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**SESSION 5: STRANGERS NO MORE  
(SUSTAINABILITY/PRAYER AND WORSHIP)**

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## **SESSION 5: STRANGERS NO MORE (SUSTAINABILITY/PRAYER AND WORSHIP)**

**Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5 and 4:1-11**

**An invitation to transformation that begins from within**

For directions on preparing for each session, review the “Accompaniment Bible Study Introduction.” Please note that in order to provide you with flexibility and choices in adapting each session to your particular setting, this facilitator guide contains more material than can be covered in a one-hour session. The guiding questions in the right column indicated in **red** provide the core elements of the study and should be ample material for a one-hour session.

### **SUMMARY**

Jonah worked for a God — a “transnational/global” God — whose reach well surpassed Jonah’s imagination. In this session, we will explore together the boundaries — both internal and external — that shape the way we seek to accompany others in mission. Together with Jonah, we discover that without an internal transformation, mission to those who are “other” is not sustainable. Our journey of Accompaniment must begin with a willingness to cross our own internal boundaries.

### **ACCOMPANIMENT VALUE: SUSTAINABILITY**

Often we imagine our relationships as simple and self-sustaining. In fact, relationships are complex, and connected to other relationships and commitments, and require much attention over time to sustain. The Accompaniment value of sustainability means that we recognize that any given relationship will require an intentional commitment of attention and time to build up all those who are involved. In a mission project context, sustainability means embedding the project or work in the community as a whole, so that the project doesn’t depend only on one or two people, and can continue over time.

### **ACCOMPANIMENT CAPACITY: PRAYER AND WORSHIP**

We are accompanied by Christ on our journey. God is always there for us. A discipline of regular prayer engages us with God’s presence and God’s reconciling mission. Similarly, as we worship together, we learn to accompany one another and to become more inclusive as we gather at God’s table. The baptismal font reminds us of the source of our calling to God’s mission. We are sent out in the ministry of reconciliation and love. We engage and celebrate the gifts of worship, prayer and music of all of our sisters and brothers.



<p>Welcome participants as they come in. Since this is the last session of the study, you may want to thank participants for their engagement and have information available about future learning opportunities in the congregation.</p>	<p><b>Welcome and Opening Prayer (2 min)</b></p> <p><i>You may offer an opening prayer or invite a participant to lead the group in prayer.</i></p>
<p>Using the image of a job assignment at a “transnational/global company,” this opening activity will help introduce Jonah’s “work assignment” and explore his reaction to it. Prepare a piece of paper — about a quarter-sheet size — for each participant. On half of the sheets write the words, “Mosul, Northern Iraq,” and on the other half, “Costa del Sol, Southern Spain). These are the contemporary names of the two contrasting cities in Jonah’s story: Nineveh was near today’s Mosul in northern Iraq and Tarshis was likely coastal town near today’s vacation destination of Costa del Sol in southern Spain.</p> <p>The book of Jonah seeks to challenge the prophet’s narrow vision and stereotypes of others. The likely contrasting reactions to the two “assignments” are intended to explore how our own perceptions and stereotypes about people and places can shape our understanding and approach to others.</p> <p>ALTERNATIVE GATHERING ACTIVITY: Make arrangements to show Rob Bell’s short video about his book “Love Wins” (available on YouTube <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQIDOP49J7Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQIDOP49J7Y</a>). Following the 3 min video, engage the group in conversation about Bell’s probing questions about our understanding of the reach of God’s mercy.</p>	<p><b>Which way to go (8 min)</b></p> <p>Imagine that you work for a transnational/global company. Your company is transferring you to a new location, which is indicated on the piece of paper you received. On the back of the paper, write down the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A one-word reaction</li><li>• A one-sentence prayer</li><li>• A question you would want to ask your employer</li></ul> <p>Compare and contrast your responses with others — How does the location determine your reaction? What would you need to consider as you prepare for the move? How would you pack differently? How do you feel about the prospective success/outcomes of this imaginary transfer?</p>

Nineveh became the capital of Assyria toward the end of its mighty military empire. Throughout the biblical text, Nineveh's fall to the nation of Media and the Babylonian Empire became a symbol of God's punishment of unjust oppressors (this was the focus of the entire book of Nahum). Jonah is being sent to it because of its "wickedness." Tarshis, a city known for its ships and commerce (2 Chronicles 9:21) was a contrast to Nineveh both by the role it played in Israel's imagination and by its physical location — completely in the opposite direction from where God was sending Jonah. In a way, Tarshis represented the farthest point Jonah would likely have been able to think of — a place far away from all of his troubles.

Help participants identify and name the ways that fear and stereotypes continue to divide between the world between "us" and "them." Point to divisions such as those around political affiliation (Republican/Democrat), threats to national security (communism during the Cold World or terrorism in our own day), etc. Strive for a nuanced conversation that recognizes the reality behind some of those divisions while challenging us to imagine what it means that God sent Jonah to bring a message of mercy to those who represented the worst enemies of his people.

One of the orders of confession in "Evangelical Lutheran Worship" begins "We confess that we have turned from you..." We all have parts of our lives that we feel we must keep from others, sometimes even from God. Without expecting participants to offer personal confessions, encourage group conversation about the ways in which, by our thoughts and actions, we contradict our own sense of God's "omnipresence"

### Pushing the boundaries (8-10 min)

Read Jonah 1:1-3

What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out for you?

There were plenty of "good reasons" for Jonah to refuse to go to Nineveh. The city was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and in Israel's prophetic imagination, it often represented all that was counter to God and God's people. The prophet Nahum describes it as a "city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty" (Nahum 3:1). Who are the people or places that seem totally other, distant, to us? Who are the groups, nations or people who represent that "other" in our personal, communal or national imagination?

In Jonah's imagination, it seems that both Nineveh and Tarshis are beyond the reach of God — one because of its evil ways, the other simply by its distant location. Are there parts of your life, work or calling that feel beyond the reach of God?



<p>(everywhere present) and “omniscience” (knows everything).</p> <p>In the history of missionary efforts, some approaches to mission have unwittingly contradicted the belief that God is omnipresent — everywhere present. Mission has at times been approached with the conviction that the missionaries were bringing God to distant lands and peoples, to those who by their “savagery” or “difference” were beyond the reach of God. Similarly, a narrow view of what qualifies as “Christian,” can blind us to God’s presence in all of God’s creation, leading us to believe as Jonah did, that one can actually move “away from the presence of the Lord.”</p> <p>TIP: The book of Jonah is more a story than a regular prophetic book. It makes its point through extensive use of imagery (a shipwreck, a whale, a worm, a vine that grows overnight, etc.), humor (Jonah’s attempt to escape God, cattle wearing sackcloth and ashes, etc.), exaggeration (God “hurling” a wind at the boat Jonah is on and Jonah suggesting that he be thrown overboard, a city that is three days walk across, etc.) and irony (it is the non-Hebrew sailors and people of Nineveh who listen to God rather than the prophet himself!). While respecting questions or opinions about the book, encourage participants to focus on the larger themes of the book rather than on questions about the historicity of the events it portrays.</p>	
<p>The language of the text portrays God actively manipulating nature to bring Jonah to his senses. It is clear that Jonah completely miscalculated God’s reach in God’s world. Being forced into a “time out” in the belly of a fish, Jonah comes out a changed man. He expresses that</p>	<p><b>The word came a second time (8-10 min)</b></p> <p>Read <a href="#">Jonah 3:1-3a</a></p> <p>What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out to you?</p> <p>“So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to</p>

transformation in the form of prayer and worship, partially captured in the prayer in chapter 2. Encourage conversation in the group about participants' transformational experiences, particularly those that occurred in the context of worship or prayer.

EXTRA: Consider spending some time with the group focusing on the second chapter in Jonah that captures Jonah's psalm or prayer "from the belly of the fish." You could have one person read it out loud, split the group in two and read it back and forth by verse, or invite people to read it in silence. What words or images stand out in the text? What do these stirring words express about Jonah's experience? What is the role of thanksgiving in his transformation?

TIP: Read the paragraph beneath "Accompaniment capacity: prayer and worship" as a way to help stir ideas about how worship and prayer help shape us.

Many scholars have pointed out that the book of Jonah is as much about the conversion of Nineveh as it is about the conversion of Jonah. Pointing to the story of another unwilling prophet who, like Jonah, began his journey from the port city of Joppa, author Justo Gonzalez argues in his book "Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes" that the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 — and the whole book of Acts — is as much a story about the conversion of new people to Christianity as it is about the conversion of Christianity itself into a much broader movement. Gonzalez writes:

"Peter, Son of Jonah, receives a call in Joppa — where Jonah himself boarded a ship. Contrast between the clarity of the vision for Cornelius (10:3) to Peter's

the word of the Lord." In chapter 1, Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. What changed by chapter 3?

Jonah's "conversion" (change of direction) comes about through his time-out in "the belly of the fish," where he has a chance to do some thinking. Have you ever spent some time "in the belly of the whale"?

Where are your "belly of the whale" places, the places where you get to think, pray and reflect?

What are ways in which worship, devotional time or prayer help you to set time aside to think?

Part of the story in the book of Jonah is about the conversion of Nineveh — the invitation to heed God's call and change their ways. For that to happen, however, Jonah must first be converted himself. Are there ways in which we — the church — need to be "changed" before we can effectively invite others into a changed relationship with God?



<p>puzzlement (10:17) ... Have we stopped to reflect on how much the church learned through that mission? Very little of our New Testament, if any, was written in Jerusalem. On the contrary, most of the New Testament was written precisely at that border between belief and unbelief, which has always been the growing edge of the Christian church, not only numerically, but also theologically” (page 52).</p> <p>Like the story in Jonah, the story in Acts reminds us that the mission is at its best a mutual endeavor, where both the one bringing the message and the one receiving it experience a transformation.</p>	
<p>Jonah is included in the list of prophetic books, but Jonah is never called a prophet and the book doesn't look anything like the other prophetic books. The eight-word sermon in Jonah 3:4 is the only “prophetic” message in the book. Jonah's minimalist sermon reflects his lack of trust and his contempt for those he has been sent to preach to. Nineveh's response is completely surprising. Like the non-Hebrew sailors earlier in the book who are the ones who encourage Jonah to pray, the people of Nineveh are the ones portrayed in the book as actually acting as God would have them act. This story is an invitation to openness to the possibility that those we are sent to minister to often turn out to be our partners and our teachers!</p> <p>The story is also a reminder that in Accompaniment it is important to take our faith and ourselves seriously, but not too seriously. The book of Jonah is read in its entirety, repenting cattle and all, as part of one of the services during the Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur — the Day</p>	<p><b>Forty days more (8-10 min)</b></p> <p>Read Jonah 3:3b-5 and 4:1-11</p> <p>What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out for you?</p> <p>“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Eight words... that's it. What do you think about Jonah's sermon? What about Nineveh's reaction?</p> <p>In verse 4:2 Jonah quotes a very familiar Jewish belief about God: “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” How do you think he sounded when he recited this central belief?</p> <p>Read verse 4:2 out loud once more and try to infuse it with the tone and expression Jonah likely used when saying it. Can you hear Jonah's ambivalence about God's grace? Has there ever been a time when you have felt ambivalent about God's grace?</p> <p>Just like Jonah, people of faith have often been ambivalent about God's grace. Discuss together the following verse from the hymn “There is a Wideness in God's Mercy”:</p>



of Atonement. In the midst of this very solemn commemoration, the book of Jonah provides some comedy relief lest we take ourselves too seriously.

EXTRA: Consider singing “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” (ELW 588) or simply having copies of the lyrics available for the group to sing or read together.

**CROSS-GENERATIONAL TIP:**  
Even before the age of texts and tweets, Jonah generated a powerful 48-character message. In pairs, identify a ministry of your congregation you feel strongly about (worship, youth, social ministry, etc.). Write a text (160 characters) or a tweet (140 characters) that you feel effectively communicates your passion for that ministry to others.

In the discomfort that followed the loss of shade Jonah experiences a personal loss. God’s pleading question to Jonah asks if he can imagine the value of humans and creation. Jonah has reduced the value of others to the use he may have for them. Again, there is a challenge — and an invitation — to a more sustainable way. Can we see those we approach as fully human?

The book of Nahum is an “oracle” (prophetic speeches) against the city of Nineveh, and it provides a contrast to Jonah’s message about the city. These two are the only books in the Bible to end with a question, points out the Lutheran Study Bible: “While Nahum’s final question emphasizes Nineveh’s never ending cruelty (3:10), God’s final question to Jonah emphasizes God’s concern even for the people of the wicked city (4:11). Reading these two books together helps us to see more

For the love of God is broader  
than the measures of our mind;  
And the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.  
But we make this love too narrow  
by false limits of our own;  
And we magnify its strictness  
with a zeal God will not own.

Continuing with the comic approach of the book, God first “appoints” a bush to grow overnight and provide shade for Jonah and then, when Jonah most needs the bush, “appoints” a worm to attack the bush and kill it. What do you think of this portrayal of God?

Jonah is one of only two books in the Bible that ends with a question — the other is the book of Nahum. Re-read verses 4:10-11. What do they reveal about God? What do they challenge Jonah to consider?

Without an internal transformation, mission to those who are “other” is not sustainable. Our journey of Accompaniment must begin with a willingness to cross our own internal boundaries. Our own ability, as individuals or communities, to effectively engage others, requires that we attend to our own insecurities, that we explore our own faith and convictions. It does not mean that we need to have it all together before we begin, but simply that we recognize that we do not have it all together. It requires that we approach the other with the same level of grace that we are called to approach ourselves. May we see ourselves — and others — the way God sees us.





<p>clearly that God is both just (Nahum) and merciful (Jonah) toward oppressors and oppressed alike.” (page 1516)</p>	
	<p><b>From head to heart (3 min)</b></p> <p><i>As this is the last session of this study, you may want to leave some time for final comments and reflections on the series. Plan also to share with participants other learning and ministry opportunities available through your congregation.</i></p> <p><i>Additionally, you can offer participants some of the suggestions in this section to make a connection between this study and their daily lives.</i></p> <p><b>Grab a mug of coffee</b> or other favorite drink and read the entire book of Jonah, approaching it as a story that is at once insightful and humorous.</p> <p><b>Take some “time out” to “be still.”</b> For some ideas and resources, see the ELCA Portico Benefit Services “Slow Down” available at: <a href="https://www.porticobenefits.org/~media/Files/PDF/60_198_BW.ashx">https://www.porticobenefits.org/~media/Files/PDF/60_198_BW.ashx</a>.</p> <p>Short YouTube video about Rob Bell’s book, <b>Love Wins</b> (<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQIDOP49J7Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQIDOP49J7Y</a>). Watch Rob Bell’s brief video clip if you didn’t use it in the Alternative Gathering Introduction.</p> <p><b>Gran Torino (2008)</b> with Clint Eastwood. Disgruntled Korean War veteran Walt Kowalski sets out to reform his neighbor, a young Hmong teenager, who tried to steal Kowalski’s prized possession: his 1972 Gran Torino. In the process, Kowalski discovers the need for a journey inward in order to see others with more grace.</p> <p>Read <b>“Santa Biblia: the Bible through Hispanic Eyes”</b> (Abingdon Press, 1996) by Justo Gonzalez. Drawing on the experiences of Latino Christians in the United States, Gonzalez offers a challenging, insightful, and often humorous look at Scripture, emphasizing the gift various perspectives bring to the whole church.</p>



	<p>Read “<b>Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness</b>” (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, 1st paperback edition) by Eugene Peterson. In this book Peterson explores vocation by turning to the book of Jonah, in which he finds a captivating, subversive story that can help us recover our “vocational holiness.” While addressed most directly to pastors, this book is a great resource for all.</p>
<p>TIP: A great resource for time of silent prayer or centering prayer is the free Meditation Helper app, which can be set to any amount of time and ring a soothing bell to mark the beginning and the end of the meditation time. You can download it on your Google Play Store for Android phones or tablets or Apple App Store for iPhones or iPads.</p>	<p><b>Closing prayer (3 min)</b></p> <p><i>You may offer a closing prayer or invite a participant to lead the group in prayer.</i></p> <p><i>Alternatively, you can invite participants to draw on the image of Jonah’s time of reflection in the belly of the whale, and end this final session with a time of centering or silent prayer. Begin by asking everyone to sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, hands resting on their lap or on the table. Invite them to be attentive to their breath as they take a couple of deep breaths. Ask them to repeat the following brief litany based on Psalm 46:1:</i></p> <p><i>Be still and know that I am God Be still and know Be still Be</i></p> <p><i>Depending on time, you can follow with a time of silence between 2 and 5 minutes. Ideally, people should be given the time just to be in silence, but if you feel it would be helpful for your group, you may suggest that participants reflect in this silence on the things they have heard and discussed throughout the study.</i></p>