

“God’s Vessel”
Jonah 1:1-6, 11-12, 17-2:10

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Like many of you, I consider myself an animal lover. I have always had pets and will probably have them for the rest of my life. I enjoy seeking out opportunities to go visit other kinds of animals—aquariums, zoos, wild animal parks, and farms. With the exception of snakes, which I have an irrational fear of, I could happily devote a day to watching animals at work and play, doing whatever it is they do, in their natural habitats. I’m not animal expert, and in fact I think some of my fascination of animals comes from not entirely understanding them.

I love that our planet is populated with so many different kinds of species of animals—all of living side-by-side but speaking different languages, living in different habitats, forming different families, and spending our days in different ways. In 2011 there was a census of all the species of animals on earth and they came up with 8.74 million species, give or take a million. That number is mind-boggling! I can't think of 8.74 million different anything in the world, let alone animals. This number, 8.74 million, puts into perspective for us that we are just one species in this world. There might be a lot of us, we might make a big impact on the environment, and we might be loud, but we are just one of 8.74 million other kinds of animals living here.

So much of our lives are spent with our own species—focused on human relationships and human work and our human families. We are in a unique position where we often get to decide whether or not there will be other species interacting in our days. If we don't like a particular kind of insect in our home, we get rid of it. If we don't like pets, we don't adopt one. If we don't like mosquitoes or bees or flies we stay inside in the summer or light a citronella candle on our patio. We build up our homes and offices with materials so strong that no other animal can possibly break through, unless they are invited in. And when one does find itself inside, be it a mouse or a lost squirrel, we often do everything

in our power to get it out again. Even though we are one of over 8 million species, by and large we know very little about our fellow animals and spend relatively little time with them.

It makes a certain amount of sense that we would stick to what is familiar and what we know best—ourselves. But it's helpful to remind ourselves that we are not the only ones inhabiting this planet. There are millions of other kinds of animals with different needs, different patterns, and a totally different perspective on life. We may speak different languages, but there is still much we can learn from animals—from observing them, from learning about them, and from protecting them from the harm we humans do to them and the rest of the environment.

I think our religious ancestors understood that we can learn from animals. Thousands of years ago humans lived more closely alongside more kinds of animals, and would have seen them as an integral part of their life rather than a choice or just a meal on their plate. This is reflected in the way that animals are woven throughout the Bible—they are integrated into stories of heroes and families and prophets and communities. There are 138 animal appearances throughout the Bible, but unless we are learning about Noah's Ark, today we don't spend a lot of time thinking about the animals in the Bible. In many ways we take their presence and their role for granted. So this month, we are reflecting on stories with animals in them. Sometimes the animal will be the hero, other times they will be the villain, but they might have something to teach us as we revisit familiar stories from their perspective.

In some instances in the Bible, animals speak or communicate with humans. Other times they are in the background, going about their business, as the human drama unfolds around them. There are also moments when animals are used by God to teach a human or group of humans a particular lesson. This is the case with Jonah. God told Jonah to go visit the people of Nineveh and give them a warning about their behavior. Jonah did not want to go so he ran away, on a ship. When storms followed him and threatened the safety of the boat, Jonah's shipmates tossed him overboard. It was then that a large fish, often described as a whale, swallowed Jonah up. He had nothing to do but sit in the belly of the fish and think about what he had done, or more accurately, not done.

After Jonah repents and promises to listen to God, the story says my favorite line: God spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on the dry land. God spoke to the fish! We always think about God speaking to people, about God speaking to *us*, but this one little line is our reminder that God also speaks to animals. Although it is not specified, I imagine that God also spoke to the fish *before* it swallowed Jonah. No matter what the movie *Jaws* says, I don't think it is normal behavior for a fish to swallow a human. So, I imagine there must have been a conversation out in the middle of the sea between God and the fish. It probably went a lot like the conversation God had with Jonah—God would have explained to the fish that there was a man, a prophet, who wasn't listening to God's instructions, and God needed the fish to help God teach Jonah a lesson.

For me, the fish adds an important element to the story. The fish is a humbling reminder to Jonah that God can move through anyone or anything. I imagine that part of the reason why Jonah was so brazen that he disobeyed God was that his ego had become inflated. Perhaps as his gifts of prophecy grew stronger as he became more comfortable in his work of speaking to crowds of people and interpreting God's will for them. The thing about prophets is that their gifts come from God—they are only as powerful as their connection to God is strong. Jonah likely started to think he was solely responsible for his own success; that he knew as much or more than God and no longer needed to listen to him. He challenged God's decisions and directions, thinking he could outsmart the holiest of holies, the one who created the whole world. Challenging God isn't bad—but I think it has to be a conversation. Jonah ran away, refusing to face God and refusing to find a resolution.

The fish is Jonah's reminder that what he was given was indeed a gift. It was Jonah's reminder that God can choose to use another creature just as easily as Jonah was chosen to do God's work. The fish is Jonah's reminder that when he starts to think he is more important than anyone else, even a fish can do the job he was once given. There is nothing too exotic about a big fish—especially from the inside of its belly. I don't think it was meant to be menacing or threatening of Jonah's life. Jonah was sentenced to sit and big still, surrounded by the fish, with nowhere to go. That is a very big lesson on

pride for him—God chose to speak through Jonah, and God can just as easily choose to speak through someone or something else.

For me, today, the fish that swallowed up Jonah as a favor to God offers me a different perspective. So often when we hear stories, even Bible stories, we relate to the main character—the hero doing the right thing or the slub who is can't seem to do anything right. We put ourselves in the center of the story and look out from that vantage point. There are certainly times in our lives when this is right—there are highs and lows when it feels like things are circling around our experiences or one particular moment. It feels like we are the hero or the main character playing out a role in our life. It feels like we are the Jonah with a big lesson to learn and like everyone around us is waiting for us to get it right.

But that is only some of the time. I think that on most of our days, we are more of a background character. We play a supporting role to the people in our lives as they take their turn with big moments and difficult decisions—learning the lessons of life and sometimes getting it right, sometimes failing spectacularly. I think on most days in our lives we are like the fish—God is talking to us and using us to help others, but we aren't necessarily center-stage. Sometimes we are in the background, helping out, trying to listen. Sometimes, we are called to play a role in someone else's story. I like that Jonah isn't the only character in the story—I like the fish's steadfast presence, working quietly, not always noticed but still important. Jonah may have eventually learned to listen to God, but it wouldn't have been as memorable with out the large fish to swallow him up.

The fish reminds me that it isn't always about me. By using a fish, we are taught that it isn't even all about us humans. There are other animals at play. There are other characters in the story of our world. We are but one perspective. We are but one way that God is talking to and through us. That fish reminds me that even if you don't say a word, you can make a very big impact.

So this month we are taking a look at the animals in the Bible. They might not come to mind as easily as Jonah or Noah or Jesus or Paul, but as we saw from the large fish, they still have a lot to say.

They still have a lot to teach us, and God still has a lot to teach us through them, if we will only take the time to listen.