

More Than A Fish Story: A Journey Through the Book of Jonah – Incomplete Repentance

Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

Rev. Dr. Nancy S. Lynn

June 21, 2026

I was listening to “Fresh Air” on National Public Radio the other day and heard an interview with Princeton professor, Eddie Glaude, Jr. Glaude has written extensively on race in America and has a new book out entitled, *America, USA: How Race Shadows the Nation’s Anniversaries*, in which he looks at the state of race relations in the years of our country’s major anniversaries - 1876, 1926, 1976, and now 2026.

Glaude chose to construct the book around anniversary years because he says, “at each of these moments, the country has to tell a story about itself. It has to tell a story about its founding...It’s going to be a particular story...a story about the - you know, the saintliness of the founders, a story about the sacredness of this grand experiment.”

Each time we tell that story, we tend to edit out the parts we don’t want to face because we struggle with the contradiction that is so deeply baked into our country’s history. A contradiction Glaude articulates saying, “America imagines itself at once as a beacon of freedom and as a White republic.” As an example, Glaude looks at the time around 1876, just after the Civil War when, he says, racial justice began to be treated as philanthropy - as if freedom is something that white folks possess and, therefore, can give or take away. In the antislavery movement, he says, “Folk are fighting against slavery, and they are arguing that this contradicts their commitment to principles of equality and liberty and democracy and the like. And then, once the Civil War amendments are passed, particularly the one that ends slavery - the 13th Amendment - what do we get? This debate about whether or not these folk can bear the burden and responsibility of citizenship. So you see folk who were once ...antislavery suddenly become...folk who are arguing against extending citizenship to Black folk.”

Glaude sees this pattern of the nation moving toward real freedom for people of African descent and then reverting back again repeated throughout our history right up to today. In the summer of 2020, with the death of George Floyd, we began to face the truth of our history and take steps toward racial reconciliation. Now in 2026, our Supreme Court has just gutted the voting rights act.

In listening to this interview, I found Glaude’s arguments compelling - so much so that I bought the book - and I wanted to share a bit with you on this day when we commemorate Juneteenth. Even Juneteenth is an example of this giving and taking away of Black freedom. After all, what we are commemorating is not the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 but the day more than two years later when the last 250,000 slaves were finally given their freedom. Consider that language I just used. They were given their freedom - as if freedom to live independent, whole, and healthy lives is something which is ours to give.

What you might be wondering about, and I can understand why, is what all of this has to do with the book of Jonah. After all, last week we began a four-week worship series about Jonah. For those who missed it, here is a quick recap. We talked about Jonah’s rebellion against God, his

refusal to respond to God's call to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. God called him to warn the Ninevites that God was unhappy with their evil deeds and would soon punish them if they did not repent. But Jonah would not go. In fact, Jonah ran in the opposite direction of Nineveh and then boarded a ship to take him even farther away. God sent a terrible storm that nearly capsized the ship. The sailors realized that one among them had angered their god and Jonah acknowledged it was him. In order to stop the storm, they threw Jonah overboard and immediately the sea and sky were quiet again. At the end of this episode, we are left with the impression that Jonah is doomed to die. This is God's punishment for his rebellion.

Yet, as we pick up the story today, we learn that the tale isn't over yet. The next thing that happens is that God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah. When I was a kid, I always thought that was part of the punishment. I mean, spending three days in the belly of a giant fish seems like punishment, doesn't it? It wasn't until I was an adult that I understood that the fish is actually God's way of rescuing Jonah from drowning.

As an aside, after worship last week I got an email from Helen Ryan asking where the idea that it was a whale that swallowed Jonah came from. She had looked at eight different translations of the Bible and in every one the word fish was used - well, big fish. I was honest and told her I really didn't know why we so often say Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Yet, in doing my research for today's sermon, I learned something. Commentator James Limburg writes that the general term "big fish" leaves room for the imagination of the reader. So, for example, in the third book of the Maccabees, which was once in the biblical canon, the author writes that Jonah was in the belly of a huge, sea-born monster. Near the end of the first century, Josephus writes that Jonah was swallowed down by a whale. So, there is the answer to Helen's question - we can blame Josephus.

However, you envision this giant fish, the story goes that Jonah stayed in the fish's belly for three days and then the fish vomited him up on the shore. What follows is Jonah's song of thanksgiving, a song which is similar in structure and content to many of the psalms. He sings of crying out to God from the depths of the sea when the seaweed entwined his legs and his life was ebbing away. In gratitude, he sings of God rescuing him from the dangers of the sea, saving him from drowning, and giving him back his life.

What is interesting about Jonah's song, though, is how little remorse he expresses and how little responsibility he takes for how he ended up in the sea in the first place. Nowhere does he say I'm sorry I ran from you, God. Or, I shouldn't have disobeyed you. The closest he comes to acknowledging his part in how events unfolded is when he says, "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty", suggesting perhaps he knows he prioritized his own will over God's.

Without any remorse or apology, this song is at best an incomplete repentance. He hasn't done the work of asking himself why he ran away. Why didn't he want to go to Nineveh? Was it fear? Or maybe not believing the Ninevites deserved God's mercy? Something sent him running and whatever it was, that is where his sin lies. He chose to respond to his own agenda rather than to God's call. Worse yet, he claimed the power to determine the Ninevites' fate as his own, not God's. By refusing to go to Nineveh to warn them of God's anger with them, he takes away their opportunity to change their ways. He takes away their freedom to choose God's way over their

own. At the end of the song, he recognizes that deliverance - the gift of grace and mercy and salvation - belongs to God. Yet, he doesn't say anything that suggests he understands his own motivations or the consequences of his actions.

I think that is where white America finds itself on this Juneteenth weekend 250 years after our country's founding. The contradiction Glaude points out between the belief that our country is a land of freedom and the belief that freedom is the possession of white people to give or take away is still very real in our country today. We see it playing out daily in the news. While some of us have begun to name and acknowledge the extensive damage our forefathers wrought by enslaving millions of Blacks, many deny it. While some recognize how the impact of that damage continues to play out in our country today, others perpetuate it.

Furthermore, I contend that like Jonah, very few of us have done the real work of repentance. Repentance is to tell our country's story honestly and to stop denying we live in a racialized society. Repentance means taking a deep look within ourselves to name what the ugly feelings and fears are that we don't want to face. It is to acknowledge that every day I benefit from living in a society that values white skin over black or brown. Repentance literally means to turn around, to turn away from our fears and discomfort and turn toward the beloved community that is the kingdom of God.

Our country's sin of enslavement and racism is something we were all born into. As Christ-followers, we are called to face how we participate in or benefit from that sin and actively work toward dismantling the systems and assumptions that perpetuate it.

Yet, we hold back. Much like Jonah held back from going to Nineveh. For some, that is because they are in denial that race is still an issue in our country. Others feel guilty or ashamed of our racist history and how it is playing out today. Still others are afraid - afraid of giving up power or afraid of how they will be seen in the eyes of God if they acknowledge their own culpability.

Yet, ultimately the story of Jonah is a story of God's mercy and grace. God calls us to repent as individuals from our denial and our discomfort, our privilege and our fear. And God promises that when we do, God will meet us with grace and forgiveness. Change comes slowly, but I am convinced it will be the people of God who lead it. The Holy Spirit will empower us to heal ourselves and others. We will be the voice of God warning the Ninevites of our time to turn away from the sins of hatefulness, injustice, and systemic oppression and into the light of God's kingdom of love.

May it be so. Amen.