


The Signs of Jonah



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Catherine: As soon as mention is made of the book of Jonah, the question always arises as to its character: Is it an historical account or an extended parable? If it is considered history, the book itself places the story in the time of Jeroboam II, in the eighth century B.C. The reference is in II Kings where Jonah the son of Amittai is mentioned as a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II. If that is not the actual historical setting, it is at least the setting the later author of the parable intends us to imagine. Israel is at the zenith of her power as a nation. All is not well from God's point of view, as the prophet Amos makes quite clear. A sense of national well-being and power was paramount; justice and righteousness had been lost in the euphoria.

If the account is a parable in its totality, then its actual historical setting is about the time of Ezra, when those who returned from Exile and attempted to rebuild the nation were smitten with the same sort of narrow nationalism that had also characterized, for different reasons, the time of Jeroboam.

In other words, there is a sufficient commonality of settings that, to some degree, the arguments about the type of literature the book is are irrelevant in order to see what it is saying both to Israel and to us.

In fact, we might suspect that a great deal of the arguments about historicity are means of avoiding dealing with the message of the book. After all, if we argue about that, then the matter is settled once we have a firm opinion on the basic issue of date and authorship. We forget that the book, regardless of its form of literature, is the Word of God to us, and we must take it seriously. Our avoidance may be due to the unconscious realization that our culture—in which we are called to be the People of God—may resemble entirely too closely the setting in which Jonah finds himself.

Justo: As we look at the book of Jonah as a whole, one thing that immediately strikes us is the role that animals play in it. The most famous is the great fish, which had become a whale by the time the Hebrew text was translated into Greek and thus passed into the New Testament reference in the Gospel of Matthew. But just as important for the entire story of the book is the worm in chapter 4, which God appointed to eat the plant that was sheltering Jonah. And it is also significant that the last word of the entire book is "cattle," or perhaps in a better translation, "beasts."

But the most remarkable episode dealing with animals in this book appears in chapter 3, in which the king of Nineveh decrees: "Let neither human nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let human and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God." What the text literally says is that it was not only people but even animals that were covered with sackcloth and were ordered to call on God. The

universality of God's love in the book of Jonah has often been remarked. But what we often miss is that this universality extends even beyond the people of Nineveh and includes the cattle and the beasts.

Justo: (Jonah 1: 1-2) “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’”

Nineveh was the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire—an empire so powerful that at its height, it even held sway over Egypt. It was an empire built on conquest, blood, and pillage. According to their own inscriptions, the Assyrians boasted of the cruelty with which they dealt with their enemies, deporting them *en masse* into slavery, mutilating or impaling their leaders, sacking and destroying their cities, and in general destroying any who could cast the slightest shadow on their power and supposed glory.

It is one of many such episodes that is told in II Kings 17: 6, 24.

In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in Halah, on the Harbor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. . . . The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and dwelt in its cities.

If there was an evil empire in Old Testament times, it was the Assyrian Empire. And Nineveh was its capital.

At the time in which the author places the call and work of Jonah, this last event had not yet taken place. But many similar calamities had already been brought upon the neighboring countries by the rising Assyrian power. Therefore, it is not surprising that God tells Jonah that the wickedness of Nineveh has reached to heaven. Nor is it surprising that the prophet would much rather not go to Nineveh, although, as we shall see later, not for reasons one might most readily assume.

So, the prophet goes to Joppa, not on his way to Nineveh, but on the contrary. He is called to go east. And he proposes to take a ship to the westernmost corner of known world.

The city of Joppa, now Jaffa, plays an important role in another biblical episode. In Acts 9 and 10 we are told that Simon Peter was at Joppa when he had a strange vision and a strange call.

He was a Jew. But not a regular Jew. He was a Galilean, and as such already suspect of not keeping to Jewish tradition as strictly as those in Jerusalem. In more recent times, he had followed another Galilean, and he and those others who had followed Jesus were now under threat of persecution. If there was anything he would rather not do, it was to antagonize any further those who watched over the religious purity of Israel.

And now he is called to go visit a centurion. An officer of the evil empire whose general had desecrated the Temple by riding his horse into the Holy of Holies; an officer who had the right to demand that any Jew carry his burden for a mile; an officer of the empire that had crucified Jesus.

But, instead of seeking a ship for Tarshish, Peter invited in the guests who brought the call from Cornelius, and the next day he rose and went off with them; and when he met him he declared himself ready to break the law for the sake of obedience to God and he said, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection." And the result is that the young church rediscovers what old Israel had already been told in the book of Jonah: "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." (Acts 11: 18).

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But it was not so with Jonah. He had no wish to be a prophet. At least, he had no wish to be a prophet to that evil Assyrian Empire. So, he took a ship for Tarshish, hoping to escape from the calling and the presence of God: "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord." But he must not have known the 139th Psalm. For, had he known it, and believed it, he would have known how futile his flight was.

Catherine: The rest of chapter 1 includes some very interesting narrative. The ship is manned by sailors who are not part of the People of God. A terrible storm arises, and the sailors begin to pray, each to his own god. Meanwhile, Jonah is sleeping.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." (Jonah 1: 4-6)

Clearly the sailors had no idea why the storm had come, but Jonah might represent a different god than the rest of them, so they wanted his prayers too. Surely Jonah was not sleeping the sleep of the righteous. Perhaps he was so relieved to have gotten away that he did not notice the storm. Remember Jesus with the disciples in the storm on the Sea of Galilee: (Mark 4: 35-41)? Jesus was sleeping while all the disciples were afraid and they finally woke him with the words "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" In the case of Jesus, the disciples had good reason to expect that Jesus's presence among them could mean their salvation, and indeed it did, since he was the Lord whom even the sea and the winds obeyed. The case of Jonah was quite the opposite. His presence was hardly positive for those who were with him.

The sailors on Jonah's ship probably did not assume he had any particular authority, but they too wondered if he cared about what happened to the ship. When he realized they were in the midst of a storm, surely Jonah knew that he had not escaped God at all. God is lord of all creation, the heavens, the earth, all that is on the earth, the sea, and all that is in the sea. Jonah

probably woke up with the thought, "O no, it didn't work." No wonder he preferred to sleep.

But he does not say anything.

The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. (Jonah 1: 6-16)

Once the lot has been cast, all possibility of escape for Jonah has disappeared. He has been found out.

Jonah is no coward, however, at least now that the finger has been pointed at him. He has placed many innocent people in great danger because of his faithlessness. The storm and the fall of the lot makes that clear to him. He also was aware that his attempt to escape from God

had been futile. Interesting that he does not at this point repent and agree to go to Nineveh. But at least he does not want the rest of the ship to sink on his account.

So, he tells them to throw him overboard. He evidently preferred death to repentance. The sailors, however, are not so quick to follow his suggestion. They had been convinced that Jonah's God had a great deal of authority over the sea. Perhaps they were afraid that, were they to kill Jonah, his God would be angry with them. They tried to row to safety, but their attempt was to no avail.

The sailors, preparing finally to throw Jonah overboard, prayed to Jonah's God, asking that his blood, if it is innocent blood, not be charged to them. Jonah has been a witness to the God of Israel in this strange situation, even when he refused to be one in Nineveh.

God has called a People to be witnesses, declaring the will and purpose and glory of God to all of the nations. Jonah was such a witness and refused his mission. But he became a witness despite himself, but only when he acknowledged his disobedience.

We, too, are called to be witnesses. We, too, are often unfaithful in that task. But our acknowledgement of our disobedience can also be a witness to many, when God's judgment upon us is confessed. This chapter makes clear that if we are called to be God's witnesses, we

cannot evade the task. Even our attempt to evade will force us to confess God's purposes that are clarified in judgment when they are not willingly acknowledged.

What is also clear is that our faithlessness can bring great danger, not only upon us but also upon those with whom we are involved, even those outside of the faith. God's purpose in choosing a People is not merely for the sake of that people but for the sake of the world. The damage that is done by faithlessness is not only to ourselves or to the church as an institution but is to the wider world for whose sake we were chosen and called.

Towards the end of the Book of Acts, there is a very interesting event in the life of Paul that both parallels and reverses the story of Jonah, even as Peter paralleled and reversed Jonah's disobedience.

In Acts 27, we have the account of Paul's trip to Rome because of his appeal to Caesar. Paul is on a ship because of his obedience to God rather than as a means of escape from God. He boards, having told the ship owner that a storm will destroy the ship, but the owner does not pay any attention to this prisoner. They sail, and the storm does come. The ship is so storm-tossed that the cargo has to be thrown overboard. The storm lasts for days, and all hope is lost. Then we read these words

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the

ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island." (Acts 27: 21-26).

It does happen in that way. Paul's faithfulness saves those who are not part of the people of God even as Jonah's disobedience puts them in danger. We are part of the whole fabric of the wider world, and neither our obedience nor our disobedience has effects only upon us.

Somehow the image we now have of our planet as "spaceship earth" reinforces this. We are all in the same boat, and our actions or inactions—our faithfulness or unfaithfulness—has a profound effect on the rest of those with whom we travel.

Jonah, evidently preferring to perish than to obey, has been cast into the sea. The sea calms; the sailors are so grateful that they offer sacrifices to the God of Israel. Jonah had been effective in a strange way, for now these sailors are praying to the God of Israel. But the story does not end there. God will not take even this as final: "But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17).

Enter the great fish. Jonah cannot escape. Evidently, he is sufficiently frightened by this event, or else he determines it is quite hopeless to try any further, but for whatever reason, after three days and three nights, he turns to God in prayer, calling for help and deliverance. Repentance may finally have set in. It is difficult to attribute Jonah's change of heart to fear. After all, this is

the same man who told the sailors to throw him overboard. I'm not sure that the experience with the fish would be more terrifying. But the inescapability of God would be clear. The 139th Psalm, which we sang included these words: "If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!" Jonah had tried it. He had been willing to die to escape God. But he discovered that the psalmist was quite right. God was there as well.

"And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon dry land." (Jonah 2:10). That episode is now over. And while Jonah begins to recover from his ordeal, let us gather at the separate tables.

Discuss: To what place or people would we be unwilling to be sent as witnesses?

Justo: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying: 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message that I tell you.' (Jonah 2: 1-2). This time Jonah did obey the call of God. It is not clear from the text that he did this very willingly. Actually, according to the next chapter he was still not convinced that this was something he wanted to do. But by now it must have been obvious to him that God was not going to let him off that easily and that he must fulfill his calling, no matter how disagreeable it might be to him.

So, he goes to Nineveh and starts preaching the message that God had given him. And here we come up with another peculiarity of the book of Jonah. Here is a successful prophet. More often

than not the prophets of the Bible were rejected by the people to whom they were sent. Jesus himself spoke of Jerusalem stoning prophet sent to her and saw his own rejection and crucifixion as part of that continuing history.

But here we have exactly the opposite. The text seems to indicate that the city had forty days before its destruction. And yet, after the first day of Jonah's preaching, the people of Nineveh believed God. According to the text, "the people of Nineveh believed God." This does not mean that they became believers in God or that they were converted to Judaism. It means rather that they gave credence to the message God had given the prophet. They did this "from the greatest of them to the least of them." From the king, who proclaimed a fast, to the beasts, who also fasted and wore sackcloth.

Catherine: The text is quite specific:

Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the kings and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (Jonah 3:7-9).

Surely there is no intention to say that the animals also needed to repent. John Calvin stresses these verses, and his interpretation is very helpful. Inasmuch as the animals always suffer from human sin—whether viewed as specific acts or as the "Fall of creation" that is implied in Genesis—here the animals are also part of human repentance; that will change their lot as well.

Human sin affects more than human beings. We have such great impact on the whole of creation that our responsibility for the rest of the world is great. This is part of what is meant by humanity having dominion over the earth. We have power, as a species, but our sin has meant that all of creation suffers because of us. Whether it is nuclear war we consider, or pesticides, whether it is the method of producing meat, or animals used for experimentation, our effect as a species is astonishing. Forests are removed, and species die. Dams are built, and other creatures must adapt or disappear. The condition of the human heart matters for all of the world. Sin makes a difference to the whole world. We are beginning to realize that.

Paul writes to the Romans: "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." (Romans 8:19). And no wonder it waits. Human redemption makes a difference to the whole creation. And so the animals, who have had to suffer because of human sin, wear the garb and endure the signs of human repentance. If such redemption occurs, it will make an enormous difference to them.

Justo: In some ways, the most surprising thing in the entire book of Jonah is not the big fish, nor the little worm, nor the mighty storm, nor the dry sirocco. It is rather the repentance of Nineveh. A repentance so astounding, that even the animals are said to be part of it. Who would have believed that the evil empire of Assyria was capable of' repentance? Who would have believed that God could forgive such an evil empire? It is almost easier to believe in the

whale, and the worm, and the animals crying to God, than in the evil Nineveh repenting and being loved by God.

According to the book of Jonah, when God saw that the people of Nineveh repented, God decided not to punish the city. Any Hebrew reading the story in later times would know that this was not the whole story, for eventually God did destroy the city. But the important point for the author of the book of Jonah is that even a city such as Nineveh, whose evil was proverbial and would eventually lead to its destruction, that even such a city could hear the Word of God and repent.

Much later, Jesus would speak of the "sign of' Jonah." In Matthew 12: 38 - 42, he is quoted as saying,

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!

And very similar words appear in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11, except that in this other case there is no mention of the three days and nights.

It is interesting that when we as Christians think of the reference of Jesus to the sign of Jonah, all we think about is the single reference to the three days and nights in Matthew and seem to ignore the words about the Ninevites in both Matthew and Luke. If we take those words seriously, the sign of Jonah is not simply the parallel between the time in the belly of the fish and the time between the death and the resurrection of Jesus. It is also the astounding fact that those who were not supposed to be believers, the people of no less than the capital of the evil Assyrian Empire, were ready to repent of their wickedness. The sign of Jonah is that the publicans and the harlots are going into the Kingdom ahead of those who are supposed to be leaders of the People of God but who refuse to listen.

The sign of Jonah is the attitude of unbelievers that puts to shame those who profess belief. It is also the sign of the queen of Sheba who comes from afar to learn the wisdom of Solomon, in contrast to the people around Jesus, who refuse to learn from Him.

The sign of Jonah is the Centurion Cornelius sending for Peter. It is the earliest church hearing, despite of all its prejudices, that "to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." And part of that sign—the part that we may be most reluctant to hear—is that Jonah himself is not ready to see and accept that sign.

Catherine: The underlying theme of the whole account does not become clear until the beginning of chapter 4. Only then are we told why Jonah had been so reluctant to go to

Nineveh. He was not afraid that they might harm him—that excuse might have made some sense under the circumstances. Nor was he simply unwilling to be a prophet: According to II Kings, Jonah was already a prophet, with no reluctance recorded, as long as he did not have to go to Nineveh. Nor is Jonah concerned that the task is too great and not possible, and he did not wish to set out on an impossible mission only to fail.

Chapter 4 clarifies Jonah's problem with the mission. He was quite sure that if God wanted Nineveh to repent, then they would. He was afraid his mission would be successful. He did not want Nineveh saved. He would gladly see them destroyed, for after all, they were the major enemy of Israel. They deserved destruction, after all they had done. Why should he try to save them? And so, Jonah sulks, angry with God.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. (Jonah 4:1 – 5).

Jonah had great faith in God—that is, that God could turn the Ninevites from their sin. He also was well acquainted with the merciful character of God who does not wish to destroy but rather to save. He knows that God's love extends far beyond Israel. He believed in the power and mercy of God—and he did not like it.

Jonah is at least more honest than most of us. We, too, know of God's mercy and power. We, too, say that no one is beyond the redemptive power of God. Rarely would we be so bold as to say that we specifically did not want to be involved in any such redemptive activity. We might act that way, however. Jonah is clear about his feelings. Jonah is speaking with God in prayer, which is very interesting. Jonah has faith, in the sense of belief in God's intentions. He, however, does not like those intentions. More often than we like to admit, our faith is of that character. It is not faith mixed with doubt, but faith in what God wants is in a struggle with what we want, and what we want has our higher allegiance.

Jonah is so angry that he would like to die. After his experience with the shipwreck, he now at least asks God to take his life. For him it would be better to die than to live. And we need to have a little sympathy for Jonah. We know his sentiments. He really hoped Nineveh would be destroyed. And now he himself has been the major instrument in Nineveh's survival. If news of this reaches home, or if he goes back and says anything about where he has been and what he has been doing, how likely is he to have any congratulations on the success of his mission?

Jonah was not unrepresentative of his neighbors, whether eighth-century Israelites or fourth-century returnees. His work would not likely be appreciated by the others. That is hardly a hopeful prospect. Jonah has been forced by God to go against his own hopes, but he has not agreed to God's plans. And now, what future is there for him? He hates himself and expects, probably rightly, that those who agree with him will also hate him.

And so he sulks and builds a little hut outside the city to see what would happen. Perhaps he hopes that God will change and realize the total reasonableness of Jonah's position and destroy the city after all. Perhaps he hopes that the repentance of the city will be so short-lived that there will be good reason to destroy the city after all, for surely such an evil place as Nineveh could not really change. They are evil to the core, and God should destroy them.

Faith is more than believing that there is a God. James says that "Even the demons believe, and shudder." (James 2:19). Faith is more than acknowledging certain characteristics of God, such as God's love and mercy, even that love and mercy seen in the work of Christ. Somehow, what we learn from this brief book, is that true faith has to do with supporting the purposes of God, being willing to work for those purposes rather than the ones held by an unconverted heart. It means risking the work for the goals of God despite the fact that we will most likely be thought strange or dangerous by those who live by different goals. Jonah was not yet faithful. God still had more to do with him. And God begins the dialogue with a question: "Do you do well to be angry?" That was a very basic question that got to the heart of the matter. But Jonah went out and sulked, waiting to see what would happen.

Justo: "And the Lord God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head." Believe it or not, in the early church this plant created more controversy than did the whale. The old Greek translation, and the Latin based on it, called the plant a "gourd" or a "cucumber." In the fourth century, Jerome, the great scholar who produced a new

translation from the Hebrew into Latin, translated the word as an "ivy." Soon Augustine, who in any case did not like Jerome's translation, wrote to him, telling him of an argument that had ensued in a church in North Africa. When the bishop read Jerome's new translation, some who knew the text by heart, and who had grown used to the plant being a "gourd," protested. Soon there was a near riot in the church. The bishop, afraid of losing his congregation, consulted some of the Jews in the city, who erroneously told him that the plant was in fact a gourd. By then the matter had reached the city of Rome, and there too were screams and protests over Jerome's tampering with Scripture. Thus were churches divided. It was almost as if there were two parties, the "gourdites," and the "ivyites," and anything that a member of one party said was immediately contradicted by the other.

It would have been funny were it not that it was in itself such a blatant contradiction or the very message of the book of Jonah. In that book, we are told that God cares even for the Ninevites, who do not believe in God. And now here are Christians in the fourth century going at each other's throats over the all-important question of whether the plant was a gourd or an ivy. And likewise, there are Christians in the twentieth century going at each other's throats over the all-important question of whether the book is factual or not and rejecting each other with as much vigor as Jonah wished to reject the Ninevites.

In such cases, it may be well to follow Calvin's example, who comments on the passage: "Jonah tells us that a gourd, or a cucumber, or an ivy, was prepared by the Lord."

The point of this part of the story is precisely that it was an insignificant plant. And, if Jonah was so distressed by the destruction of such a plant, would not God be ever more distressed by the destruction of Nineveh?

But then comes the final surprise of the book of Jonah—a surprise that should be no surprise for those who have read the Bible carefully. The reason why God shows such great concern for Nineveh is not its power, achievements, or its king, but rather its children—the 120,000 who do not know their right hand from their left—and its beasts. Those for whom God shows this preferential concern are precisely those who, while suffering the brunt of whatever Nineveh might do or not do, are not really the ones responsible for such actions, nor the ones with the power to determine them.

As we now look at the eventual fate of Nineveh, or any of the great civilizations of the past, we mourn their passing glory, their fallen buildings, their forgotten achievements. But this strange God of the Bible is not so much concerned about Nineveh's achievements, or its glory, or its king, as God is for its children and its beasts!

Thus, if Nineveh is able to stand for a while longer, it is not for the sake of its own grandeur, nor by the power of its armies, but rather for the sake of those who from Nineveh's own perspective would seem to count least—the children and the beasts. If any empire is allowed to stand, it is not for the sake of its emperor, its armies, and its riches, but rather for the sake of its

children, its poor people, and its beasts. As the book of Jonah sees it, the security of Nineveh is in its children and its beasts. And from that perspective, the security of this nation is not in its generals and admirals, but in its children; not in the Pentagon, but in the homes where millions live who have little say in what is going on; not in Wall Street, but in Harlem, not its millions of acres devoted to agribusiness but in the animals that we are so quick to slaughter for the sake of so-called progress. And if the Soviet Union still stands, it is not because of the Kremlin, but because of the babushkas and their grandchildren. And, if God shows special concern for the church, it is primarily because of what we do or not do at 475 Riverside Dr. or at 341 Pance de Leon Ave., nor even because of our great and prestigious churches and pulpits but rather because of the mission still to be done, because of the justice still to be proclaimed, because of the poor, and the oppressed, and the hungry who are the object of God's preferential care. And the counterpart of this is also true. If Jonah is angry for the plant, how much more will God be angry if the 120,000 children and the beasts of Nineveh are destroyed; how much more will God be angry if the millions in Ethiopia and Mozambique are not fed; how much more will God be angry if the people called to be God's prophetic voice do nothing for the salvation of those millions of Blacks oppressed in South Africa; how much more will God be angry if in our rush to save ourselves, our civilization, our freedom, our security, our way of life, we destroy the beasts that are also part of God's creation—the beasts that, as Calvin said, bear the consequences of our sin?

In the book of Jonah, the last word is that of God's love for those that would otherwise not seem to count. And no matter whether Jonah is a historical book or not, it may well be true that in the book of God's history, the last word is again God's love for the last and the least.

Catherine: We might wonder whether Jonah ever understood and adhered to God's perspective on the matter. The story ends without telling us. The point that was made to Jonah was intended also for the readers, and what mattered was whether or not they agreed with God or with Jonah. That remains our situation as well.

God had asked earlier if Jonah did well to be angry. Then, in these last verses he asks if Jonah does well to be angry about the loss of the plant. Jonah still maintains that he has every right to be angry, so angry that he wishes to die.

God's response is interesting. Jonah has pity on the plant, and that had been a gratuitous event that helped him. He had not planned for it or worked for it. Yet he was angry when it died. The parallel is clear. God has created the whole world, and he has continued to work with it and for it. God is concerned for the world, not because it does something for God but because God loves it and has put a great deal of investment into it as it should be. Jonah had thought he knew all about mercy and power. But here he learns something else. God has worked and worked hard; God has been involved and concerned about this world. This is the reason for Jonah's mission. And that is the reason for ours as well.

If we are honest with ourselves, we do not always agree with what God wants in the world. It cuts across our prejudices and our plans. But it is more than a struggle of wills. God is ultimately concerned about the world for reasons that are greater than our reasons for our plans. When we come to the Incarnation and the cross, we see even more dramatically the length to which this God goes in order to redeem a wayward creation.

Our task, as those who bear the name and the sign of Christ, the one greater than Jonah who dedicated all of his life and being to the fulfillment of the plans of God—is to commit our lives to those plans knowing that it is out of God's great love that such plans have been made. Our calling is to be different from Jonah, in that we shape our lives to the plans of God which are for the good of the whole creation.

