

Mutant ministry: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Psalm 62:5-12

## **Jonah is prophetic minimalism gone amok.**

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Many erstwhile human encounters with the divine word are fraught with irony. The Bible is full of examples: Balaam's talking ass; the promise of a patriarchal heir so long overdue that the child is named for the ensuing hilarity; the virtuous foreign woman deemed to be worth seven times the family-redeeming child she bears for her mother-in-law; the messianic savior born in a hovel and killed like a common criminal.

The mutant ministry of the prophet Jonah is another case in point. So familiar are the details of this entertaining story that a brief summary will suffice to set the scene. The Prophet of the Lord (PL) is commissioned to warn the Most Evil Empire (MEE) of its impending destruction. The PL flees by boat in the opposite direction. An act of God on the high seas threatens to destroy the ship and all aboard. Phoenician sailors, more deeply religious than the PL, determine who is to blame for the predicament and what to do about it. Despite their reluctance to risk the loss of life (wink, wink), the Phoenician sailors toss the PL into the sea. The PL is promptly swallowed by a large marine creature. From the belly of the whalelike fish, the PL delivers himself of a prayer so lousy with pious platitudes that the poor sea creature pukes him up onto dry land.

Our text begins with a prophetic recall and recommissioning. This time it's off to the MEE. In the midst of the great city the recalcitrant PL unleashes a five-word oracle whose brevity is matched only by its banality: Forty days . . . and you're toast! (Jonah 3:4, paraphrased). And yet in this exquisite farce, the response far exceeds that of modern, urban, evangelistic crusades among the well churched. The evil people of the MEE believe in God and exhibit a repentance so robust that a fast is proclaimed and all are clothed in sackcloth from king to cattle.

God's response is predictable. The whole judgment thing is called off. But the PL is not pleased. His hatred of Nineveh is greater than God's mercy. This is exactly why

he had fled in the first place. He wanted no part in the deliverance of the MEE. By the end of the story the PL may or may not have accepted the counterintuitive morality so prevalent throughout the Bible: Samaritans can be good neighbors; stutterers can be lawgivers; theophanies are likely to be encountered in the still, small voice; and not even Nineveh is beyond God's compassion.

This unique prophetic book provokes one to imagine that someone was goofin' with the gullible. Here is prophetic minimalism gone amok. Jonah is portrayed as the moral equivalent of a cliché, the misanthrope in a sandwich board that says "The End Is Near." But perhaps the key lies not in the content of the oracle but in the context of its delivery. The inherent warning of Jonah's oracle is muted in the text. Instead what emerges is a great city paradigmatically pregnant with evil, and rushing toward ruin—or redemption.

A parallel dynamic can be seen in the temporal framework of Paul's ethic. The Corinthians want answers to their questions. How should they live? Paul gives some instructions intended to carry apostolic freight. He wants them to "stay as they are," with some concessions. His rationale is the "impending crisis." The culmination of an appointed time (kairos) that is just around the corner. From now on they are to live "as if" and "as if not," since the present form of the world is passing away. It's nothing less than the end of the world as they know it. For Paul, the impending wrap-up of history is so vivid that it infuses all current questions, problems, dilemmas and challenges. If indeed the present form of the world is passing, he seems to reason, why waste energy on lesser orders of concern, such as slavery and sex? These eschatological convictions have shaped Paul's mission and his priorities.

When we hear this kind of imagery bandied about today we think of doomsday cults, survivalist bunkers and other forms of spiritual excess. But could it not also be used to describe our experience of the modern world? A world seemingly being remade with every passing day. A world less predictable, less comprehensible, in a constant state of flux. In nature and culture, present forms are becoming extinct. Our culture lurches, groaning, toward ruin—or redemption. Something new is coming that we can't quite see. But we feel ourselves at a threshold.

The putative catharsis of the Y2K phenomenon was symptomatic of this elongated almostness-but-not-quiteness of Christian hope. Paul's perspective suggests that we, like the Corinthians, learn to live as if the preoccupations of the present world were not preeminent. To live as if the inevitability and reality of the new order were

already transforming the way we live. It is something short of a realized eschatology, perhaps. Nonetheless, even before it arrives, the new thing is forming us, rearranging our priorities.

From the psalmist's perspective, more metaphysical than temporal, priorities are also realigned by God's omnipotence. Low estate and high estate, considerations so crucial in earthly terms, are lighter than a breath in the cosmic balance. To confess that power and lovingkindness belong to God is to relieve ourselves of a significant existential burden, and also to accept an ethical mandate. For the Bible insists that we bear responsibility for the way we live. This principle appears over and over again in scripture, from the law to the prophets to the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Bounded by God's justice and God's mercy, there is this moral universe in which we move and breathe and have our being.