

“I’ve been thinking,” said Jonah, “that God delights in making people humble. And I’ve got good reasons too.”

He was on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean. It was a beautiful day with just the right amount of breeze. And Jonah was standing at the front of the ship watching the seabirds circling around fish under the surface of the water.

“Perfect,” he thought, “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the entire world right now.” And it was absolutely true.

He continued talking to the ship’s parrot that was preening itself on its perch. “It’s all right there in history, God raises people up, gives them positions of power and then crushes them. Abraham, was promised that he would be the Father of a nation. For 25 years he had to live with that promise without it being fulfilled. 25 years of watching his wife getting older and older. 25 years of living with the embarrassment of being wealthy without an heir.

“Do you think he didn’t hear the murmurs behind his back? People would have accused him of not being righteous, of being cursed by God for some secret sin he had committed. Why else would God want him to go through all that? What is God’s purpose in that?”

Jonah paused and looked at the ocean. The parrot opened its mouth and then closed it in the way that parrots do.

“Wind’s picking up,” said the captain.

The captain touched the lucky charm around his neck and said something under his breath, and he came over and looked at Jonah.

“You’re from Israel aren’t you? Rumour has it that you are running away from your God!” Jonah looked at the captain and then turned back to the ocean to escape his gaze and said, “We all are to some degree, don’t you think?”

Jonah used those words as a shield and let his gaze drop to the sea.

He never really wanted to be a prophet because it always put his faith on the line. Things always seemed to be black and white whenever he uttered prophetic things and this is not how he wanted to view the world. The world needs more love and less judgement, especially from God.

He cast his mind back to God’s most recent calling for him.

God had said to him, “Go to the city of Nineveh and tell them that within 6 weeks I am going to kill them.” That’s just not a popular teaching.

Nineveh had a population of about 120,000 people, about the same size as Hamilton and spread out over an area the size of central to west Auckland. They used to say it took three days to walk from one side to the other. It was one of the great centres of the world at that time, kind of like New York or London. And it was a place where people could get anything they wanted, they be whoever they wanted to be and they could do whatever they pleased. It was paradise for those who wanted a lifestyle without responsibility, to live in decadence or luxury or just plain sensuality.

There was a temple in the middle of it. A glorious temple that was dedicated to Ishtar who was the goddess of all life. She was worshipped through sex and the temple was a religious brothel. Apparently once women were married they were required to go to the temple and wait for a man to throw them a silver coin. If this happened they would have sex with the man and then they could return home to her husband. If the woman was unattractive though, she could stay there for many years.

Sensuality was religious expression. And to your average Hebrew it was disgusting and degrading. Their laws were extraordinarily strict when it came to sexual purity. Death was the usual punishment.

But it wasn’t just sexual impurity that Jonah was going to preach against, it was the religion of their land. God was calling him to be completely intolerant and politically incorrect. It’s a bit like walking into the Black Power headquarters and shouting, “God really doesn’t like what you guys are doing, so he’s going to kill you.”

God had told Jonah to “preach against them” which is not a popular message for anyone to give and in a town renowned for it’s violence and immorality, it would mean certain and probably quite unpleasant death for the messenger.

Jonah shook his head. Still in complete and utter disbelief at God’s stupidity. Why would he want to send someone into that place only to die? What use could that possibly be for God’s purposes?

The wind began to pick up a little and on the horizon the clouds began to darken. “Man I hate sailing,” he said under his breath. “It’s so unpredictable.” Jonah went below the deck and fell asleep.

Meanwhile on the deck the captain and the crew started to get a little uneasy.

By now the clouds had thickened and the wind was becoming stronger. They had taken the sails in and were bracing themselves for a storm. The lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, and the boat began to lurch. The waves swelled higher and higher, and the crests were being whipped by angry squalls and soon the waves began to crash over the sides of the boat. The sailors and the captain began to be afraid.

“This is crazy,” said the captain. “One minute we’re sailing in beautiful weather and now this terrible storm! I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

They became desperate and began to pray to their own gods to save them. They believed whole heartedly in their religions, but their prayers were futile. They believed whole heartedly but to no avail—I guess all roads don’t lead to Rome.

The captain came across Jonah sleeping in the hold and shook him awake. “What do you think you are doing? We’re sinking and you sleep? Why aren’t you praying to your god to save us just like everyone else? Get up and get praying man! None of the other gods seem to be listening to us, try yours and see if you can do better.”

There was a kind of desperation in the captain’s voice. It wasn’t just that they were sinking, but it was also that he was witnessing how his religion just wasn’t enough. He was at a point where he was prepared to give anything a go. His desperation was disappointment at the fact that his faith would not save him.

“Pray to your God and maybe we will live!” Jonah got up and went up on deck to the raging storm. The sailors were huddling around each other trying to hear what each other were saying.

Jonah didn’t want to pray to God. He was running away. He didn’t want to allow God into his existence again, it was too disappointing. There was too much at stake. Too much pride, and too much shame.

He was afraid that if he prayed to God that maybe God wouldn't answer his prayers—just like he hadn't answered the prayers of his ancestors who died in Egypt while in slavery. He didn't want for his religion to become more fake than it already was.

*Later he would think about how he had brought into question his profound experience of being told by God in no uncertain terms to go to Nineveh. There was an irony in the fact that the very reason he was on the boat was precisely because God had revealed himself but Jonah was afraid that God wouldn't show up in this moment of crisis. It wasn't that Jonah didn't believe he could, the question was whether God would. And truth be known, he wasn't prepared to let God into this situation anyway.*

*But God had other plans.*

Jonah looked at the captain, "What are they saying?" The sailors were claspng their foreheads in total helplessness, and there was a lot of heated argument taking place.

The captain said, "they're trying to find out who it is that we should blame for this calamity."

"Superstitious idiots," thought Jonah.

Jonah joined the crowd and couldn't believe that they were going to draw straws to see who was at fault. "This is crazy," he thought, "what are they going to do to the person who loses? This is so random."

They passed the straws out. Jonah drew the shortest straw. And for a moment the storm didn't matter to anyone.

Everyone's eyes widened. And they looked at Jonah. Suddenly they all erupted into angry shouts in their own languages. Finally one of them took Jonah by the scruff of the neck.

"Who are you," he shouted, "where do you come from, what have you done that has made the gods so angry with us? Well?" and turning to the others, "I should cut his throat right now, and then we'll see what happens to this storm . . ."

But the captain intervened, "No," he shouted, "that's not necessary." And turning to Jonah, "Well, who are you?"

Jonah looked at them all and thought that this was going to be the proverbial 'it'. And he shouted so he could be heard by everyone, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship God, the one and only God. The one who made the heavens and the earth. The sea and the land."

Their jaws dropped. When Jonah had told them before that he was running from his God, they hadn't for a moment thought that it would be *the* God. In their understanding of things the creator God was pretty much the worst God you could run from since, well, that god had created all the others. They hadn't thought much of his statement until now and they realised—even in their ignorance—that they were in the cactus.

Jonah thought about this later. When he had said who he was, he was trying to escape, so he chose to articulate his belief in God. He figured if he demonstrated an awesome loyalty to God then the others wouldn't possibly think this was his fault because he was too righteous. Yep Jonah wasn't being brave, he was still running even when he made that statement.

Sometimes we all find ourselves hiding behind big words of religion so that we don't have to confront the truth. Orthodoxy is the best mask, making accurate doctrinal statements is great camouflage. Jonah had recited his Sunday School answer so that they would be so impressed with his religious stature that they would have to find another culprit. And there he stood before an angry and confused mob, and worse, before his determined and intentional creator. Jonah didn't fear the God who created the storm, but sailors who drew straws to find answers.

Meanwhile the storm was getting fiercer and fiercer, and the boat was taking on more and more water.

They wouldn't have a bar of his arrogance, the straw test had divined that Jonah was at fault. They had witch hunted Jonah and they yelled out to him, “well, what is it then that we must do to you, what is it that your God would want us to do to get him on our side?”

And Jonah knee jerk reacted. He felt so awful because deep down feelings were starting to surface. “What if it is my fault? What if there are supernatural consequences to my actions?” He had always lived with God being there but not really interacting with humanity. He knew the history of his people, but there was always a biases to interpreting history. God always looks more involved in hindsight. God always seems to do so much more when we look back but is strangely absent from many of life's experiences in the here and now.

And Jonah was sceptical as to what exactly it was that God was going to do to him. Except for now.

He was surprised at how superstitious he had suddenly become. What if God had actually rigged the straws...this is more than a coincidence. It is surprising how even sceptics can find God's interactions in peculiar ways in the middle of crisis. But there wasn't time to work this through—a decision had to be made.

He acknowledged that he was a bad prophet. He had no understanding of a forgiving God. To Jonah it seemed that God was so angry with him that he was going to end his life, God was punishing him. It wasn't fair that the other sailors should get caught up in his mistake. Deep down he knew that he was the cause of this situation.

It was clear that God was going to kill Jonah anyway so he said to the sailors, "Throw me into the sea, and I'm sure it will become calm, because . . . well," and he braced himself for the strange thing he was about to say, "if there is anyone who could be responsible for this storm hitting us, I'm the most likely candidate. And if that is true, then it's better just I die, than all of us."

He looked uncertainly at the ocean and saw the waves and the whirlpools, and he saw that there was no way that he could last for very long in all that chaos, so at least, it would be a quick death. "Drowning's the most peaceful way to die," he thought to himself. And so he looked at the sailors who stood with a mixture of fear, hate and despair and decided to gamble with ending his life.

But they didn't want his blood on their hands, and they decided to try rowing back to shore, but to no avail. In fact it seemed as though this simply provoked the storm.

Once again the sailors gathered around in a huddle and yelled out to Jonah, "who is your God? What is his name? Tell us how we can pray to him so that he will not hold us accountable for your life? Tell us!" Jonah, clinging on for dear life to the side rail, said "he is known as the great 'I am.' He has no name because we cannot understand him in that way. He is mysterious...and vast...and all powerful..." But for some reason all these explanations didn't seem to work for the experience they were having right now. They were

experiencing God's power, his anger, his wrath—things that are personal, these things come from a personality who is interacting and engaging. Jonah was seeing another side to God. But before his thoughts about this were passed, the men began to pray to his God. The one true God. And even in his reluctance and rebellion, Jonah was used as an evangelist.

They prayed that God would forgive them as they threw Jonah into the God-inspired rage of the sea where he was sucked quickly into swirling mass of water.

It all happened in slow motion for Jonah when they cast him overboard. He went through the air, watching the men disappear above him, having their last peer at a man they had just killed. Some of them were delighted, others were horrified. But as Jonah hit the surface of the water, he noticed a patch of blue sky instantly open above the boat.

"It *was* my fault," he thought as the waves grabbed him and pulled him under. His heavy clothes made it difficult to do anything other than sink.

"Well, God, at least I didn't die with the sinners in Nineveh." He was making the most of a bleak and hopeless situation until he started to choke for air. Suddenly death became a reality. Pending doom snapped him into a panic and he started to throw his arms around wildly to grab anything at all.

At our lowest points we are closest to God. As we realise the preciousness of life during dying breaths, we realise the preciousness of eternity. When our world that was the size of our pride becomes so small, we can see clearly how big the universe with God really is.

"God?" cried Jonah's heart, "I'm scared and I need you. Help?" A simple prayer, so pure in it's helplessness, so powerful that it saved a city. And he passed out.

[lights out]

Jonah woke up and it was warm. The air was actually not really air. It was more like, well, there is nothing to describe what it's like to be inside a giant stomach. It could have been similar to being immersed in an offal bin at the freezing works, except, rancid fish would usually smell bad, but when you have

that combined with litres and litres of gastric juices, it would have been diabolical. Jonah vomited immediately.

He had no idea where he was, but he expected that it was Hell. He vomited again and continued to vomit until he began to dry reach.

And then he got used to the smell. And sat down with a squelch and a sploosh. “This isn’t at all what I expected Hell to be like,” he thought to himself. He lent back and put his hands down on the ground only to feel them slip on a slimy goo. He vomited again as he realised that he had just grabbed onto some kind of flesh.

After a while it occurred to him that this room had two openings. Occasionally stuff would come into the room, whole fish it felt like, and then it would disappear down another opening on the other side. He had to fight the movement of the walls that kept pushing him in the direction of the exit. Somehow he knew that where he was would be better than what was through that opening.

He really couldn’t sleep, but over time he realised that he wasn’t dead. He didn’t know where he was, but he knew that this was more real than spiritual. And part of him was thankful.

Three days is a long time to be in the dark. Especially in a place like that.

Jonah had plenty of time to think though. And at last he prayed the following prayer.

“God, you heard me. You heard me when I cried a pitiful cry for help. You didn’t need to do that, and I didn’t deserve that, but you heard me and you answered me.

“You threw me into the storm, into the very depths of the unkind sea, I felt the waves and the breakers envelop me and suck me under.

“I thought it was the end, I said to myself ‘this is it. I’ve been banished from God’s sight forever.’ But for some reason you have saved me and I’m going to get to worship you again.

“The current was tossing me, the deep surrounded me, and I felt seaweed strangling me. And I kept going deeper and deeper and I felt as though I would be left there forever. I felt like I’d descended into the pit of Hell, because I thought you were ashamed of me. But you reached out your hand and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, and here I am.

“When I was about to die, I whimpered out a measly prayer. But you still heard.

“Those that hold on to the worthless things in life, give up any right to receive your generosity. And I was holding on to my pride, my little understandings of how you work.

“All I can say is thanks, I’m going to be more giving of the things I hold dear. That is my promise.

“It is the least I can do because true life belongs to God. And only God can give it.

“I’ve been thinking that God delights in making people humble. And now I know why.

“I’m not running anymore God, I’m not going to run.”