

One thing for sure about this life on earth—it is weird.

The strangest things happen every single day.

With regard to certain events in both my personal and professional life I have thought to myself: “I could never make this up.”

Sometimes the truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

I am sure that in your own life you have found yourself in circumstances or with people that were beyond strange. It is true for everybody.

Here are some examples:

Police in Deer Lake, Newfoundland, decided in August not to press charges against three boys whom they had previously believed had harassed a young moose so badly that it had to be put down. A final piece of evidence against prosecution came from the father of one of the boys, who vouched that they could not possibly have committed the crime of harassing a moose to death, since they had been busy at the time, vandalizing a nearby church.

[Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News, 8-12-09]

Alexander Kabelis, 31, was arrested in Boulder last May for slashing tires on almost 50 vehicles. He offered several explanations for his behavior, including being overwhelmed by radiation from the nearby Rocky Flats nuclear facility and having been forced by his mother to wear braces on his teeth as a child. [Denver Post, 5-22-09]

Athena Sidlar, age 28, was fired in August from her trainee job at the Allentown, Pennsylvania State Hospital after being accused of helping a mental patient swallow large metal objects.

Too late, hospital personnel discovered that Sidlar, herself, had a long history of compulsive large metal-object swallowing. [Morning Call (Allentown), 8-28-09]

Some of the stories from the Bible could be considered news of the weird. Consider the story about a very reluctant prophet who runs from his mission and gets swallowed by a whale.

The book of Jonah is weird to say the least.

Unlike the other eleven prophetic books in the Bible, this is a story **about** the prophet and his adventures,

rather than a book of sayings **by** a prophet.

Jonah is history, allegory, and narrative, and it is strange.

Set during the reign of King Jeroboam II, around 770 BCE, a prophet named Jonah is commanded by God to go to Nineveh, which at the time was the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

Nineveh was a powerful enemy of Israel and Jonah is being asked to preach against it. It would be like going to Kabul or Baghdad and preaching against Islam. Or like going to Tel Aviv to preach against Judaism.

Not something even a crazy prophet would be eager to do.

Understandably, Jonah hates this assignment, and bolts in the opposite direction.

He jumps on a ship bound for Tarshish, a city at the far end of the known world which today would be somewhere in Spain.

Soon a savage storm arises and threatens to break the ship into pieces.

Everyone is crying out to be saved, everyone except Jonah who fast asleep.

The other passengers begin to suspect that Jonah might have something to do with the storm, and that he might save them.

So they ask him all about his background, and realize that because he is running away from God, they are being tested with this storm.

Jonah explains what he is doing, and says: “Throw me overboard into the sea and the storm will stop. It is all my fault, I am causing this storm.”

Jonah would rather die than go to Nineveh as God commands.

They tried rowing the boat back to shore, but the storm only got worse.

So eventually they throw Jonah into the sea, and immediately the storm stops.

The sailors were so grateful that they sang praises to God.

Things were not so great for Jonah, however.

The Bible simply says: “Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah.

He was in the fish’s belly for three days and three nights.”

Jonah’s journey took a definite turn for the weird.

Finally after three days and three nights living in the belly of the fish (and that had to be something too strange to be believed) he is vomited out on dry land, and the word of the Lord comes to him again: “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

This time Jonah does go to Nineveh. Still smelling fishy, and his face and skin blotchy — the result, perhaps, of intestinal acids at work during his three-day sabbatical in a sea creature — he enters the city and walks for an entire day.

He makes his way just a third of the distance across this daunting and dangerous

place. He must have looked like an apparition from *The Nightmare on Elm Street*.

“In forty days Nineveh shall be destroyed!” he shouts like a madman.

That is his sermon. One sentence.

This stinky prophet cries out against the 120,000 residents of an enormous and powerful city, not knowing if they will hear him or heed him.

Or just tear him to pieces.

The weird thing is that people were open to this troubling message. They did not get angry and try to kill him, instead they listened and trusted in God, proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth and ashes to show their repentance.

God saw their genuine regret and humility and God’s mind is changed.

Merciful God does not destroy the city.

And in one more turn toward the weird, Jonah is furious about God’s mercy.

He yells at God, saying, “I knew you would show grace and mercy and turn your plans for punishment into a program of forgiveness! I knew it.”

He goes off to sulk and stew over the fact that these sinners were NOT destroyed.

The results of his one sentence sermon were amazing and immediate.

To everyone’s surprise, the Ninevites turn back to God, and repent of their sins.

They proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth, young and old alike.

Even the king of Nineveh rises from his throne, removes his robe, covers himself in sackcloth, and sits in ashes. He calls everyone in the city to turn from their evil ways and from the violence they have known.

When God sees what they do, God has mercy upon them and blesses them.

All because of this reluctant prophet Jonah, who never wanted to be there in the first place, and who resents the positive results of his message.

In spite of himself, Jonah’s long strange trip results in very positive things.

So, Jonah’s journey, like that of Abraham, Jacob and Ruth and Naomi and Jesus, has something to teach us.

If we volunteer to serve God craving the familiar, with our own agenda and ideas, we’re setting ourselves up for failure.

The Holy Spirit of God can take us to weird places.

In fact I would say that a hallmark of a sacred journey is finding yourself in places where you never expected to be.

It is precisely in those lonely and strange places where you learn and grow and discover God.

It is not always pleasant. It involves suffering and sacrifice and surprise.  
It means finding yourself lost and broken, and there realizing who you really are.

And who God really is.

None of us would ever choose to be in the belly of a whale.

But sometimes that is exactly where we find ourselves.

And there we also find God.

Ask Jonah. The message of Jonah is all about trusting in the unfamiliar and strange. It is about hearing God and responding. When we're obedient to God — even after a time of running in the opposite direction, we find that our efforts can be used for something wonderful and good.

Even finding ourselves in circumstances that we could not make up,  
that are stranger than fiction.

Keep in mind that Jonah's preliminary response to God's call was one of complete avoidance and disobedience.

When he originally turned and headed for Tarshish, he was ignoring a direct command of God.

Which is exactly what we all do—that is the human condition.

Father Mapple, the preacher in another great fish story, Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, points out that God often speaks to us in commands, because God knows that what is expected of us is difficult. "If we obey God, we sometimes must disobey ourselves," Mapple says; "and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."

We are sometimes called to disobey ourselves, meaning own desires for gratification, comfort, security, popularity and success.

We are called to put a higher reality before our own and that takes faith.

Jonah disobeyed God, and this led to the near-death and very weird experience of being thrown into the sea and swallowed by a fish.

But when he repented, as he was about to ask the citizens of Nineveh to do, and was obedient to God, he discovered life for himself, and for those he sought to help. Renewal and regeneration came when he trusted in God in the midst of a very weird reality.

God used this reluctant, narrow-minded, vengeful and self-pitying prophet to bring a ship of people to God and to save the greatest city in the world at that time from destruction.

Jonah accomplishes all of this in spite of his own weakness and lack of faith.

In a very real sense, all God driven journeys are strange.  
 Who would leave a life devoted to seeking pleasure and wealth and happiness  
 and choose to care about the lost, the sad, the broken?  
 Who would risk going to a war zone to witness for peace?  
 Who wants to be faithful to a set of moral constructs that  
 will have people looking at us as though we're from another planet, an alternative  
 universe that bears no resemblance to current values?  
 The idea that we are to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, pray for our  
 persecutors, care for the sick, the sad, the forgotten and forlorn is just plain weird  
 in light of the values of this world.  
 The idea that every person is created in the image of God and precious to God, the  
 idea that every person is Christ and they are all crucified seems bizarre indeed

But... it is what we believe.  
 And we also believe in a man who cared for the lost, broken and vulnerable,  
 we believe that hope follows despair, joy follows sorrow,  
 and life comes even out of death.  
 We believe that our God is a God of miracles and new beginnings.

So the next time you think to yourself, "Man I could not make this up, this is  
 stranger than fiction." Hang in there.  
 You just might be in the midst of a weird God inspired call that could accomplish  
 miraculous things.  
 Most of all, do not ever give up on yourself.  
 For if God could use a reluctant and stubborn prophet like Jonah,  
 God could use you, Even you.  
 Thanks Be To God.

Remain seated as we sing a Hymn that is very meaningful to me.  
 This Hymn was written by Brian Wren, melody adapted by Hal Hopson  
 and is a Hymn for Marriage and HolyUnions, but I find it a Hymn for Life.  
 It speaks to all of our journeys because it describes the hope, the pain, the  
 strangeness of this life and reminds us that nothing matters more than Love.  
 "When Love Is Found" 643