Opinion
Guest Voices



"Jonah and the Whale" (1621) by Dutch painter Pieter Lastman (Artvee)



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The Book of Jonah is one of my favorite books in the Bible. Because of what is happening in the Middle East right now, the Book of Jonah is especially relevant to us today.

Jonah is not a children's story. It is a story about international politics and interreligious relations. In fact, if people knew its message, it might be banned from school libraries as too "woke."

Nor is it a history book. Rather, it is a short story, a parable. Just as Jesus made up parables to teach, so too the author of Jonah created this story to teach an important lesson.

When we read the Hebrew Scriptures, there is one theme that is constant and clear: The Jewish people are special because they have been chosen by God. Yahweh is their God, and they are his people.

Some Americans believe the same thing about our country. In American exceptionalism, America is seen as a "shining city on a hill."

Since the Jewish people were often tempted by pagan worship and immorality, Moses and the priests were isolationists; they taught the Jews to stay separated from the pagans. Often these pagan nations were also their political enemies.

Taken to an extreme, this separatist tradition easily became a form of excessive nationalism that saw everyone outside their nation and religion as evil and untouched by God. Christian nationalists fall into the same temptation.

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There was a small group of Jewish prophets who thought this separatist and exclusivist tradition was wrong. This group believed the Lord, as the creator of the world, is the God of all peoples. All people are God's children. Scripture scholars have called them "universalists," because they believed God's mercy and love was universal; it was not just for the chosen people.

The author of Jonah was a member of this universalist camp and lived around 600 to 200 years before Christ.

The story begins with Jonah being told by God to preach repentance to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, an empire that included what today we call Iraq and Syria. By the time the story was written, Nineveh was no more, but the author used it to symbolize all those nations hated by Israel.

Jonah is told by God, "Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it; their wickedness has come before me." Jonah is told to get the Ninevites to repent; if they don't repent, God will destroy them.

This was like telling a modern-day rabbi to preach in Iran or Gaza. Rather than going to Nineveh, Jonah sets sail in the opposite direction toward Spain.

Why does Jonah flee? At first, we might think he is afraid of the Ninevites and what they will do to him when he starts preaching. But what he really fears is that the Ninevites might listen; they might believe and do penance and then God won't destroy them. Jonah wants them destroyed, so what Jonah fears is not failure, he fears success. Jonah is a man filled with hate.

Jonah was like many people in the world today: Israelis hating Palestinians; Palestinians hating Israelis; Shia hating Sunnis; Sunnis hating Shia. Radical Buddhists in Myanmar hating Rohingya Muslims; Hindu nationalists in India attacking Muslims and Christians.

But it also happens in our own country where white supremacists hate immigrants and Blacks. Democrats hate Republicans, and Republicans hate Democrats.



"Jonah Preaching to the People of Niniveh" (1630-1661) by Italian painter Salvator Rosa (Artvee)

Jonah hated Nineveh; he did not want its reconciliation with God; he wanted its destruction. So, he sails away on a ship. When a storm comes, the crew and passengers pray to their gods for deliverance. Jonah does not pray because he knows his God is the cause of the storm.

When he admits this to the crew, only reluctantly do they throw him overboard and then pray God will forgive them for this crime.

God sends a giant fish to rescue Jonah. Jonah praises God for rescuing him from death, but he is not happy when God again tells him to go to Nineveh, but this time he goes.

When he arrives in Nineveh, Jonah announces that in 40 days the city will be destroyed. Jonah likes the idea of destroying Nineveh. But the worst of all possible things happens: The Ninevites repent, and God relents and does not destroy Nineveh.

Jonah is very disappointed and angry at God. "This is why I fled," Jonah tells God. "I knew you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish."

He is so unhappy he tells God, "Please take my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah would rather die than see his enemies live.

There is a joke about God appearing to an Israeli and a Palestinian politician to tell them the world is going to end. The Palestinian politician tells his people, "I have bad news and good news: The bad news is the world is going to end, the good news is that Israel will be destroyed." The Israeli politician tells his people, "I have bad news and good news: The bad news is the world is going to end; the good news is that there will never be a Palestinian state."

After finishing his mission, Jonah goes outside the city and sits in the shade under a tree. God sends a worm that kills the tree; it withers up, and Jonah has no shade. This makes Jonah angry, and he complains to God.

And the book of Jonah ends with God's response: "You are concerned over the plant which cost you no labor and which you did not raise; it came up in one night and in one night it perished. And should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons … ?"



"The Prophet Jonah" (1550-1585) by Italian engraver Adamo Scultori (Artvee)

There are many ironies in the book of Jonah. Everyone in the story, including the pagan sailors and Ninevites, are better persons than Jonah. When Jonah preaches in Nineveh, he does not offer mercy and forgiveness; he prophesies destruction. His prophecy does not come true because God is merciful. And Jonah, who disobeyed God and was not punished, is angry at God's mercy.

And the greatest of all ironies is that the city is Nineveh, the capital of one of the most cruel and unjust empires in the Middle East that wanted to enslave or destroy

Israel.

The book of Jonah reminds us that even the most evil person or empire can repent. The book of Jonah tells us that our goal must be reconciliation with our enemies, not their destruction.

This is why the church teaches that war must be a last resort, not an early option. Negotiations and diplomacy must come first. Christians must seek dialogue and friendship with other religions and not treat them as enemies.

The book of Jonah applies not only to international affairs, but also to our personal lives. Hatred and the inability to forgive can be self-destructive among nations, among ethnic groups, in families, in the workplace and even in the church.

When we see someone as an enemy, we have failed to see them as children of God.

Jonah is like the opponents of Pope Francis, who don't like the pope constantly talking about the compassion and mercy of God, especially for divorced and remarried couples and for gay couples. These opponents stress rules and want a God who punishes sinners.

In the gospels, Jesus tells us the reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives, believe in the good news. He asks us to look into our hearts and reject the hatreds that motivate us. He asks us to be reconciled with our enemies and love them as children of God our Father.

As Christians, we pray our hearts might not be hardened with hatred like Jonah's. We pray all peoples might reform their lives and believe in the good news of God's mercy and love for all his children.