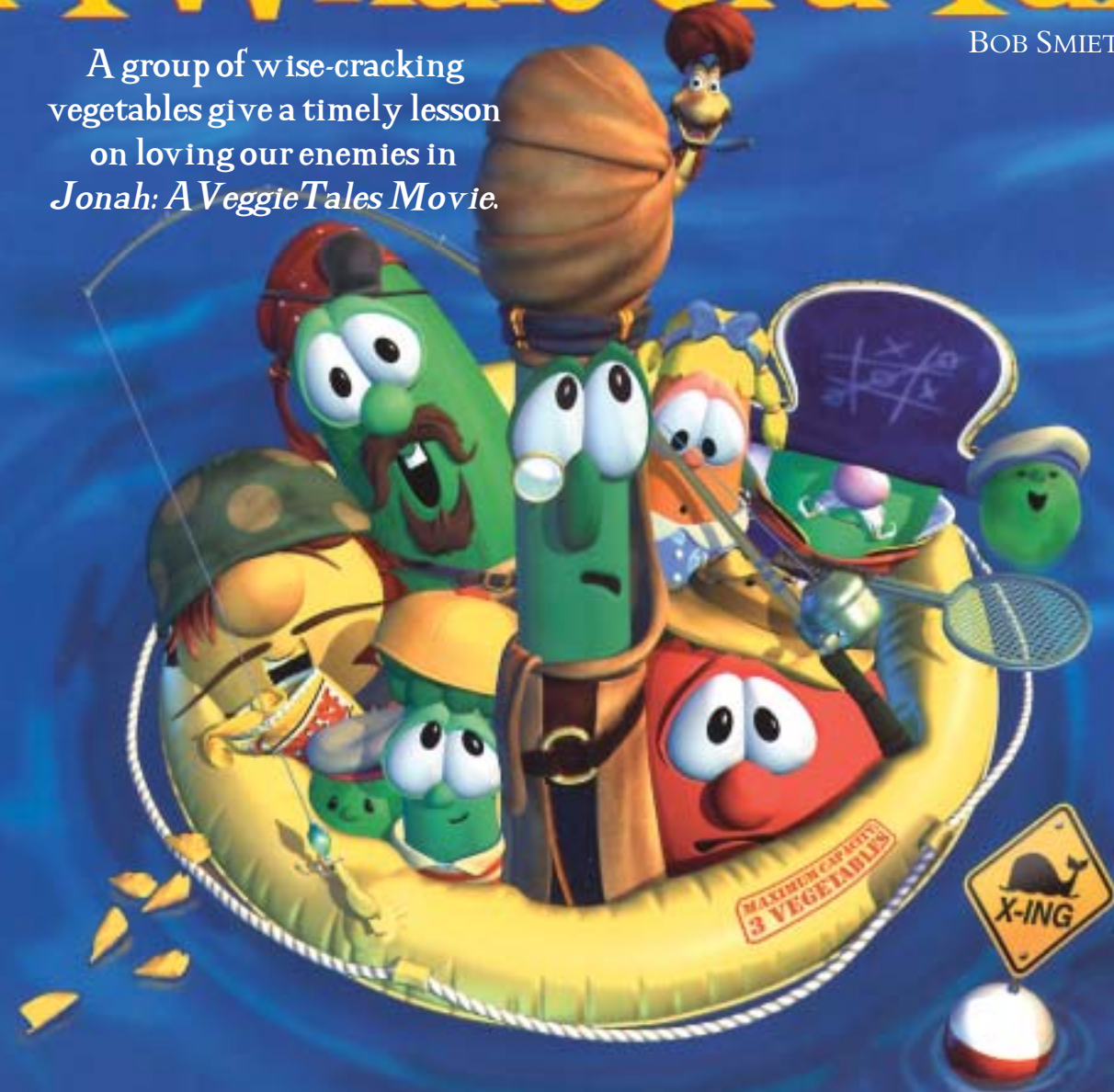


# A Whale of a Tale

BOB SMIETANA

A group of wise-cracking vegetables give a timely lesson on loving our enemies in *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie*.



In *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie*, audiences will find all the elements that have made the VeggieTales video series a success—eye popping animation, toe-tapping songs, Monty-Python-esque humor, and plenty of animated vegetables that love Jesus.

They may also find something they may not have expected from an animated children's film—a message about loving your enemies, even when they live in Iraq.

In the film, which follows the Old

Testament story faithfully, an Israelite prophet named Jonah (played by Archibald Asparagus, an upper-crusty English butler-type character) is told by God to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jonah refuses to go, and instead flees his home by ship. The ship is almost sunk during a massive storm, which calms only when Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale. While in the whale's belly, Jonah repents, and gets a second chance.

But when Jonah gets to Nineveh,

the people repent of their evil deeds, and the city is spared. That angers Jonah, who is disappointed that God won't wipe them out.

At the climax of the film, Jonah climbs to the top of a hill outside of Nineveh (located in the northern no-fly zone of present day Iraq) and waits with glee for the fire and brimstone to begin. "Oh it's time to watch the fun," he tells his sidekick Khalil, a Persian rug dealer with a Pakistani accent. "It's time to watch God wipe them off the face of the earth. . . . I picked a safe dis-

tance so we won't get singed."

Even when the destruction of Nineveh is delayed, Jonah is still excited about what he thinks is going to happen. "Oh this is going to be great," he says. "The bad guys are finally going to get what they deserve."

As he waits, a weed grows up next to Jonah, and gives him shade. When the weed dies unexpectedly, Jonah is beside himself with grief. He would have shed no tears for Nineveh, but has plenty for the weed.

At this point Khalil has had enough. "Has it ever occurred to you that God loves everybody," he asks, "not just you?"

That's the message that Phil Vischer, CEO of Big Idea Productions and

Testament at North Park Theological Seminary, says that Jonah, the book and the movie, is about a "distortion of what it means to be elect." The ancient Israelites believed that since they were God's chosen people, they were entitled to special benefits—like God's mercy and forgiveness—that were denied to other people, like the Ninevites.

"The message of Jonah is about the mercy of God extending to nations outside of Israel," says Hubbard, "that God has compassion on all nations just as he does for Israel."

This practice of presumption is not limited to the ancient Israelites. In his book, *Messy Spirituality*, Mike Yaconelli writes about "kingdom monitors,"

**"The message for Christians from the story of Jonah is all about God's deep compassion and mercy for everybody. Not just us. Not just those on the inside."**

voice of Bob the Tomato (as well as Archibald Asparagus), hopes to get across to Christians, especially evangelicals, who he says are too often tempted to "forget about trying to save the world," and focuses only on trying to "keep our own kids Christian."

"We need to remember that we're all called to have a cultural impact," he said. "The message for Christians from the story of Jonah is all about God's deep compassion and mercy for everybody. Not just us. Not just those on the inside."

Robert Hubbard, professor of Old

people who sneak into the church because of God's mercy and grace (which he refers to as Jesus' irresponsible love) and then appoint themselves as gatekeepers.

"[A]s soon as we are included in the party because of Jesus's irresponsible love," he says, "we decide to make grace 'more responsible' by becoming self-appointed Kingdom Monitors, guarding the kingdom of God, keeping the riff-raff out."

And the people of Nineveh were no

**Bob Smietana is features editor of the Companion.**



Archibald Asparagus



Khalil



Bob the Tomato

## A Look at Modern-Day Nineveh

Since United Nations sanctions against Iraq (where the ruins of Nineveh are located) were imposed in 1991 at least 200,000 and perhaps as many as 500,000 children have died in Iraq from malnutrition and water-borne diseases, according to a report published in 2000 by UNICEF. Human rights advocates and many faith-based groups blame the sanctions for a range of problems in post-Gulf War Iraq, including increases in infant mortality, malnourishment, waterborne diseases, and medical shortages.

One of the groups that has been especially vocal in drawing attention to the condition of ordinary Iraqis is Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness (VITW). VITW is particularly concerned that if the United States attacks Iraq in the near future, it will bomb bridges, electrical plants, and sewage and sanitation plants. That, the group says, would mean catastrophe for civilians in

Iraq, especially children. "If you knock out the electrical facilities, then food begins to spoil, and the hospitals immediately have big problems, because their generators won't last forever," says Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of VITW. "The sewage and sanitation facilities that rely on electricity [will] stop working and that's when you get contaminated water seeping into people's drinking water."

VITW has also been sending delegations to Iraq, bringing medical supplies and visiting hospitals. Delegation members bringing back reports of children who are traumatized because of the threat of a possible U.S. attack.

"We are hearing stories of fourth graders," Kelly says, "sometimes half- or three-quarters of a class wetting the bed at night because the adults have told them about what could happen." □

ordinary riff-raff. Hubbard points out that the Assyrians have been referred to as “the Nazis of the ancient world.” They were cruel, warlike, and would devastate the cities they conquered. They posed a real threat to Jonah and his people—within seventy years of Jonah’s lifetime, the Assyrians would conquer Israel and carry its people into exile.

So God’s demand that Jonah go to Nineveh meant personal risk—he might be killed—and even worse, it meant aiding and abetting the enemy of his people.

Jonah knew that if he went to Nineveh God might spare the city, something in his people’s strategic best interests. “That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish,” Jonah tells God. “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

As the United States contemplates war with Iraq, Jonah raises disturbing



questions for Christians since the interests of our nation may be in conflict with the interest of God’s kingdom.

“What does it mean for us as Christians, if we think that God loves the people of Iraq and has compassion on them?” asks Hubbard. “That God understands their sorrows, their suffering under their pharaoh, Saddam. What does it mean that God loves Saddam and cares about him and his family? What does it mean that God is also a God of judgment and justice?”

As Robert Frost once pointed out

once, the moral of Jonah is that we cannot trust God to be unmerciful. God could show mercy to the Assyrians in Jonah’s day. And God could show mercy to the Iraqis.

Some would argue that it would be an act of mercy to remove Saddam Hussein by force, and their point is worth considering. Others would argue that it is naïve to apply that lesson from Jonah to the current crisis with Iraq. That is Sunday school—and this is war. “Love your neighbor” refers to personal morality, not to global politics.

But if there is any time when Christian love matters, it is precisely when a nation is considering going to war. That’s when the rubber hits the road—when our Christian conscience must temper our anger, and give us pause to carefully consider our action.

The book of Jonah ends with a question—“Shall I not show mercy on Nineveh?” It’s a question that we, like Jonah, would do well to ponder, whether we go to war or not. □

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