

I had to do a little work to come up with an angle on the Jonah story that wouldn't be totally old news. So bear with me. Certainly one of the main points of the story is that God loves everybody, good, bad and ugly, whether they realize it or not. But that's not new news, so I gazed at the text for a while and started thinking, Why did the author make this story funny? Why did the author decide, "I will tell a story that shows how God loves everybody, and the way to give it the right amount of zing is to make it funny"? And I decided—and here's where I'll try to do some persuading—that it's because any time we tell a story, there's a sense in which we're telling our own story.

In Biblical hermeneutics scholars used to try to be completely objective. Now we realize that we can't achieve that, and it's better to know and acknowledge up front what your lived experience and social location are, so as to avoid pretending that what you are about to say is unassailable. That's an insight we got from feminist scholars, queer scholars, scholars from the global south, scholars of color—everybody comes from somewhere, and everybody interprets texts from where they sit. Everybody tells a story from where they sit.

Here's an example. In my ethics class on Monday, a Black student whom I'll call Rose asked if we could discuss an issue that had arisen in her life. It seems that her parents just bought and moved into a townhome, and they are the only Black residents on the street. Their nextdoor neighbor, whose yard is full of yard ornaments, keeps putting a deer statue in their yard. They'll wake up and see it in the yard, take it back over to her, and the next day it's back in their yard again. They've tried to speak with her, but she doesn't answer her door. What to do?

Obviously there's a racial layer that Rose is concerned about, or she wouldn't have

started by telling us that her parents are the only Black people in the neighborhood. Is the deer issue going to ignite some race-related ugliness? But there's also just a lot of question about what it means that the deer keeps appearing in their yard, and what's up with this neighbor, and how do they take control of their yard. My students responded first with legal approaches: if she's putting it in their yard, she must not want it so they can throw it away. Or, take it to the homeowners' association, which apparently isn't an option yet because it's a brand new development. But then they thought about it some more because they realized that to use escalated tactics from the world of rights might not be a good way to approach a neighbor you need to live with.

So then they suggested putting the deer back in her yard with a note saying Thanks but no thanks, I don't want this deer. Someone put in the chat (and here's what's great about teaching online, there's always a parallel chat going on at the side of the screen while people are taking turns speaking), "maybe your mom could dress it up a little, put a little hat on it or something, before she takes it back to the neighbor." Someone else offered, "Maybe the neighbor is using visualization, and she wants your mom to give her a deer." Or, they thought, since she has so many yard ornaments, maybe she feels sorry for people who don't have any, and she's sharing.

Clearly the discussion got a little goofy before I steered us back to reviewing for the midterm. But my students were taking a few sparse facts and making it into their own story. They were making it into a whimsical story about eccentric but benign behavior, a harmless neighbor lady with whom you can be gently playful. They dropped out the component of fear of racial tension, though I think you can make a case that part of the function of the humor was

to de-escalate that tension. They made their own story, and it was a story about the essential absurdity of the situation, an absurdity you can only laugh at.

I think the author of Jonah is doing that too. This story is written during the Persian period, but it's set at an earlier time when the Assyrian empire, whose capital was Nineveh, was a historical enemy and a continuing threat. The Assyrians were not lovable rogues. They were powerful, ruthless enemies. I read that they scorched their enemies alive to be able to decorate their walls with their skins. They had invaded Israel, the northern kingdom, and annihilated its population and replaced them with other captive peoples. They are the baddest of the bad.

But God tells Jonah to go cry out against them, and Jonah immediately heads down to the docks for a boat going exactly the opposite way, across the Mediterranean Sea to Spain. He's like a toddler, just noping his way right out of there. Then the whole storm and fish sequence happens, during which the sailors display a lot more reverence for Jonah's God than he does, until he's urped out onto the dry land again. This time he goes to Nineveh and he could not possibly do a more graceless, half-hearted job of prophesying. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," he says, which is a message that I feel Isaiah or Jeremiah would have done a lot more with. But everybody responds, from the king all the way down to the livestock, which are also covered in sackcloth and crying mightily to Yahweh. And Jonah watches from a hill outside the city, sulking and pouting because he didn't want his message to work; he wanted God to smite the Ninevites.

In the final scene Jonah is completely a comic figure. He's watching the city like the Grinch, enjoying the shade of a bush that God made grow, and then mad and sulky when God

makes the bush die. “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” God asks Jonah, and Jonah spits, “Yes, angry enough to die!” Which is ludicrous; someone is taking himself way too seriously. And God delivers the coup de grace: “You didn’t even make that bush, I did. So I can certainly have concern for a big city full of people who hardly know anything, not to mention their animals.”

The enormous damage that had been done to Israel by the Assyrians was not funny. The violence of their warfare was not funny. But the resentment and self-righteousness of a prophet, who’s mad at God for being gracious, merciful, and slow to anger—that’s funny. He’s a tiny, impotent figure shaking his fist at the God of the universe for not reflecting Jonah’s own resentments but instead caring for all creation. Jonah full of hate and resentment is a comic figure when the God who never lost sight of him or any other creature for one second, the God whose call he couldn’t dodge, the God who controls storms and giant fish is so gentle, kind, and tender. Jonah’s anger is tiny and ridiculous.

This author does want to tell us that all God’s children got a place in the choir. He does want us to get that our enemies are our kin, and that we should not cherish animosity toward others. But more than that, he wants us to see ourselves with the same gentle bemusement that we see Jonah with. He wants to let us know that however enormous and painful and consequential our fights are, they are not the essence of who we are to each other. “Stand down from your defensive position,” he seems to be saying. Take seriously the work that our consciences call us to do, and don’t avoid fighting for justice. But do it all in the light of the God who mysteriously loves every one of us, even Donald John Trump, and always leave yourself a little bit of room to laugh.

God of the seas, sky, and land,

When Jonah turned to run from you, you showed him that nothing and no one could hide from your presence. You are in all things, and you love all things. Show us the gift of your presence, and help us to carry your word of compassion and grace to all the world, in the name of the one who carried out your love flawlessly, Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.