

Welcome to the
2007–2008

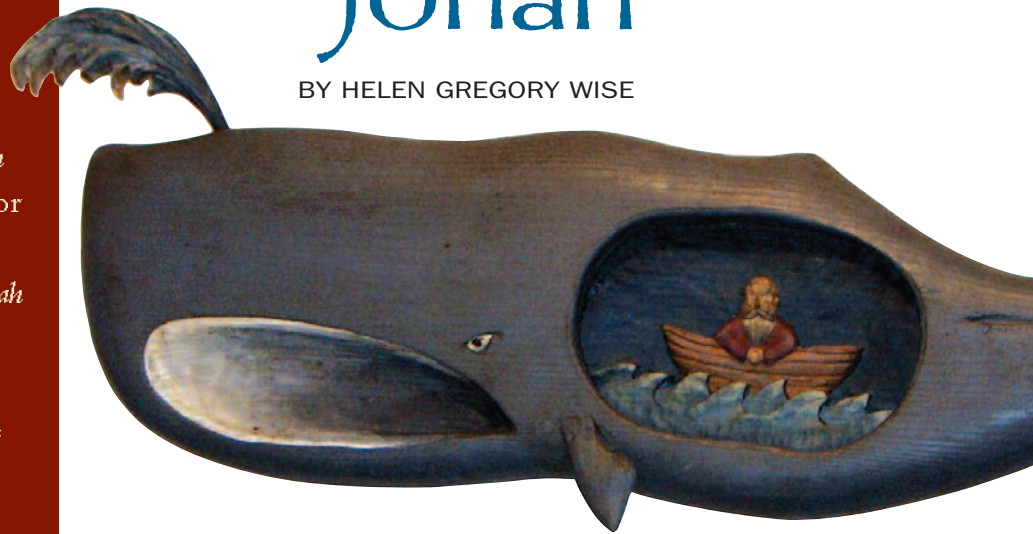
Horizons Bible study,
*Above and Beyond:
Hearing God's Call in Jonah
and Ruth*. In preparation for
using this study, read this
storyteller's version of *Jonah*
and consider using a
modified version of *lectio
divina*—a spiritual practice
that enables scripture to
become a means of union
with God.

Read the story aloud,
slowly. Be alert for any
particular word or phrase
that draws your attention in
a special way. Meditate on
this word or phrase and
become aware of any
words, images or memories
that arise in you. Respond
to God's word, simply and
directly—with thanks or
remorse, joy or anger, praise
or supplication. Rest in
God's presence and act on
God's word and guidance.

Then reflect on Carol
Bechtel's warning in
Lesson One: "Reading
Jonah and *Ruth* may cause
Christians to reevaluate
their level of commitment.
If you don't want to hear
the call to go above and
beyond the call of duty in
your faith, avoid these two
books like the plague"
(*Above and Beyond*, p. 5).

Jonah

BY HELEN GREGORY WISE



***Jonah and the Whale*, woodcarving by Three Points Design,
Virginia Beach, Virginia**

How did the call sound?

Like a game of Hide and Seek? "Jooooonah."

Like a frustrated parent? "Jonah, son of Amittai, prophet from Gath-hepher?"

Like a judge pronouncing sentence? "JONAH!"

How did the call sound?

"Jonah, go to Nineveh and cry out against the peoples' wickedness."

Now Nineveh was just about the wickedest place, with the wickedest enemies, in Israel's history, and it was in that direction! So Jonah went in the opposite direction, down from the hills of Israel to Joppa. He got on a boat going to Tarshish, as far in the opposite direction as a ship could sail. Down Jonah went into the hold of that boat, and hid himself in—to get far away from Nineveh, far, far away from the presence of God.

Then God hurled a great howling wind across the sea, a storm big enough to break apart Jonah's boat. Frightened sailors prayed to their gods to save them. Waves grew stronger. Terrified sailors threw cargo over the side to lighten the ship. Winds tossed the boat higher. A desperate captain remembered that one man had not asked his god to save them—Jonah. "Wake up! Pray to your god—maybe he will save us!"

Now, it's safe to assume Jonah did not pray to God—after all, he did not want God's attention—and the storm did not abate.

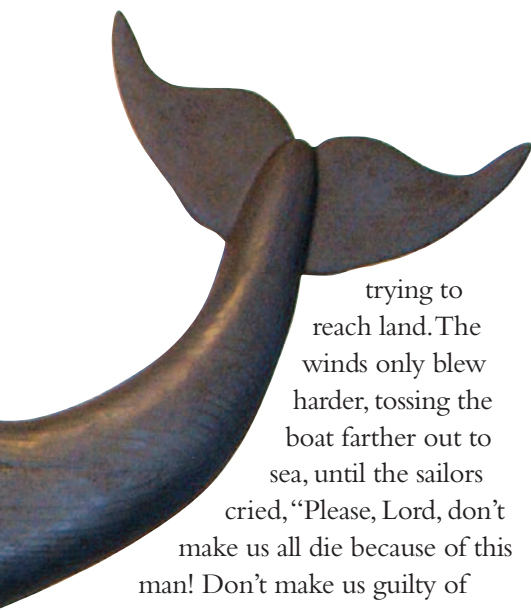
So sailors cast lots to see whose fault it was for that storm, and the lot fell to Jonah. Sailors' words stormed Jonah. "What have you done?" "Where is your country?" "What people are you?" "What kind of a person are you?"

"I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord God who made sea and land. But I am running away from the presence of the Lord."

The sailors stared at Jonah. "What shall we do to *you*, so the sea will quiet down for *us*?"

"Throw me overboard. The waters will quiet down for you. This storm has come upon *you* because of *me*."

But the sailors did not want to throw Jonah over to a certain death. Instead, each grabbed an oar and began to row hard against the wind,



trying to reach land. The winds only blew harder, tossing the boat farther out to sea, until the sailors cried, "Please, Lord, don't make us all die because of this man! Don't make us guilty of killing an innocent man! Remember, it's really you who wants to drown him!" The sailors picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea.

The wind and the waves and the sea were still. And in the silent stillness, the sailors feared God even more. They offered a sacrifice, and each man made a vow to God.

Jonah? He descended into the depths of the ocean where God sent a large fish to swallow him up, whole! After three days and three nights in the belly of that big fish, Jonah finally answered God.

Oh, how Jonah prayed! He told God all he had suffered when God cast him into the deep. How terrible it was to be driven away from God's sight! But he, faithful Jonah, would again sacrifice to God in the Lord's holy temple! How thankful Jonah was that God had saved his life since *he* was not like *those* who worship idols, not like *those* who forsake their God. What presumption! Not a word of confession or penitence! Not even a prayer for forgiveness.

The amazing grace in this story is not that God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah! It's not that Jonah lived for three days and three nights in the belly of the big fish! The amazing grace is that, after that prayer, God told the big fish to spew Jonah out on dry land!

God called Jonah a second time! "Go to Nineveh, and say what *I* tell *you* to say." Sin City's behavior *and* the prophet's seemed to be on God's mind that time!

Jonah went to Nineveh. However, he only walked one third of the way inside the great city before delivering God's message, "In 40 days, Nineveh will be overthrown." But in spite of the brevity of the messenger and the message, the Ninevites *heard God*. They turned to mourning and repentance. When the word of God reached the king, he rose from his throne, tore off his royal robes, covered himself in sackcloth, sat in ashes and proclaimed, "No creature, human or animal, shall eat or drink. Let every person and animal in Nineveh be covered in sackcloth, and cry to God. All must turn from evil and violence. Who knows?! God may relent from fierce anger, so we do not die!"

God saw and heard the Ninevites' acts and cries of repentance. God did not overthrow Nineveh! All Jonah saw or heard was what God did not do. Jonah was angry and told God so, in no uncertain terms.

"Isn't this just what I said would happen! This is why I went to Tarshish instead of Nineveh in the first place! I knew you were gracious, always ready to forgive, slow to anger, only too willing not to punish people—who, I might add, fully deserve to be punished! Just kill me! It's better to die than live in a world without justice!"

Jonah did not even seem to notice the irony in his words. He ignored the irony in God's answering question, "Jonah, is it right for *you* to be angry about *my* mercy and deliverance?"

Jonah marched right out of Nineveh, built a booth for shelter, and

sat waiting to see what would really happen to Nineveh. "After all," Jonah reasoned, "one certainly can't expect Ninevites to keep up a clean act for very long. People like that only pretend to change their ways—they're still the same inside. Surely God will see, and they'll get what they deserve!"

Jonah was hot inside and out, sitting, waiting and hoping to see Nineveh destroyed. Then God appointed a bush to grow beside Jonah, up over his head to shade him and relieve his discomfort. That Jonah was pleased and happy about! Perhaps God was beginning to see things his way after all.

But, the very next day at daybreak, God appointed a worm to attack and destroy Jonah's bush. The hot sun rose. God sent a sultry east wind. Scorched until faint, Jonah moaned, "It's better to die than live!"

Again, God asked, "Is it right for *you* to be angry about *my* bush?"

"Yes, angry enough to die!"

Then the Lord God, sovereign over all creation, spoke to Jonah. "You care about the destruction of a bush you did not plant or grow, a bush born one day and dead the next. Should I, Creator of the Universe, not care about a great city of more than 120,000 people—even if they do not know right from wrong—and many animals?"

How do I hear God's call?

Like a search party calling a lost creature who does not know right from wrong?

Like a patient teacher repeating the call over and over?

Like my Creator and my Lord, whose very call demands my all?

Helen Gregory Wise is a professional storyteller and director of Christian education at Trinity Presbyterian Church in East Brunswick, New Jersey.

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Read the story slowly. Be alert for any particular word or phrase that draws your attention in a special way. Meditate on this word or phrase and become aware of any words, images or memories that arise in you. Respond to God's word simply and directly—with thanks or remorse, joy or anger, praise or supplication. Rest in God's presence and act on God's word and guidance.

Then reflect on Carol Bechtel's warning in Lesson One: "Reading Jonah and Ruth may cause Christians to reevaluate their level of commitment. If you don't want to hear the call to go above and beyond the call of duty in your faith, avoid these two books like the plague" (*Above and Beyond*, p. 5).

Ruth

BY HELEN GREGORY WISE

The three women stood on the road, hearts, arms and wombs empty—Naomi, the Israelite, who left a famine for a fertile land where she buried her husband and two sons; Ruth and Orpah, the Moabites, once wives of the two sons, now childless widows themselves. Judah lay before them, Moab behind.

Naomi spoke, "Go back, back to your own mothers. May God be kind to you as you have been kind to me and the dead."

But the younger women wept, refusing to go back.

Again Naomi cried out, "Go. Find husbands and security where you can. I can give you nothing, not even hope. My lot is bitterness since even the Lord is against me."

Again the young women wept. But Orpah, with a kiss, did turn back; while Ruth clung to her mother-in-law. "Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. May God curse me if ever I leave you!" Naomi said no more.

Now two went on towards Bethlehem in Judah where rumor said God had once more given the people food.

The whole town buzzed at their arrival. The townswomen asked, "Is this really Naomi?"

But she answered, "Do not call me 'Naomi'—'Pleasant'—for the Almighty has taken away everything I had. Call me 'Mara'—'Bitter'—for God has dealt bitterly with me."

Now, it just so happened that Ruth and Naomi arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth said to her mother-in-law, "Let me go into the fields and glean what the reapers leave behind, so you and I will have something to eat. Tell me where I will be most welcome." But Naomi only answered, "Go, my daughter."

Now, it just so happened that Ruth fell in behind reapers in the field belonging to Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's dead husband, Elimelech. Boaz noticed Ruth and asked his men about her. A servant told him she was the Moabite who had returned with Naomi, how kindly she had asked permission to glean, how she had worked from early morning without a break. Immediately Boaz welcomed Ruth, instructing her to remain in his fields. When a stunned Ruth replied, "Why?" Boaz blessed her for her kindness toward Naomi. At mealtime, Boaz himself served Ruth food and drink. Privately, Boaz instructed his men to let Ruth glean even among the uncut grain and to drop some of the cut sheaves for her to gather.

That night Ruth returned home with enough grain for many loaves of bread, and a story that made a stunned Naomi bless Boaz.

So Ruth continued in Boaz' fields as the grain ripened, and Naomi bided her time until the moment was ripe. At the end of the harvest, on the night of celebration after the grain was separated from the chaff,

Naomi told Ruth what she must do to gain the security of a husband for herself and the security of inheritance for them both.

Now, it just so happened that after good food and good wine, a contented Boaz went down to the far end of the winnowing room to sleep, out of sight and hearing of the other revelers. Washed, perfumed, wearing her best, Ruth slipped in, uncovered Boaz' feet, lay down beside him and waited. At midnight, a startled Boaz rolled over to discover at his feet a woman who said, "It is Ruth. I am yours by right since you are next-of-kin." A second time Boaz blessed Ruth for her loyalty to Naomi. But Boaz also had bad news—he was *not* the very next-of-kin! Still, Boaz told Ruth to stay the night. At dawn, he sent her home with barley for Naomi and a promise to try to arrange to *act* as next-of-kin.

Now, it just so happened that when Boaz arrived at the city gate to keep his promise, the real next-of-kin appeared, as did the 10 elders necessary to seal a deal. Boaz informed the kinsman that Naomi was selling land that the next-of-kin had first rights to buy. "I'll take it," said the kinsman. But Boaz, who had made a promise to the woman he hoped to marry, continued, "Oh yes, with the land comes the *foreign widow* of the *dead* son, so you can keep the *dead* man's name on his land, the *dead* man's *inheritance*."

Can't you just hear the stunned, or perhaps trapped, next-of-kin! "Bu . . . bu . . . bu . . . But that will complicate *my* inheritance. *You* take the land, with the *widow*." And exchanging the customary symbolic sandal in the presence of 10 elders, the kinsmen closed the deal! Boaz had kept his promise. And all those



Ruth and Boaz, stained glass, from Temple Emanuel, Grand Rapids, Michigan

watching pronounced blessings on the marriage of Ruth and Boaz.

Two women, wombs now fulfilled, arms and hearts filled, sat in the center of Bethlehem—Ruth, new wife and mother; Naomi, new grandmother nursing the infant grandson in her arms. Before and behind, the townswomen gathered, saying, "Blessed be the Lord. Ruth,

whose loving kindness is greater than seven sons, has borne a son for Naomi." And the women named him Obed, father of Jesse, father of David, and 27 generations later, father of Joseph, father of Jesus.

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Read a storyteller's version of this story and the story of *Jonah*, with suggestions from the author for ways to read or tell these stories, alone or in a group—visit www.pcusa.org/horizons.