



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

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Worship Every Sunday at 9:30 AM

The Gospel According to Broadway: “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat”

This might have been the easiest Scripture to pick in this entire series. The planning for this “Gospel According to Broadway” series started with the selection of songs. Once each song was selected, I decided what Scripture to pair with it. When I was told that “Sit Down You’re Rocking the Boat” was going to be the song this week, how could I have picked any Biblical story other than Jonah?

Nicely Nicely Johnson sings the show-stopping number about his dream. In it, he describes a trip to heaven that is nearly interrupted by his unholy habits. It seems that at first he is making up the story, but it’s never really clear. And different story tellers seem to treat this moment differently. Was Nicely truly converted in this moment, or was he just trying to cover for his friend? The movie points toward the former, as he is later seen in new clothes and a part of the mission workers instead of with the gamblers. Nicely’s story of rocking the boat had a real effect on his life and moved him to transformation. Jonah’s story however, doesn’t have the same neat bow on it.

Jonah is a classic story that begins with the Hebrew version of “Once upon a time...” It begins with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah gets up and goes... to Tarshish, which is the opposite direction about as far as possible to go (west of Gibraltar in modern Spain). There is good reason Jonah would not want to go to Nineveh. It was the home of the enemy. It was the capital of the empire of Assyria, which destroyed Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Nineveh was the seat of evil and devastation to the Jewish people.

Jonah tries to flee from God, and in the end, the whole point of the story is that God is the God of everything. God is in Tarshish *and* Nineveh. God is in the sea and the land. God is

with the sailors and the fish and a shrub and even a little worm.

Most importantly, God is a God of compassion, and that compassion stretches from Tarshish to Nineveh, and this is a hard lesson for Jonah to take. While trying to flee from God—a



Guys and Dolls won five Tony Awards, including the Tony for Best Musical in 1951 and won the

truly futile idea—the sea is tumultuous and threatens to sink Jonah’s ship. The sailors figure out (through casting lots, much like the crap-shooters in *Guys and Dolls*) that Jonah is rocking the boat. The sailor know it. Jonah knows it. They decide that the solution is to throw him overboard. Once in the sea, he is saved from drowning by a big fish. While Jonah is thankful and praises God for saving him, he doesn’t realize the depth of what happened to him. He is thankful for God’s compassion on him, but he is unable to grasp that God could have compassion on the Ninevites.

This is where Jonah and Nicely differ. It feels as if Nicely has a genuine conversion.

He sees the error in his ways, and the experience of getting thrown of the boat changes him. He wants to repent and lead a life of grace. Jonah however, never seems to figure it out. He is never able to see the Ninevites as anything other than *other*. We are left wondering if Jonah will ever accept that Ninevites could be God’s people too.

But that is the power of stories. We like our stories with happy endings, wedding vows, and clear repentance and redemption. Life isn’t often that clean. Jonah’s story is certainly not. The point of Jonah’s story however, is not if Jonah is redeemed or if Jonah gets it. The point is communicate the message to us—the reader. Do we get it? Do we understand that God is the God of Tarshish *and* Nineveh. Do we accept that God’s compassion reaches to the ends of the earth—even to people we don’t want it to reach?