

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

**Why I Am Convinced That Jonah Lives Yet
in the Belly of the Great Fish**

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In the book of Jonah we are told that God had had it with the people of Nineveh. The book of Nahum describes Nineveh as a “burden.” In Nahum 2:13 the Lord God is reported to have said, “Woe to the Bloody City! It is all full of lies and robbery.” And a bit further on: Behold, I am against thee, saith the Lord of hosts And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee from thee, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her? Whence shall I seek comforters for thee?”

It is to Nineveh, this abomination created by humankind, that God sends Jonah. One day, the word of the Lord comes upon Jonah, and the message is this: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.”

Jonah agrees with the Lord, for the people of Nineveh are his proclaimed enemy, the enemy of Israel. Nonetheless, Jonah resists the Lord’s mandate. And, really, who can blame him? The people of Nineveh are known for their inhumanity. He

takes a ship to Tarshish and hides himself in the midst of the ship's sailors in an effort to flee the Lord's directive.

And the Lord is not pleased. And we all know what happened then: "The Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken." These men of the sea cast their wares into the sea in an effort to lighten their load and secure, they hope, their survival. Meanwhile, below deck, Jonah lies sleeping. The shipmaster goes to him and tells him to get up and call upon his Lord to save them all. The sailors, suspicious that some one among them has made the Lord unhappy, conclude that Jonah is the culprit, for he had told them prior to the storm's occurrence that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. They plead with him to tell them how to appease his God, the God of the Hebrews. He tells them to throw him overboard, for he has brought this trial upon them.

Well, these sailors of the sea don't really want to do that, so they try to reach land with Jonah on board—but to no avail. The power of the storm is too great. So they "took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging."

And this is how Jonah came to be swallowed, as the Bible says—by a great fish—and there he stayed for three days and three nights where "the depth closed [him] round about." There, his "soul fainted within [him]" and he remembered the Lord, from whom he had been fleeing. He prays and is granted salvation, whereupon the Lord reminds

him that there is work to be done in Nineveh. So he goes. Three days later, arriving in Nineveh, he cries out to the people: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

Unlike Jonah, the people of Nineveh hear, listen, and respond the first time to the Lord’s message. Instructed by their king to fast, to replace their fine clothing with sack-cloth, to turn from their evil ways and from violence, they choose to “cry mightily unto God.” They fear God’s “fierce anger” and they repent.

And God repents as well, and the people of Nineveh are saved.

Now, you would think Jonah would have been pleased with his accomplishment. He had done the Lord’s bidding and done it well. But--no. The Bible says, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.” Remember: Nineveh is a powerful city and Jonah has been its enemy. *The fact, though, that he has swayed the Ninevites to repent does not sway him to think of them as other than his enemy. They remain other. His mind harbors anger, not visions of justice.*

He becomes childishly sulky. He goes outside the city, makes himself a spot in the shade, and waits to see what the Lord will do to the city. Mad that the Lord has not destroyed the city, he declares he’d rather die than live. While he’s sitting outside the city, sulking, God gives him a gourd—a fast-growing plant—for shade. By and by a worm comes along and destroys the gourd. Jonah becomes even angrier.

Eventually, because Jonah has failed to get the point, God has to forgo these experiential lessons and spell things out for him: He tells Jonah that as God has shown Jonah compassion—saving him from the big fish, giving him a gourd—so is he to feel compassion for others. The Lord says, “Should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” Granted, it’s not a very flattering statement, but it does lift up compassion.

Jonah was given an opportunity to evolve spiritually, to allow himself to be guided by the intelligence of empathy and the importance of compassion, to foster justice through the humane treatment of others, and he chose instead to think of himself and his hatred and his anger. When we reject compassion as Jonah does here, we do so for many reasons: fear, indifference, disgust, incuriosity, righteousness. Compassion, in the end, is not the end itself.

You have to wonder: How did this guy merit a chapter in the Bible?

For me, the answer is this: Maybe he did or maybe he didn’t. Certainly, Jonah’s lesson is one I have had to learn more than once. But the insights we are to glean from the story did merit a chapter in the Bible.

As with all such fantastic stories, such myths, we need not believe in this one to gain from it. If you go online you’ll find that lots and lots of people spend time trying to determine

what kind of a fish swallowed Jonah. They want to prove the truth of Jonah's experience. But the point here (our epiphany, not Jonah's) transcends the necessity of facts. Myth does not invest itself in verifiable facts; it invests itself in revealing insights that teach us how to live; that does not make it lesser; such a story provides insight into what it means to be a human being on a spiritual journey. Here, Jonah reminds us of our vulnerability, our ability to despise individuals whom we do not know. The Lord's thinking on this occasion reflects the Buddhist belief in Great Compassion, the notion that we should be as willing to offer compassion to strangers as we are to family and friends. It is the belief that we are all connected, one to another, as Marc Ian Barasch puts it—me in you, you in me.

Such a story offers much to ponder symbolically. I wonder: By what is Jonah swallowed? Literally—darkness—the fish's belly; metaphorically—darkness. Jonah disappears into the dark and cavernous belly of this creature whose home is the depths of the sea. Layers of darkness encase Jonah, who prays as the ocean's currents and the fish's might move him into the vast unknown that will offer up its secrets and truths only to those willing to surrender to the promise of understanding through connection. His is an opportunity to plumb the depths of his inner self, to know his demons.

Clearly, God thinks Jonah needs some time to think. In this place Jonah certainly suffers, his head wrapped in the seaweed of confusion, his outer vision stymied by the absence of light, his inner vision struggling. As this fish—let's just call it a whale—swims through the sea, rises to the

water's surface, breaks through to light and air, Jonah prays. In this moment there waits great potential.

In the end, Jonah wasn't in there long enough. Christ went into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights and emerged transformed, determined to share his wisdom with humanity. Jonah—not so much.

Though God forgives the Ninevites their sins, Jonah—despite his journey—cannot. He wants a fire and brimstone kind of conclusion. He who is the messenger, who survived the belly of the whale, does not yet comprehend the depth of the message. He who is the messenger must receive further instruction. And God's message is one he does not wish to hear: the people of Nineveh deserve compassion and just treatment. Whereas Jonah believes them undeserving (after all they were his enemy and heathens to boot), God declares them deserving.

God shows Jonah the way: He is to share God's desire to heal humanity, to foster justice. He is to connect with his enemy by seeing the equality that exists in their shared humanity. Such a moment of empathy has the potential to dissolve the division between the Ninevites and the Hebrew nation. Such a moment of empathy could allow for an actual encounter, minus antagonism, to occur. Such a moment of empathy makes possible compassion: the alleviation of the pain of another—in this case, *the other*—someone whom Jonah is unlike, someone he neither understands nor cares for. God, it is important to note, shows compassion not only to the

repentant people of Nineveh but also to their many cattle, who are also deserving.

That was a long time ago, when Jonah was swallowed by a big fish in the midst of a big storm. Despite the passage of centuries, humanity, like Jonah, has yet to get the message. I wasn't actually familiar with the rest of the story—Jonah's anger, his petulance—until Reverend Rohde pointed me toward it. In this chapter of the Bible we are shown a man who does not complete his spiritual quest. The story of Jonah doesn't even tell us if, in the end, Jonah finally understands God's message. The chapter ends with God's words, not Jonah's acceptance and understanding. Did understanding come or does the Lord wait yet for Jonah to find his way into empathy and compassion? I will hope he found his way, for if I hope for Jonah, I find hope for myself and for the whole of humanity.

Today, as we find our way into the 21st century, we argue yet about who is deserving and who is undeserving. As human beings, we are yet as Jonah was: too often unable to get close to those we do not know and cannot, therefore, understand. We live in a world that chooses war over peace, that rejects the empathetic, compassionate way that God bid Jonah follow. Jonah's choice maintains division and makes impossible harmony and healing. We teach people to think critically, but we expect them to function empathetically and compassionately as a matter of course. We hold the emotions alongside reason and see not the potential of their intelligence but fear of the possibility that they will lead us astray. We argue about how long and high we should build

the fences that further divide us. The God of Jonah sought unity, not division; the God of Jonah believed in compassion.

The story of Jonah offers us the gift of an insight. It offers us knowledge that is reliable not for its factual status but for its wisdom, which lived then as it lives now—unquestionably valid, undeniably reliable.

We here at Augustana are surrounded by the potential for such insight: here on this campus we swim as one and as many through our days, seeking those bright moments when we emerge from our individual journeys to breathe one with the other.

If we are lucky, we will do better than Jonah. We will thrust ourselves mindfully into the minute details of this place, connecting with the world and the people around us as we seek healing and justice for ourselves and for the planet.

This year, our 150th, we must seek insight as we look to the past to imagine our future. We must know ourselves fully within this community that strives to be ethical and caring in its day-to-day life. Toward that end, Paul and I—chapel and chair of moral values—will begin in a few weeks, to go on walk-about. In early October, Paul will ask us to breathe in the insights that reveal the inner world of Bergsaker, a whale of a dorm, furnished with the promise of flourishing, a place we will visit so that its place in our spiritual evolution can be contemplated. Kay Christianson of the library will ask us to contemplate the beauty of the sculptures affixed to the back

wall of Mikkelsen Library: what vision went into their making? what insight might we internalize if we allow ourselves to encounter their promise. In late October I am going to take us to the grove of crabapple trees that fill our campus each spring with the scent of beauty and the promise of new beginnings and fruitful endings. And new beginnings and fruitful endings. God speaks to us in many ways, through places and creatures and people, through plants and rocks and sky.

To Jonah the Lord gave an insight. Jonah's choice, as he stood within it, before it, was his: to connect with other—his enemy, the Ninevite—or not. To choose to stir the interior life or not.

I hope you will walk with us into the belly of Augustana College, where there is much to be contemplated and known.

The body of Christ given for you.

The compassion of God bless you.

SERVICE TRAVEL –Service includes local involvements and advocacy and travel to such places as Pine ridge Reservation (fall break), New York city and other storm stricken parts of the country through Lutheran Disaster Response. **There will be an informational meeting on Tues., Sept. 28th in the Chapel Narthex at 10 am.**

BANQUET – Campus Ministry is serving the Banquet, the local downtown soup kitchen, on **Fri., Oct. 15th**. There is a sign-up sheet on the Narthex table. The food prep shift is from 2-4 pm, and the serving shift starts at 5:15 pm. We will be doing some car pooling if you need a ride to the Banquet, which is on 8th St. and Weber Ave.

CIA - Catholics in Action - There will be a Pizza Party in the Chapel Narthex on Thurs., Sept. 30th. Come and get acquainted and meet the new Director, Ann Sechser, a '01 Augie grad! **Everyone is welcome!**

CAMPUS MINISTRY INVOLVEMENT – There are many ways to be involved in campus ministry. Please fill out the sheets on the Narthex table and return them to the chapel office.

OUTREACH – Groups of students lead worship and youth retreats across the region. A great way to get acquainted with a smaller group of students of all ages with a modest time commitment. Applications on the table in the chapel Narthex.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Thursday (23 rd)	Ignation Prayer Retreat, 10 am
Friday (24 th)	Worship, 10 am – Rachel Hurley, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (26 th)	Worship, 11 am – Ben Eisele
Monday (27 th)	Morning Prayer, 10 am
Wednesday (29 th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Pres. Rob Oliver
Thursday (30 th)	CIA Pizza Party - 5 pm - chapel Narthex