

“The Character of a Caricature”

Jonah 4:1-11

06.06.21

Introduction

When I was a little boy I remember going to a school carnival with my older brother and sister. I can still remember the smell of fresh buttered popcorn wafting through the hallways, bobbing for apples, face painting, some carnival games, and of course there was a sketch artist who was drawing caricatures.

My siblings wanted a portrait of the three of us, so we waited in line. They told me that the man was going to draw a picture of us and that I needed to stand really still. After what felt like an eternity, he handed the drawing to my older brother, and I was excited beyond words to see what it looked like. But to my surprise, it didn't look like us...but it did.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with a caricature. It often highlights physical features in an unflattering way. In some ways, a caricature might confirm our deepest insecurities. We might look at it and say, “So it's not just me...everyone else thinks I have a big nose, too!” Or “I was right...my eyes are too close together!”

In a culture that is so fixated on physical appearance, I'm not so sure that caricatures are always helpful. Sure, they might make us laugh a little, but do they cause us to focus on the things we cannot change?

On the other hand, what would it look like for someone to draw a caricature of your personality and the way you treat others? What would a caricature of your spiritual life look like?

Jonah as a Caricature

Last week I talked about how sometimes we learn Bible stories in Sunday School class as children and we see them as one dimensional. As a result, we often fail to revisit them when we get older to understand their deeper truth. As an example of what I meant by that, the next few weeks I want to take a closer look at the story of Jonah.

Most of us, when we hear the name “Jonah,” immediately think of the Old Testament prophet who was swallowed by a great fish. But out of four chapters, a great fish is only mentioned three times. The story is *so much* more than that.

According to the majority of biblical scholars, the story about Jonah was probably never intended to be understood as a literal, historical account. This is not just the conclusion

of modern biblical scholars; even folks like Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation (in the sixteenth century), read the story as a parable.¹

To be clear, if you read the story as a literal account, it is not my goal to convince you otherwise. My purpose is to simply help us think of the theological message and how it applies to us today, rather than getting caught up on the size of the fish, its species, etc.

But more specifically than a parable, Jonah is a *caricature*. One biblical scholar writes,

If it is correct to describe the literary genre of the book of Jonah by the loose designation of parable, as the majority of commentators conclude, then it is possible to add that its literary tone is that of parody or satire. Jonah is made to appear a ridiculous figure whose part none would be prepared to defend. With his narrow pretensions and uncharitable grudges he puts himself against the very will of God, only to be cut down to size and exposed as self-centered and self-righteous. Behind him must stand a group of people whose mouthpiece Jonah is or whom Jonah caricatures...²

Overview

Before we dive into what is happening in the background, let's do a 15 second overview of what we remember about Jonah. Jonah is an Israelite prophet whom God calls to go to Nineveh and warn them about impending judgment. But Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh, so he boards a ship that is headed to Tarshish (i.e., the opposite direction). On their way a great storm arises, and Jonah is thrown overboard to appease God's wrath. Jonah assumes he will die, but something worse happens: God uses a great fish to swallow Jonah so that the prophet of God can repent and go to Nineveh.

Jonah repents, reluctantly goes to Nineveh, preaches the shortest message in the history of preaching, and the people of Nineveh miraculously repent. Although this is where we usually end the story, it doesn't stop here. After the people of Nineveh repent, Jonah becomes furious that God has shown grace, mercy, and forgiveness to them. The story ends with a bit of a cliffhanger.

So, I think in order for us to better understand what is happening beneath the surface, we need to ask, *Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh?*

The Ninevites

Most of the time I think we just assume that Jonah was rebellious, but the truth is that Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria, and in the 7th century B.C., the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed Jewish cities, killed many of their people, and

¹ L. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, p. 178

² *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

led survivors into exile. So, for God to call Jonah to go to Nineveh would be like God calling us to go and preach God's love to the Taliban.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew that God was merciful and forgiving and would give the people of Nineveh a second chance, when Jonah wanted God to destroy them. That is why this week I started with the end. I wanted us to see Jonah at his worst.

This is a caricature moment. The story of Jonah is like God holding up a big mirror for the entire nation of Israel and saying, "This is what you look like. This is who you have become."

So, this is what we can actually piece together from history. Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C. Biblical scholars usually date the story of Jonah as being written sometime in the post-exilic period of 600-300 B.C. (i.e., after the destruction of Nineveh).

Since the story is most likely a parable, the people of Nineveh most likely never repented. Instead, God is offering them an alternative ending—a version of what the story could have been if the people of Israel would have extended God's love rather than judgment.

How Jonah was First Received

So, a caricature is supposed to wrap honesty in humor. Instead of some scathing indictment, the original audience would have received the story of Jonah as a satire. It was a comedy. It's hard not to laugh when you think of a man getting so bent out of shape over a worm eating his plant that he wants to die—but it certainly gets the point across that Jonah clearly lost perspective. I can imagine a fourth century Jew doubled over in laughter after hearing the story of Jonah for the first time, and then hear them say, "Okay. Okay. I get the point. We have some work to do."

You see, when the Israelites were preparing to return to their land after being exiled, the prophet Isaiah reminded them that it would not be enough for them to go back home and rebuild. The people of God were called to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6). The story of Jonah is the most extreme example of irony. God's love, grace, and forgiveness are so boundless that God does not simply want his people to be a light to *some* Gentiles—God also wanted Israel to be a light to the Gentiles who had oppressed them. Instead, Jonah became a comical portrait of the Israelites' self-centered attitudes.

Jonah for the Rest of Us

Over the next few weeks, I want to challenge you to read through the Book of Jonah once a week. It is only forty-eight verses in length, which will probably only take about twenty minutes to read at the most. As you read the text, I hope you'll ask the following questions:

1. How do I see glimpses of myself in God's reluctant prophet?

2. Who are my Ninevites? (i.e., who do I need to forgive so that I can show them God's love and grace?)
3. How is God calling our community of faith to look outward rather than inward, so that we might be the light of the world?

Reference Tools

Allen, Leslie. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*. 1976. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Limburg, James. *Hosea-Micah*. 1988. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Simon, Uriel. *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*. 1996. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Wolff, Hans. *Obadiah and Jonah*. 1991. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What comes to mind when you think of a caricature?
2. As you reflect on this week's message, what one thought stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp?
3. How do you see yourself in the story? How is God using the story of Jonah to speak to you?
4. Have you/will you take Pastor Jonathan's challenge to read through Jonah each week for the next three weeks?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?