

Matt Henry  
Jonah 3:1-4:1  
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“Who Knows?”

Grace and peace...

We’re looking at the story of Jonah today. Jonah makes me think of my godparents because when I was about preschool age or so, they gave me a “Jonah and the Whale” pop-up book. Growing up, this pop-up book was the only thing I had from them even though they once belonged to the same church as me. As a kid, I never knew my godparents. I thought they had moved away or died even. And then when I was sending out announcements for high school graduation, my parents said, “Why don’t you send one to your godparents, Tom and Ruth Ann? They’d come.” I said, “What?” Well, it turns out they were in Idaho Falls the whole time. They didn’t die. They just went Pentecostal! As a HS graduate, I got to meet them and know them which was very meaningful for me. Now this is only the first paragraph of this message, but many of you already have some application. Godparents, connect with your children today. Godchildren, connect with your godparents today. Call, write, talk! Who knows how the story will turn out? It’s worth finding out.

Some people think of the story of Jonah as a whale of a tale. It's only a children's story that pop up books are made for. But it is so much more because it has grown up implications. It is going to address important questions such as:

*Who is deserving of God's love?*

*Is it wrong to despise the wicked evildoer?*

*Why does God repent?*

*How can the wicked be so receptive to a word from the Lord when the faithful are sometimes even more resistant?*

These are questions God answers through a mere four-chapter book of the Bible.

And the answers are huge! The question I am asking today is "Who knows?"

A lot of people talk and prognosticate about the future. But they don't know. They are making educated guesses. Who knows who is going to the Superbowl? Who knows when the government shutdown will end? Who knows when Costco is going in on Ten Mile? Only God knows the answers to these questions and more. But Jonah is bothered because He knows exactly what God wants to do. That's why he's on the run.

So let's pick up the story in chapter 3. The whale or big fish has just vomited Jonah onto the dry land. Doesn't that vomiting actions just beg for a 3-D page in the pop-up book? The whale has accomplished its purpose of holding

Jonah captive until his heart changed. The runaway prophet no longer, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time and says, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

The Bible says Nineveh was big and vast. It was a three-day journey just to get through the region, probably not just the town. It had more than 120,000 inhabitants. Nineveh later became the capital of the Assyrian Empire in 705 BC. This is about 60 years earlier, I think and I’ll tell you why later. But at this point, Nineveh is one of three important royal cities. You may know the Assyrians were brutal and cruel to their enemies like no other empire. They skinned, burned and decapitated their enemies. They piled the skulls of defeated soldiers into pyramids at the entry to the city gates right by the “Nineveh Welcomes You” sign from the Chamber of Commerce. The Assyrians were downright evil and barbaric people killing children and pregnant women in the most torturous of ways. So it’s safe to say Jonah hated the Assyrians and had sufficient reason.

Jonah speaks the shortest sermon ever. “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” It actually works! Why? There is a whole list of reasons.

One, Jonah spoke what God told him to speak (3:2). He didn’t make stuff up. He just said it. And we believe in the power of the Law to bring people to

contrition and remorse and break them. The Gospel is that God gave them time to repent. Forty days. We believe in the power of God's Word.

Two, Jonah's message may have worked because of the messenger. He had just spent three days in a fish's belly. Some people think he would have had bleached skin or have an abnormal physical appearance of some kind that would validate this message.

Three, historical context. This was new to me, but I did some research and learned the Assyrian Empire, as large as it was, almost passed out of existence prematurely. From 781-745 BC, it has a downturn. During this time there are revolts, famines and other natural disasters. They had a big earthquake which is seen as a sign of divine wrath. There was a famine from 765-758 BC. Assyria was losing battles and losing territory to its enemies. There were domestic riots. With all the trouble they already had going on, they could have easily believed that Jonah's warning of Nineveh's downfall would actually happen. And to top it all off, there was a total solar eclipse over Nineveh on June 15, 763 BC. And you know how people get worked up over a total solar eclipse! People go crazy.

Assyrian literature is also revealing. One researcher cited the Assyrian writings and stated what a solar eclipse would have meant to them: "the king will be deposed and killed, and a worthless fellow will seize the throne...rain from

heaven will flood the land...the city walls will be destroyed.” The Assyrians tell us that at such a time, there would be solemn fasting, and the king would hand over his throne to a substitute until the danger passed. At least once when there was a total solar eclipse, the Assyrians cry, “Nineveh shall be overthrown!” which can also mean “Nineveh shall be made to repent!” Why would the Assyrians say those things? It could well be because there was a reluctant prophet in town saying just as much.

All of these things taken together explain why the people believed Jonah and actually repented. And it puts Jonah in Nineveh in June 763 BC for that total solar eclipse which totally fits the biblical timeline of his life (Jeroboam II reigned 786-746 BC in Israel; 2 Kings 14:25). Jonah preaches at exactly the right time for the people of Nineveh to listen to him. But that’s vintage God for you, to line up the cosmos for a cause!

The question “who knows?” is put forward by the king of Nineveh. He tells everyone and their livestock to fast, wear sackcloth. Imagine cows wearing sackcloth! But that’s what they did. “Let everyone call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” And that’s exactly what God does. He relents. The Hebrew says He

repents. He chooses not to destroy Nineveh because the people repented. God can do this because as Jonah came to realize and confess in the belly of the whale, “Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

This is no children’s story. Jesus himself vouches for the historicity of Jonah when he says to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to test him, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Matt. 16:4). What is the sign of Jonah? To spend three days in Sheol, in the throes of death, only to come back to life. Jesus dies and on the third day is raised to life and He has accomplished salvation for all people, not just some. He chooses to love and to act to save the whole world—even the people we have a hard time liking ourselves.

I have a hard time loving \_\_\_\_\_ . Fill in the blank with what goes there. My ex, my enemies, ISIS, child abusers...once you have identified someone, now you have a reason to repent like Jonah did. Because we’re called to love everybody. I’m not denying the wickedness of certain actions, but I am saying that God has already accomplished the forgiveness of their sin. That’s what the cross is all about. We have to accept that God’s love is for everyone. We can’t rule people out no matter what they have done. We can’t fall into the trap of Jonah. Because when all Nineveh repents, Jonah should

rejoice, but instead he is angry. “It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.” He was so angry, he even begs to die, because he knew God was gracious and would forgive.

Now for some reason Jonah’s anger wasn’t in my pop-up book. It didn’t make the cut in the lectionary; I had to extend the story so we could see the point: Flawed people being sent by a flawless God to love like He does.

Speaking of flawed people, Nichelle is here with us today. I’m just joking, we are friends. As you know, Nichelle is going to Peru as a LCMS missionary. And this Sunday is about saying “yes” to God and joining with Him in the great work of the global mission. Nichelle, if you know her, is pretty much an anti-Jonah. Instead of running away, she is running toward. She has a heart for people, she is secure in her relationship with the Lord and she wants people to enter into the same relationship she has with the God of the universe. What’s it going to be like for her when she goes? What would it be like if all of God’s people had an anti-Jonah attitude like this in their daily life? Who knows? There’s only one way to find out!

In Jesus’ name, Amen..

Learn more at these resources:

Read more at

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tomhobson/2017/08/jonah-eclipse-ancient-nineveh/#1Gd8dbjlzRT6XP7B.99>

Tyndale Bulletin 47.2 (Nov. 1996) 301-314.

## WHO WAS THE ‘KING OF NINEVEH’ IN JONAH 3:6?

Paul Ferguson

Biblical chronology places the story of Jonah the prophet between (793–753 BC). Given the accounts by the Assyrians of their ruthless cruelty, one can understand Jonah’s reluctance and refusal to go there (see Jonah 1–4). It was an exceedingly dangerous assignment. But he eventually went, proclaiming to them a warning of coming destruction on account of their evil ways. But as the story goes, led by its king, the entire city repented, and so was spared. It is possible that this story occurred during the reign of Adadnirari III, for there is evidence of a monotheistic revolution in which the god Nabu appears to have been proclaimed the sole, or at least the principal, god, occurring in Assyria during his reign.