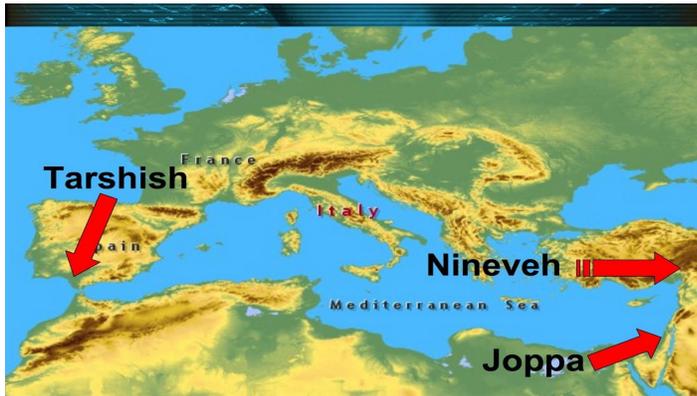


“Jonah, the Lousy Prophet”

Rev. Stephen Milton,
July 7, 2019
Lawrence Park Community Church

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Jonah and the whale story is one of the more famous stories in the Bible. Even people who have never been in Sunday school know of the tale of a prophet who was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it. But we rarely get a chance to revisit the story as adults. Most of us reject it as kid’s stuff, since it is full of all sorts of unlikely miracles. But this story wasn’t written for children, it was meant to be understood by adults. So, starting this morning, I would like to introduce you to the adult version of this famous story. There’s nothing pornographic in this adult version, have no fear, all the events are the same, but the meaning is more interesting than we may expect.



There are a few things you need to know as adults to understand the book of Jonah. First: why does Jonah run away? God has asked him to go to Nineveh, a city in what is now Iraq. It was a real place, its ruins were discovered in the 19th century. What Jonah knows is that this was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. And in the 8th century BC, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed northern Israel. They raped and pillaged,

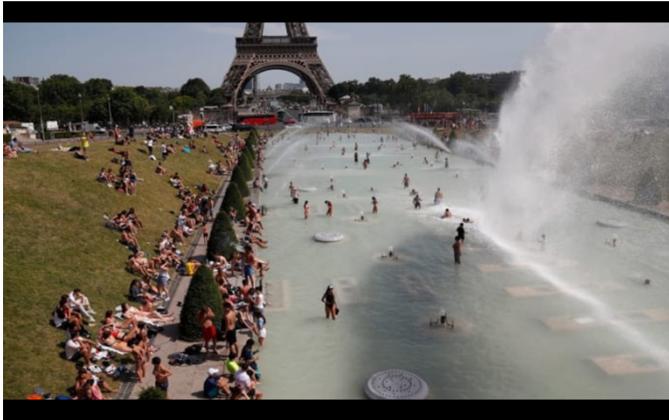
burned crops, killed thousands, and destroyed the Jewish civilization which had lived there for centuries. So Jonah, like all Jews of his time, hates the Assyrians and the city of Nineveh.¹ So, when God tells him to deliver a message, he heads the other way, towards Tarshish, in what is now Spain. The fact that he gets on board a ship filled with pagans shows how desperate he is.

But there’s something farcical about this part of the story. If God is the one who made the heavens and the Earth, you can’t simply get on a boat and give God the slip. Jonah is the only prophet in the entire Bible to refuse an assignment. That makes him a fool, not a hero.² This is something we don’t tell the kids. Biblical scholars have argued that this book is meant to be read as a satire, a farce. It is the story of a Charlie Chaplin-like character who gets everything wrong. So, we shouldn’t get hung up on whether a man could survive in a whale for three days. This isn’t meant to be read as history, but as a story.

Jonah’s foolishness starts when he disobeys a direct order from God. He thinks he can run away from the God who, as he says, created the heavens and the Earth. This is obviously impossible, but that’s how foolishness works, it ignores reality. Thinking he can give God the slip, perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that he is able to sleep through a storm which is going to swamp the ship. His hatred and egotism have blinded him to what is obvious to everyone else - God is on his trail, and this storm will kill him and everyone else unless he wises up.

Ignoring the Storms.

Lately, we, too, have been forced with storms that we've been trying to ignore, too. Two weeks ago, Europe endured an unprecedented heat wave.



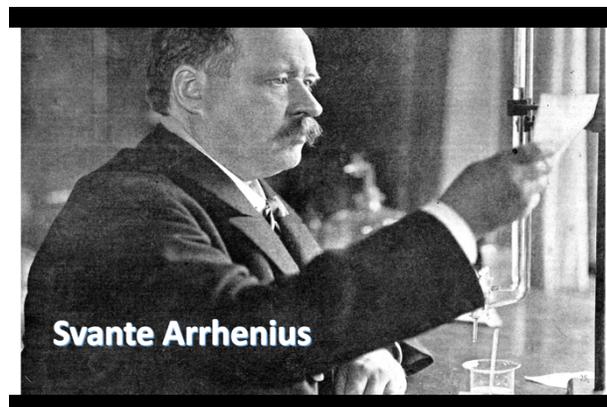
In France, temperatures reached 114 degrees Fahrenheit, (45.5 degrees Celsius)³, causing the closure of schools, and fountains to be opened beside the Eiffel Tower as swimming pools. In Germany, sections of the autobahn highway were closed because the roads were melting. Train trips were cancelled because train tracks were buckling in the heat.⁴ Here in North America, wild fires have been destroying forests and homes in California and British Columbia, while flooding

continues to assail the Midwest. Last week, a scientist reported finding heaps of dead mussels, which had cooked in their shells due to hot water near the shore.

Like Jonah, we are surrounded by storms on all sides. The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that we have just 12 years to radically cut back on carbon emissions in every part of life or we will reach a threshold that will permanently endanger the planet. Like the crew of Jonah's ship, scientists are trying to wake us up. But at the same time, our politicians remain asleep. None of them have suggested we keep our cars off the roads, or stop flying. Ontario's government has opposed the federal carbon tax, while Trump has proposed changing emissions regulations, so cars can pollute more, not less.

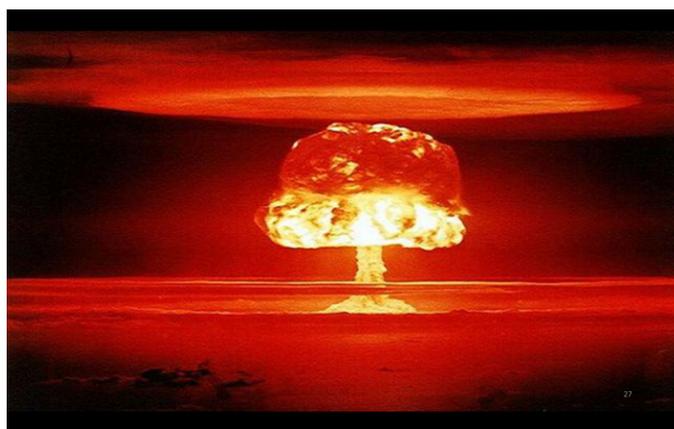
We find ourselves in a bizarre situation. We are a post-religious, scientific, rational society, and yet, here we are, with the world on fire, despite clear warnings from our best scientists. This is our hard-core reality, yet we seem to be like Jonah, determined to ignore the obvious, and sleep through the storm.

The idea that humans can change the climate is not new. We owe that discovery to this man – Svante Arrhenius.⁵ He was a Swedish scientist, who lived in Stockholm in the 1890s. On Christmas eve, 1894, he decided to solve what he thought would be a simple question.⁶ What would happen if the amount of carbon dioxide in the air went up or down – say, doubling or being cut in half. Would that have any effect on the world’s climate? Other people had already discovered that carbon dioxide could trap heat that bounced up from the Earth’s surface.⁷ It acts like the glass in our cars on a hot day. Sunlight comes in, warms up the seats and the dashboard. But the heat is trapped by the windows, so your chocolate bar melts inside the car. ⁸ Carbon dioxide works the same way, trapping heat on the Earth.



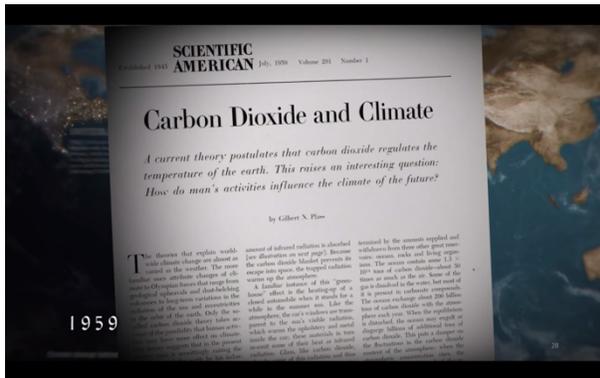
Svante was wondering about this because he wanted to know if carbon dioxide levels might have helped to cause the ice ages.⁹ To find out, he spent a year, writing out by hand over 10,000 equations.¹⁰ Over that year, his wife divorced him, he lost custody of his son,¹¹ and he battled to get promoted.¹² By 1896, he was single, but he had an answer to his question. He published an article which now puts him in the history books. He revealed that if carbon dioxide levels on Earth go down, they could trigger an ice age.¹³ If they go up, say, by doubling, they can raise the temperature of the Earth by up to 6 degrees Celsius¹⁴. Svante also noticed that human beings were adding more carbon dioxide to the air through the burning of coal, so we were artificially causing the Earth to heat up.

Seven years after proposing this theory, Svante Arrhenius won the Nobel Prize in chemistry for a different discovery.¹⁵ His fame allowed him to share his idea of how we were warming the Earth with a wide audience.¹⁶ But no one got worried. The weather seemed fine back in the early 1900s, so his strange theory was ignored.¹⁷ People just slept through it.



The Wake-up Call. It wasn’t until 1959 that his theory became public again. That was the year that scientists started worrying in public that our oil and gas were heating up the world in a dangerous way. Ironically, the proof came from scientists who had been studying what happens

to mushroom clouds caused by atomic bombs. Farmers in the Midwest had complained that the weather had changed for their crops ever since the Americans started testing their a-bombs. Scientists studied what happened to radioactive carbon created by the bombs. They found that some of it was absorbed into the oceans. But most of it just stayed in the air.¹⁸ That meant that all the extra carbon dioxide produced by cars, planes, trains, industry and factories was just building up in the air. Just as Svante had predicted. Finally, there was empirical proof for his theory.



The scientists told the world through articles in the press.¹⁹ One of them even told a gathering of America’s top oil executives in 1959. He said that their oil and gas would lead to the melting of the ice caps and the submersion of New York City, and all coastal cities. The oil executives found this hard to believe, so they commissioned their own study from Stanford. Once again, the scientists declared that Earth was in deep trouble because of the carbon we were sending into the air.²⁰ But the world didn’t

wake up. The oil companies kept quiet, and even denied that climate change science was accurate.²¹ Like Jonah, we slept, tossing and turning as the storm approached.²²

We have known since 1959 that we were in trouble – longer than I have been alive.²³ And yet, like Jonah on the ship, we have shoed away anyone who bothered our slumber. But now, we are awake, on the deck of our carbon-belching ship. The storm is all around us – wild fires, heat waves, flooding. Our choice is clear - it is time to abandon this polluting way of life before the storm destroys us. That is the rational, scientific choice. But, we keep making excuses, even going backwards. Why? What does it take to get us off this ship?

3

God does not give up.

Jonah is like us – unwilling to face reality, to make hard choices, so he slinks away. But in this story, God never gives up on Jonah. He chases him, with a storm, and finally, with a giant fish which will swallow him.

The Bible is often criticized for not being realistic. It’s bad history, a distorted story at best, sheer superstition and fantasy at worst. Much of that is true. But what the Bible’s critics miss is that its mission is not to be realistic as we understand it. Realistic is what happens in the real world. Realistic is Donald Trump’s military parade on the 4th of July, with a golden toilet back in his Manhattan apartment. Realistic is the idea that all that really matters in life is money, fame and power. If the Bible was realistic it would be just one more history book filled with the names of tyrants and emperors. But the world has plenty of those books, written by empires that fell apart long ago.

The Bible doesn't give us reality, it gives us the antidote to reality.

If it seems fanciful or impossible, that's because it is trying to wake us up out of our deep sleep. It is trying to wake us up that there is another way to live on this Earth where might does not make right, but love does. The Bible is desperately trying to jolt us out of our deep sleep, the one induced by the tyrants, who want us to believe their way is the only way. To wake us up, the Bible gives us visions of what seems completely impossible.

Think of how God treats Jonah. How many of you have ever been in charge of other employees? If they refuse to take an assignment, what do you do? Dock their pay? Fire them? Find someone else to do the job? Right. That's reality, sensible. But what does God do in this story? God doesn't give up - on Jonah or the Ninevites. God doesn't fire Jonah, or replace him, God chases him. God wants him to get this done. God throws a storm at him. God has not given up on Jonah, because God knows what Jonah does not. That people can and should change their ways. Jonah needs to let go of his hatred of the Ninevites, they need to be given a chance to repent and change their ways. So, this story breaks reality's rules, because that's what we can do, too, that's what we must do to create a reality worth having.

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We need a miracle.

So what do we do? There's no big fish waiting to save our civilization. We need a miracle, but in real life, that's not what happens.

It must have seemed that way to Svante Arrhenius. Over one hundred years ago, he realized that his civilization was going to heat the planet. But no one listened, even after he received his Nobel Prize in 1903. The world forgot about his theory, but his family didn't forget. He was a legend among his kin. Over the twentieth century they became artists – film directors, actors. One was even named Svante, in honour of his ancestor. It didn't seem like this family was ever going to have much to do with science again. But in 2003, the actor Svante and his wife had a daughter.



As she grew up, it became clear she wasn't like the other kids. She didn't make eye contact when she spoke to people. She wasn't interested in socializing or many subjects. She tended to focus on just one or two subjects and hobbies, and ignored everything else. It became clear that she was on the autism spectrum.²⁴

Like all of our kids today, she grew up hearing about global warming, and of course, her family told her about her famous ancestor, Svante Arrhenius, who had conceived the theory. And she took it to heart.

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- ¹ Steven L Mackenzie, *How to read the Bible*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.
- ² Steven L Mackenzie, *How to read the Bible*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
- ³ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/danvergano/europe-heat-wave-hottest-ever-june>
- ⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/europe-heatwave-weather-record-temperatures-wildfires-deaths-spain-germany-france-a8978071.html>
- ⁵ In the 19th century, very few scientists believed that the global climate could change at all during the lifetime of humanity. Climatology was restricted to studying the different climates found on Earth, which it was assumed had been the same for millennia. So, Arrhenius was very much ahead of his time in thinking that climate could change within a human lifetime. Matthias Heymann, "The evolution of climate ideas and knowledge," *WIREs Climate Change*, Volume 1, July/August 2010, 588-9.
- ⁶ Elizabeth Crawford, *Arrhenius: From Ionic theory to the Greenhouse Effect*, (Science History Publications, Canton:1996), 148.
- ⁷ Svante Arrhenius, "On the influence of carbonic acid in the air upon the temperature on the ground" in *Making Climate Change History*, Ed. Joshua P Howe, University of Washington Press, 2017, 40.
- ⁸ Gilbert Pass, Carbon Dioxide and Climate, *Scientific American*, July 1959.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/carbon-dioxide-and-climate/>
- ⁹ Svante Arrhenius, *Worlds in the Making: the Evolution of the Universe*. 1908, 145.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2005/jun/30/climatechange.climatechangeenvironment2>
- Ian Sample, "The Father of Climate Change", June 30, 2005, *The Guardian*.
- ¹¹ Svante Arrhenius, "On the influence of carbonic acid in the air upon the temperature on the ground" in *Making Climate Change History*, Ed. Joshua p Howe, university of Washington press, 2017, 39.
- ¹² Elizabeth Crawford, *Arrhenius: From Ionic theory to the Greenhouse Effect*, (Science History Publications, Canton:1996),148.
- ¹³ In the 1980s, ice core samples from Antarctica proved that he was right. Henning Rodhe, Robert Charlson and Elisabeth Crawford, "Svante Arrhenius and the Greenhouse Effect," *Ambio* Vol 26, No. 1, Feb. 1997
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Crawford, *Arrhenius: From Ionic theory to the Greenhouse Effect*, (Science History Publications, Canton:1996),154.
- ¹⁵ Elizabeth Crawford, *Arrhenius: From ionic theory to the greenhouse effect*, 1996. Xi.
- ¹⁶ He wrote a popular book on the history of the Earth, which included his theory about carbon dioxide. Svante Arrhenius, *Worlds in the Making: The Evolution of the Universe*. 1908.
- ¹⁷ David M Hart, David G Victor, "Scientific Elites and the Making of US Policy for Climate Change Research, 1957-74," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 23, 1993,
- ¹⁸ David M Hart, David G Victor, "Scientific Elites and the Making of US Policy for Climate Change Research, 1957-74," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 23, 1993, 648.
- ¹⁹ Gilbert Pass, Carbon Dioxide and Climate, *Scientific American*, July 1959.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/carbon-dioxide-and-climate/>
- ²⁰ Benjamin Franta, "On its 100th birthday in 1959, Edward Teller warned the oil industry about global warming," Mon 1 Jan 2018, *Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/jan/01/on-its-hundredth-birthday-in-1959-edward-teller-warned-the-oil-industry-about-global-warming>
- ²¹ Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, "What Exxon Mobil Didn't Say About Climate Change," *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 2017.
- ²² By the early 1960s, scientists knew that carbon dioxide levels were rising, as Arrhenius had predicted. Daniel Bodansky, *The History of the Global Climate Change Regime*, 24.
- ²³ By 1968, popular press was reporting on the role of carbon dioxide rising, and changing the climate. David M Hart, David G Victor, "Scientific Elites and the Making of US Policy for Climate Change Research, 1957-74," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 23, 1993, 668.
- ²⁴ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-fifteen-year-old-climate-activist-who-is-demanding-a-new-kind-of-politics>