

I enjoy a good mystery—from who-done-it mystery books, to movies that remain unpredictable until the very end. Throughout the experience I try to solve the puzzle, and those surprising twists in the storyline keep me on the edge of my seat.

Recently I've heard of scenarios where one can enter the mystery of a locked room. A team enters the room, the door is locked, and they strive to discover clues to find the exit within an hour. Clues might exist in drawers or under the rug, on a bookshelf or hidden in a piece of art hanging on the wall. A hidden series of random numbers might be the combination for a lock, or a key might open a drawer with a further clue. Those gathered in the room must work together to solve the mystery to escape the room as they wonder, "Where's the exit?"

The prophet Jonah found himself in a similar situation, but even though he had plenty of clues, the exit seemed to elude him. He encountered several exits, but rather than a locked room, he found himself trying to escape from delivering a message, from a sinking ship, and later from the belly of a great fish. Even after his escape, he remained trapped in his

narrow understanding of God, but I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's start at the beginning.

God invited Jonah to take a message to the people of Nineveh, a city in Assyria, in the modern-day country of northern Iraq. These Assyrians were the enemies of Jonah's people. He probably feared for his life, wondering if he would escape from their cruelty if he entered their country with a harsh word from God. It would be like a Democrat going into the political headquarters of the Republicans this past week with a warning that their candidates will suffer great loss. That message would not have gone over well, and the one delivering the message may have feared the consequences of such prophetic words.

Jonah looked for his first exit, and so he jumped on a ship going to Tarshish, the opposite direction of Nineveh. When a great storm arose and the sailors trembled in fear, Jonah confessed that he was running away from God. His first exit plan did not work, and to calm the waters, Jonah suggested a second exit plan: that the sailors throw him overboard.

Once he entered the chaotic waters, God provided an exit by sending a giant fish, and that's when Jonah

found himself searching for a third exit from the great fish that had swallowed him.

Have you ever found yourself feeling as though you're in the belly of great fish looking for an exit, those times when something smells a bit fishy? Lately I've been wondering where to find an exit from this pandemic and all the misinformation that seems to float around. Recently I heard someone confess, "I hear so many things about this virus. Some suggest it's like the flu, and that the media has exaggerated its severity, and that masks don't really help. I don't know what to believe anymore."

I replied, "I serve as a chaplain at our local hospital, and I can tell you it's real. The COVID units are full, and the nursing staff is exhausted from caring from so many patients. Patients are dying. It's real."

The person replied, "Oh, I had no idea. I hadn't heard."

Sometimes when we're in the belly of a fish we close our eyes, not wanting to see the reality of what surrounds us. It's easier to imagine we're in an aquarium, watching tiny fish float by behind glass

walls, instead of seeing the reality of the inner lining of the stomach walls of the giant fish that we're inside.

In Jonah's search for his third exit, he offered a prayer to God. The fish spit Jonah up on dry land, but his relief at finding an exit was short-lived, for he had arrived at the place he tried to escape: the dreaded city of Nineveh.

As writer Eugene Peterson commented in his book *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, "We respond to the divine initiative, but we humbly request to choose the destination. We are going to be [disciples], but not in Nineveh for heaven's sake. Let's try Tarshish. In Tarshish we can have a religious career without having to deal with God."¹

Have you ever said something similar when hearing God's invitation? "You want me to do what? You want me to welcome who? I'll follow, Jesus, but only if you let me select where we're going and who I get to hang out with."

It's not always easy to be a follower of God. Sometimes we put other agendas ahead, such as politics, finances, or power. Sometimes we're in denial

of the reality that we face, and God often shifts our focus to see what *is* real.

When Jonah arrived at Nineveh and brought the message of warning to the people, they changed their lives. That's not what Jonah had in mind. He expected destruction and was ready to say, "I told you so," but God had another idea in mind: grace. A second chance. Forgiveness. We Christians sometimes think Jesus came up with these ideas, but actually, they were in God's heart all along. Jesus highlighted what God had been trying to reveal throughout history, but Jonah just didn't get it. He was more focused on his exit strategy than on what God had in mind.

I've known good church folks who sometimes focus less on God's forgiveness than on the behaviors of those they don't like. They can be very quick to judge and often slow to offer God's grace.

During one children's Sunday school class, a Sunday school teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?"

There was a short interval of silence and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up who said, "Sin."²

In many ways that child's response is true. Without recognizing our own sin, we may miss the amazing abundance of God's grace. If one focuses mostly on the sin of others, like Jonah did, one might miss what God is doing. If you're speeding down the fast lane of judgment, you might miss the exit of grace. Slow down, listen to one another, and trust that God's exit of grace is broad enough for everyone.

¹ As quoted on www.homileticsonline.com, 1/21/18.

² Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #838.