

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Amy Howe
Sunday, July 26, 2026

Let us pray.

Draw us close, Holy Spirit, as the scripture is read and the word proclaimed. Let the word of faith be on our lips and in our hearts. And let all other words slip away. May there be one voice we hear today, the voice of truth and grace. Amen.

Our scripture lesson this morning as we continue the stories in the Bible that we know and love many of them. We're listening to a portion of Jonah, chapter 1, 1-6 and 11-17. Listen for the word of our Lord.

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." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid his fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. 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 your God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." 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, oh Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked up Jonah 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. 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.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I'm so happy to be with you on this side this morning. And I want to thank David for the opportunity to proclaim the word of God to Idlewild this morning. The scripture I just read from Jonah is found in the first chapter. The book of Jonah is a short book, but it does contain three other chapters. And as I was preparing this sermon, I thought about the importance of the story

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as a whole. If we read only the first chapter of Romeo and Juliet, we might think we were just reading a beautiful love story. However, if we finished the narrative, we would find quite a tragic tale of love and death. The first part of Jonah may be the part that most of us remember most clearly. After all, how many of you learned about Jonah being swallowed up by a whale or a big fish in Vacation Bible School or a Sunday School class? It's pretty dramatic stuff. I remember referencing Jonah in an adult Sunday School class at our church in Key West. And one of the participants went into quite graphic detail about what Jonah would look like and smell like after being in the belly of a whale for three days. If we only look at the first chapter of Jonah, we may be tempted to get sidetracked by the drama of this miraculous recovery. We may also dwell too long on Jonah's refusal to follow God's directive to travel to Nineveh and make this simply a story about being obedient to God. And I'm afraid if we do that, we miss the intention of the author. For it is the story in its entirety that best informs our faith. As with most Bible stories, it's important to understand a bit of the context of the story. And for that, I went back to my Old Testament textbook from seminary. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. It was a big city that traditionally had wielded a great deal of power in that region. In fact, it would later conquer the northern kingdom. It was known for its brutality and cruelty to the people of Israel. It is no wonder that Jonah would have been loath to go to that particular city and preach repentance.

I am reminded of how the Israelites detested the Samaritans, and Jesus used a Samaritan as his example of a good neighbor. It is not an accident that in this narrative God asked Jonah to preach to the enemy. And Jonah's initial response is, "No way. I will get a ticket to Tarshish and get as far away from Nineveh as I can." Well, we heard how that turned out. God sent a big storm and the sailors were in fear of their lives. And I believe our author uses humor as a device to get across theological points. The sailors, in their pagan compassion, try hard to spare Jonah's life, but eventually agree to throw him overboard.

Our lesson this morning ends with Jonah being swallowed by a big fish and living in that fish for three days and three nights. But there is so much more to this theological lesson. Jonah reluctantly does go to Nineveh and preaches to the people that they need to change their wicked ways. Lo and behold, the people immediately respond and repent and they put on sackcloths and they believe the word of Jonah's God. When the king hears Jonah's message, he too immediately repents and says, "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." He hopes that God will relent and save them from destruction. This is another clue that our story is not a historical document, but rather a theological lesson. After all, how many people do you know who hear some stranger's threats and decide to immediately and utterly change their lives? And kings and presidents, very unlikely that they would repent their way so quickly and completely based on the threats from a prophet from a distant region. I think about this man

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that rides his bike up and down Duval Street in Key West proclaiming end times or some such thing. No one pays any attention to him. Fortunately, I don't believe he is an authentic prophet. But why would the people, the people and the king of Nineveh so quickly believe and change because of the words of Jonah? And now we begin to get to it. Just after God decides to spare the city of Nineveh, we hear in the story that Jonah is not at all pleased by this change in plans. Jonah admits that the reason he fled to Tarshish was because he knew that God was merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah tells God that he would rather die than see the people of Nineveh forgiven.

And at the risk of being long-winded, I do want to share another little scene from the Jonah saga. Jonah goes out from the city and builds a booth for himself to watch what will happen to Nineveh, still hoping that it will be destroyed. God sends a bush to grow up around Jonah so that he is shaded from the hot sun. Needless to say, this is greatly appreciated by Jonah. I believe all of us Memphians understand the gift of shade in these 90 plus days. But just as Jonah gets comfortable, God sends a worm to attack the bush so that it withers away. And the sun beats down upon Jonah, and he is so angry that he once again tells God that he would rather die than live in this heat. God points out that Jonah is very concerned about this bush that grows up in one day and withers the next. God poses the question to Jonah. "Shouldn't I be concerned about Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left? Also, the many animals. Aren't the people and animals of Nineveh worthy, more worthy of concern than that bush of yours that sprouts one day and perishes the next?" So in the conclusion of Jonah, we see that all that led up to it—Jonah's refusal to preach, the sailor's compassion but resolve, the people's and the king's fast repentance— all of this was leading us to the message the author rather playfully is getting us to, and that is—God's love and mercy are boundless.

The storyteller's humor and satire only make this theological truth more pointed. Jonah was troubled by a Mosaic teaching that is echoed in various parts of Israel, Israel's tradition, namely the announcement that Yahweh is the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in faithfulness. Jonah's preaching was based on the conviction and hope that God's word of doom would be unchangeable and they would be destroyed and God would not go back on such a threat. However, Jonah learns that there is a wideness to God's compassion and freedom in divine mercy, which is irrational in the sense that it goes beyond what people expect or even deserve. And during that same time that the popular thinking from prophets like Ezra and Nehemiah was nationalistic and insisting on a strict narrow set of beliefs rejecting all other viewpoints, this unknown prophetic writer of the book of Jonah proclaims the mystery of God's compassion.

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Okay. So hopefully we have a clearer understanding of the intent of the book of Jonah. The Israelites were being invited to understand that even their bitter enemies, enemies known for brutality and cruelty, were still within the bounds of God's forgiveness and mercy. But what does the living word of God have to say to us this day in this time? Are we the people of Nineveh in need of mercy and compassion? Or are we like the Israelites who need to be reminded that God's love and mercy are boundless, offered to even our fiercest enemies? My sister, Wendy Farley, is a theologian, and I'm lucky enough to often use her as my personal commentary when I'm preparing to write a sermon. I must confess that we had a pretty in-depth conversation about Jonah last week. During our conversation, she shared with me something that touched me and stayed with me. She said that on the evening of 9/11, 25 years ago, like so many of us, she needed the comfort and hope of worship. She attended a service at her church home, and she said that her minister preached that we did not have to pray for those precious men, women, and children who had just died so tragically, because they were in the loving embrace of God. But we did need to pray for those men who were responsible for this brutal attack. Can God's mercy extend even to our most bitter enemy?

Just a few weeks ago, Dave and I traveled to Morocco with our son, Davis, and our daughter, Farley, and her family, Ed, Ace, and Teddy. Morocco is a Muslim country, and from the get-go, it felt very different from Portugal and Spain, which we had just left. I would say about 85% of the women were wearing either hijabs or burkas. The men were mostly in thobes, which are a long gown that covers their shirts and pants. The streets in the medina in the old part of the city were very crowded and narrow. Fortunately, we had a guide with us at all times or we would have been completely lost. I think we were all a bit intimidated. We said that Ace and Teddy had to be holding an adult's hands at all times. We were there just a short time, one night and a day and a half. Our last day, we had signed up for a cooking class. Well, to be honest, Farley had signed us up for a cooking class, and I was a bit wary of this activity. For those of you who don't know me, I'm somewhat of a picky eater. Okay, I am a picky eater. And the prospect of cooking unfamiliar food and eating it sounded a bit terrifying. But if you do know Farley, her oldest daughter, Energy, was going to drive this bus. So, off to the cooking class we went. It turned out that the guide's wife was our instructor. He led us to his apartment not far from the riad that we had stayed in the night before, and their two little girls were introduced to us. The home could not have been more lovely with comfortable seating, beautiful art, and delicious smells emanating from the kitchen. We spent about three hours there cutting up vegetables, seasoning dishes, and learning the art of Moroccan cuisine. Ace and Teddy loved helping at first. And when they got bored, they were invited to play with the two little girls, and they were fast friends and were genuinely sad to say goodbye. I share this story because there were times when I heard the call to

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prayer or watched a woman walking down the street with her head covered and eyes down that I felt distant from these people. They were a different color. They worshiped differently than I did. They ate differently. Their accents sounded strange to my ears. But when our guide shared the five tenets of Islam, I marveled at how similar they were to our Christian beliefs. And when I joined this family in their home, broke bread with them, they felt like family. There is a lot of talk about Christian nationalism and division and hate in our country right now. We are told that people who are not like us are our enemy and don't belong.

So I needed to hear these words from a Hebrew Bible prophet who reminded me that God's love and mercy are truly boundless.

Perhaps you needed to hear it, too.

Allelujah and amen.