

**“A Compassionate Whale and a Silly Pigeon”**  
Jonah 1:1-4, 7-12, 17; 2:1a, 10; 3:1-7a, 8b-10 (plus 4:1-2)

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I love the story of Jonah; it’s an archetypical legend of rebirth, a Hebrew Bible version of being born again. And it features a great whale.

**Karen: I love the story of Jonah, too. It’s “a thriller about a compassionate whale.”**

You think of it as a “thriller about a compassionate whale?” Hmm, I consider Jonah to be “a mystery story about a silly pigeon.”

**Karen: A silly pigeon? Where is there a pigeon in the entire book?**

Jonah himself is the silly pigeon. A Hebrew Bible professor, Kathy Farmer, explains that the word *Yonah* can mean *either* dove or a pigeon. Doves and pigeons look alike though they have different reputations. Pigeons are rather common, dirty, *silly birds*; whereas doves have come to symbolize the noble ideal of peace. Which bird was *Jonah* name after, dove or a pigeon? There is a clue elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, for when Jonah is referred to in other Old Testament books, he is considered to be “silly and without sense.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed Jonah behaves like a silly pigeon. This is a story of a silly pigeon.

**Karen: And a compassionate whale.**

Okay, this is a story about a Compassionate whale and Jonah, a silly pigeon.

Some prophets, like Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, hear the word of God and respond, “Here I am. Lord.” They proceed to follow the instructions they understand that God is giving to them, and they seem to be loyal servants of God. However in this story Jonah hears the word of God and says, in effect, “I’m not here, please go away.” Jonah treated God like the person who calls at a bad time when you frantically signal to the one who answers the phone that you’re not home.

Samuel and Jonah both knew that following what they perceived to be the will of God might be difficult, but they handled it very differently. Samuel seemed not even to have blinked. However, our friend Jonah tried to run away, naively thinking that the easier way would be to hide. There are people like Samuel who seek to follow God’s will as they discern it. They may have hard lives and face great difficulties, and yet, they are at peace, because of their faith and conviction. There are also people like Jonah, who sense God’s guidance, yet who struggle and fight, making things much more difficult for themselves than they need to. Most of us, I suspect, are sometimes like Samuel, sometimes like Jonah.

Jonah (a silly pigeon), pretends not to hear God’s voice and goes sailing away on a ship, trying to steer his own course, unaware that he could not escape God’s presence. When a huge storm arises and his ship mates conclude that to appease the storm, they’d have to throw someone overboard, Jonah—out of concern for his fellow passengers--volunteers. To save them, he had himself tossed overboard. His actions saved the ship, and as it turned out, saved himself as well. Jumping into the storm Jonah met with the famous and compassionate whale. For, after an appropriate “time out” the compassionate whale spews Jonah to dry land—up onto shore. Jonah, the silly pigeon, is a new man, now willing to follow what he understood to be God’s command.

Many of us feel God calls us to something or another, in a general sense. But God's command for our Silly Pigeon was quite specific. In fact it was the specificity of the command that made Jonah run away. He did not like God's ideas. Jonah understood God to ask Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, to tell these people to repent of their violent ways, for if they did not, they would surely perish.

It's helpful, as we try to understand Jonah's motivation for going the *other direction* to realize why God's request was so distasteful to Jonah. Jonah was an Israelite. Nineveh was a city that he would have considered part of an "evil empire." The Assyrian empire was a serious threat to the very existence of the people of Israel. The Assyrians were land hungry, gobbling up their neighbors with well-trained, well-supplied armies... Archaeologists have uncovered monuments in which they picture themselves impaling and beheading the people they defeated.

God was asking *Jonah* to *save* these people by telling them to change their ways. But these people were evil personified in Jonah's mind. The Ninevites were like the Russians to the Americans during the Cold War.<sup>ii</sup> The Ninevites, whom God was asking Jonah to *save* from destruction, were in some ways like "terrorists" in many minds today—pure evil. Yes, Jonah seems silly to us, trying to run away from God, but many of us would be befuddled, too, *if we were asked to go tell people whom we consider "enemies" to change their ways*—not in order to protect ourselves, but so that *they* will not suffer bad consequences. On this Memorial Day week-end, when we honor those who have died in war, and thereby also think about past or present "enemies," we can perhaps empathize with Jonah—how much do we want those whom we label "enemies" to be spared from suffering?

The compassionate whale knocked some sense into Jonah, so that he does go on to where God had wanted him to—the huge city of Nineveh.

The city is so big it takes three days to walk across it. Jonah walks one day, not quite giving his all to reach the center. Jonah begrudgingly tells the people in earshot to repent of their warring ways because God is angry with them for their destructive behavior. Jonah's preaching might have been like this: (covering mouth with hand) "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown if you don't change your ways."<sup>iii</sup>

Lo and behold, much to his surprise, the people pay attention to him! They repent. The people of Nineveh believed Jonah about God's plea for them to stop their warring ways. They must have thought, "Who knows, maybe Jonah's God is compassionate. Maybe we'll be spared punishment if we do stop our wars."

Sure enough, as the story goes, God did have a change of heart. Nineveh would not be destroyed after all. How easy was that? What an effective prophet Jonah was! Wouldn't it be great if everything we set out to do were so successful? Well, our friend Jonah didn't like the results; he resented the fact that these "evil" people did what he told them to do. What a silly pigeon to be angry at the results of his own preaching! God showed the Ninevites mercy, just as God had shown mercy to Jonah. Jonah should have been happy—things were going well for him, but he didn't like God having mercy for those people.

In the world according to *Jonah*, God should have destroyed the town of Nineveh. That's what God had said God would do, so that's what should have happened. Luckily for *Nineveh*, we don't live in the world according to Jonah. We live in the world according to God, and God had other plans. That's the clue--*fairness!* The clue to the

*mystery* story of the Compassionate Whale and the Silly Pigeon is “*fairness*.” That’s what Jonah thought was most important. If you do something wrong, you’re punished. It’s fair that the bloodthirsty evil Ninevites should die. That’s why Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard, too—it was fair. He had run away from God—which is what seemed to have caused the storm, and since he was the cause, he should take the consequence. But God was—and is—often not fair. God errs on the side of compassion. God saved Jonah with the compassionate whale. And, just as Jonah *knew* would happen, God also saved the Ninevites! That’s why he ran away from God’s request to begin with. Jonah knew God. *Jonah knew God would be compassionate.*

The fate of Nineveh was not for Jonah to decide. When it comes to the fate of people and places, it’s really not up to any of us. We can to an extent determine our own destinies, but a big part of surrendering our will to God’s will is learning that most of the things that happen to us, or around us, are beyond our powers to control. One important thing we can do is to determine how we will *react* to these situations.

The final scenes show Jonah sitting at the edge of the city in the hot sun as he pouts and watches the Ninevites whom God has now spared because the Ninevites sought peace. Still caring for Jonah, since Jonah is hot, God makes a bush grow in order to shade Jonah, but shortly after that God makes the bush die. Predictably, Jonah is sad and angry at God for destroying the bush. Then, according to the story, God sits down and has a heart to heart talk with Jonah. God says, “I care for these 120,000 people who really ‘don’t know their right hand from their left.’ I labored over them and helped them to grow. You care so much about the bush that you didn’t even plant. Can’t you grasp how much more I would care about all those people whom I nurtured?”

Jonah went to Ninevah. But did Jonah remain a silly pigeon, holding onto his resentment and anger because God has such amazing compassion for *everybody*? Or, did Jonah, too, become compassionate?

**Karen: What a thriller this story is!**

You are so right. It is a thriller. We don’t know about Jonah’s decision—he is a fictitious person anyway. As with some movies today, we can choose the ending. We don’t know what Jonah did, but we can know more about ourselves. Our God sends us compassionate humans—or perhaps other creatures—when we’re acting like silly pigeons, to shake us up and to send us in the compassionate direction. This may mean that at times we have to face honestly our anger at God’s compassion for other people whom we had labeled as “enemies,” who have, remember, changed their ways, not only other parties in war, but even “ex spouses,” unfair bosses, children or parents who don’t understand us, even “the church” for not always being there. (I was impressed last night with all the hugs the Lakers and the Suns were giving each other after the Lakers won. Even the Suns’ coach was hugging lots of Lakers.)

I learned something about the birds in “dove” releases at huge events like the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Those birds are really white racing *pigeons*. Silly pigeons which hold onto anger and resentment toward those they consider enemies and doves which carry a branch of peace look so much alike from a distance. We ourselves may look like peaceful doves to others on the outside, even though inside ourselves we are more like a silly pigeon holding onto some resentment. **Another person’s good does not need to diminish our own, even if we think they don’t deserve it.** We have our own good to be grateful for. But if we find ourselves resentful or angry, for heaven’s sake

we don't need to get too down on ourselves—we can just call ourselves “silly,” and get on with the goodness of life. God offers so many second chances to choose love. Sometimes we need to take those second chances nine or ten times before we find ourselves really loving. That opportunity is both *thrilling and mysterious!*

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<sup>i</sup> Kathleen Farmer, “The Truthful Pigeon,” a sermon delivered at United Theological Seminary and printed in *Keeping in Touch* newsletter from the seminary. Much of the exegetical material in this sermon is derived from Farmer’s sermon.

<sup>ii</sup> Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* begins with a challenge of the Croatian author about embracing a cetnik. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 9.

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