciple Bible Study calls the **human condition**, lets retell the story. Jonah is a prophet in the 8th century BCE, a time when much is happening within Israel and its relationship with God. Jonah is called by God to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy the impending doom of God's wrath upon the people. Instead, he boards a ship headed in the opposite direction. While on the voyage the ship runs into a terrible storm and he tells the crew to cast him overboard so they can be saved.

Somehow in the water Jonah is swallowed by a great fish and resides there three days and has conversation with himself and with God. After wrestling with God in the

belly of the fish Jonah agrees to go to Nineveh and preach to the people a word of repentance and hope. Jonah successfully convinces the people to repent and they do, but he is not happy. Jonah doesn't really like the Ninevites. Even though they respond to God's message and repent, he goes outside the city to await its destruction.

Already on a mission that he doesn't agree with, Jonah is in a foul mood. While outside the city he sits in the hot sun and complains. Then a vine miraculously grows and he continues to sit, but now under the shade of the bush that shields him from the blistering sun.

Jonah broods, even overnight, waiting for the destruction of the city but it does not come. Then something amazing happens. In the Hebrew text Jonah 4:7, "God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered." Now with no defenses, Jonah who has been through a lot already, is vulnerable again.

The Rev. Dr. T. Mark Dove, a retired pastor in the West Ohio Conference, a close friend and mentor of mine talked about this phenomenon often, "When the bottom drops out of our life, we are most vulnerable to hear the Good News." Jonah is so vulnerable he pleads to God to kill him. And this is how this story ends at the end of Chapter 4. *But the LORD said: "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*²

And what is the Lenten discipline you ask? What is the human condition to address? What is the problem? The answer: Judgement. As we think about our place in the world and our relationship with God this simple story packs much meaning. And this narrative offers us an insight into the spiritual discipline of forgiveness and why we should participate in this action regularly. Practicing forgiveness overcomes our penchant for judgement and the pettiness that keeps us from forming and being beloved community. As you journey with Jesus to Jerusalem this Lenten Season, could you leave judging others along the side of the road?

Closing Conversation

- Who are your Ninevites? Who have you judged or are currently judging? Why?
- What do you have to let go of to extend forgiveness and overcome judgement?
- How will you let it go whatever it is? Is there a new relationship to forge?
- Have you wondered how God is hurt in all our judgement of others?

¹ Kripke, Saul A. *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972, 1980.

² Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®.

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