

Sing it Back to Me. Jonah 1. Sunday, January 29. By Mark Archibald.

I attended Tyndale seminary in Toronto when I was doing my theological training. Tyndale is a commuter school – people travelled from all over southern Ontario to attend. I was living at a camp called Teen Ranch at the time, an hour and a half away. If you are commuting to Toronto several times a week, your biggest priority is figuring out what you listen to on the way to and from your destination. These were pre-podcast, pre-iPhone, pre-iPod days. My vehicle did not have a CD player. So my most frequent go-to was a radio station – New Rock, 102.1 the Edge. Lots of alternative rock, lots of music by the Beastie Boys, Sloan, Foo Fighters, and Nirvana. If you are much older than me, that last sentence sounded like a weird jumble of words. If you are much younger than me you probably thought, “Ew! Yuck! That’s old people music!” But I loved this station. This was not a Christian radio station. Not in the least.

One of the bands that got occasional airplay was a punk band called Bad Religion. Bad Religion is not a Christian band. Not in the least.

So I’m listening to this not-a-Christian band on this not-a-Christian radio station, and they are debuting the not-a-Christian band’s not-a-Christian song called “Sorrow”. And as I was listening to this not-a-Christian band’s not-a-Christian song on my way to my Christian school, I felt my jaw drop a little. Here were some of the lyrics:

**Will you guide me now? For I can't see
A reason for the suffering and this long misery
What if every living soul could be upright and strong?
Well then I do imagine**

**There will be sorrow
Yeah, there will be sorrow
And there will be sorrow no more**

**When all soldiers lay their weapons down
Or when all kings and all queens relinquish their crowns
Or when the only true messiah rescues us from ourselves
It's easy to imagine**

**There will be sorrow
Yeah, there will be sorrow
And there will be sorrow no more**

That not-a-Christian song sounded remarkably Christian. This sounds more direct and convincing than the stuff you’d hear from the Christian bands on the Christian radio station.

As you might guess, Bad Religion as a band are critics of religion, specifically western Christianity. Their logo is a cross with a line through it. They sing a lot of songs critiquing Christian practice. But they know what Christianity is supposed to be. They know who Jesus is supposed to be to Christians. And they

know, more often than not, Christians are very loudly not about the things that they are supposed to be about.

When I have listened to Bad Religion, they hold up a mirror and say, “church, look at yourselves.” They sing back to us the values we are supposed to have, and of who we’re supposed to be. That is why I heard a not-a-Christian band on not-a-Christian radio station sing not-a-Christian-song about hope for a Messiah, hope for an end of violence, hope for an end of sorrow.

There is a lot of criticism in our world directed to religion and to Christianity. Some of that is bitter and nasty stuff. But some of that criticism comes from the world’s understanding of who Jesus is and what the church is supposed to be. And often, their criticism is accurate. The world holds up a mirror to the church and says, “Look at yourselves! Is this really who you are supposed to be? Does what you say about Jesus, at the top of your lungs, line up with who Jesus asks you to be?”

The church, the people that are supposed to know Jesus and the heart of Jesus well. The church, the people that are supposed to know how to interact with the world and with one another. We keep needing reminders of who Jesus is and who we’re supposed to be. And those reminders keep coming from outside of the church!

Jonah is the kind of person that needs to be reminded of who God is and who he is supposed to be. Presumably, Jonah has grown up with a proper understanding of God all his life. He’s grown up deeply immersed in the Hebrew faith. He’s so serious about the Hebrew faith that he is a prophet, a messenger of God. He is to speak God’s words to God’s people.

He gets an assignment, but this time it’s not to be given to God’s people. Instead, it’s to be given to Jonah’s people’s enemies. The Ninevites. These were the enemies of God’s people – and many would have assumed that the Ninevites were also the enemies of God.

The assignment is a terrible one. But still, this is an assignment from God. This is the God that Jonah knows well. God tells Jonah what he’s supposed to do. Jonah does the complete opposite. God says go this direction, toward Nineveh, and Jonah heads in the exact opposite direction.

That doesn’t sound like the behavior of someone who’s grown up knowing about God. This doesn’t sound like the behavior of someone who takes their faith in God seriously. This doesn’t sound like someone who is a prophet, who speaks the words of God to people.

God tries to get Jonah’s attention. When Jonah is on his escape boat, the Lord sends a great wind and a violent storm to the sea. The ship he’s on threatens to break up. The captain and sailors on board are terrified.

God has the attention of everyone on that boat!

Everyone, that is, except for Jonah. Jonah remains below deck on the boat. Deeply asleep.

The captain has to go get Jonah. Everyone on board is trying everything they can to stop the storm, calling out to every god and deity they can think of. Jonah's not thinking of God. Jonah is fast asleep. Jonah must be told by the captain, **"Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not die."**

Nothing is working. Like with all tragic situations, the sailors assume this must be someone's fault. There must be someone to blame for the problem they are in. They cast lots to determine who is responsible for this. And the lot lands on Jonah.

The crew has questions for Jonah:

- **Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?**
- **What kind of work do you do?**
- **Where do you come from? What is your country?**
- **From what people are you?"**

Jonah must have answers for what is happening to them.

Jonah states plainly: ***"I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."***

The crew's response is telling. They are terrified. And they ask, ***"What have you done?"***

This God of the Hebrews seems to already have a reputation among them. Maybe the captain and crew did not worship this God, but they knew of this God. And they knew that you don't play around with this God.

Jonah's God already had a reputation. And the only person that did not seem to take this reputation seriously was Jonah. The others on the boat know of this God and this God's reputation. And while they didn't worship this God, they knew how Jonah should live in response to this God.

Jonah makes his first good decision in the book so far. Jonah accepts blame for the situation. And Jonah suggests they deal with him to calm the storm: ***"Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."***

The crew doesn't do this right away. They are merciful and gracious to Jonah. They are everything that Jonah is not to the enemies of his own country. They have no reason to treat him kindly. But they do. They, the "outsiders", those not faithful to the God of the Hebrews, behave in the way that Jonah is supposed to behave.

Even when they finally must relent and dispose of Jonah overboard, they plead for the mercy of God.

"Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased."

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Presumably, Jonah has grown up with a proper understanding of God all of his life. He's grown up deeply immersed in the Hebrew faith. He's so serious about the Hebrew faith that he is a prophet, a messenger of God. He is to speak God's words to God's people.

But it's the crew on the boat that truly understand God, truly sees God, and truly sees what this God requires. The people with no allegiance to the God of the Hebrews understand how to respond to this God. And in the end, it's the crew that completes this part of the story in worship.

The crew holds up the mirror to Jonah's life and asks, **"What have you done?"**

We see Christians behaving badly all the time. They shout the name of Jesus loudly and declare their allegiance to Jesus loudly. But at the same time they take up causes that have nothing to do with Jesus, while having actions that don't reflect Jesus in the least. There's a lack of grace, love, and compassion – all things that Jesus exemplifies.

The world already knows the reputation of Jesus. Jesus is highly regarded. Jesus is highly respected. And Jesus, as we read him in Scripture, is clearly admired and recognized.

People in the world holds up a mirror to us: "You act this way. That makes no sense. Because your Savior acts this way." Like the crew on the boat with Jonah, the world sees who we say we belong to, the world sees our actions, and the world looks us dead in the eyes and asks, "What have you done?"

This month and next a few of us have been sharing what we are excited for and what we are looking forward to. This is what excites me: People in our world understand who Jesus is supposed to be. People in our world understand what the church is supposed to be. This is very, very good news. People have a genuine appetite for Jesus and for a loving and faithful group of people committed to living Jesus way in our world.

Jesus said, **"The harvest is plentiful."** We see this. We see people with an understanding of who Jesus is. We see an appetite for Jesus.

Jesus followed this up with, **"but the workers are few."** There is a hunger for Jesus. But who will honestly, humbly, and graciously share that with our world? There is a startling gap between Jesus and the lives of believers. There is a startling gap between what the church is supposed to be and what it is.

The world is more than willing to hold up a mirror to us when we live in a way that denies who Jesus is. Don't wait for the world to hold up a mirror to you and say, "what's wrong with this picture."

The great news is, **we already have a mirror.** In the book of James, that mirror is Scripture, God's word. It's a way for us to truly look at ourselves, to examine our hearts, and catch an enduring image of who Jesus truly is.

When I need to reset my life as a follower of Jesus, here's where I go to the Bible. I go to the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And I read Jesus interaction with the religious people of his day. The religious people – the religious leaders, scribes, pharisees, the church of that day – are constantly at odds with Jesus. And the outsiders – the people who have fallen away from their faith or never had it in the first place – are the ones drawn to Jesus. Who do you think we – church people – are most likely to behave like? The religious people. Don't try to say, "Oh, no. That's not me. I'm not religious like that." Well, you're on church on a Sunday morning sooooo . . .

I look at the lives of the religious people. I see how they are at odds with Jesus. I read the stories that Jesus tells to them, and I recognize, "This is for me." And I see myself in this stories, and like the crew on Jonah's boat I ask for help and throw myself on the mercy of God.

Even in this day, people have a biblical understanding of Jesus and the church. And they say where we don't measure up. When the world holds up a mirror to you and ask, "What have you done?" don't turn away. Humbly hear what they are saying. Reflect.

Go to the mirror that is the Bible. Examine your life. And time and time again turn to Jesus.

The harvest is plentiful. It's exciting! People have a correct expectation of who Jesus is and who we ought to be as a result. Let's honestly engage with the people of our world, and humbly share with them the Jesus and the church they've been looking for all along. Let's be people and a church willingly fashioned in the image of Jesus.