Jonah was already established as a prophet.

“Jonah the son of Amittai prophesied that even though sinful patterns of abuse, injustice, and idolatry continued unabated,” writes Deacon Dr. Cory Driver, “the Northern Kingdom of Israel would become great again by recovering land and prestige that had been lost under previous kings (2 Kings 14:23-27). In other words, Jonah’s prophetic career, outside of the book that bears his name, is based entirely upon prophesying national greatness for an unrepentant country. As a prophet, Jonah was an unconditional Israelite nationalist.” (Cory Driver, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-jonah-31-5-10-5>)

It is therefore with comedic irony that God chooses Jonah as the one who will prophesy against the Assyrian city of Ninevah—no other prophet was less interested in seeing repentance and possible redemption from the wickedness there. We hear not of the particular sinfulness in the bible or other texts, but all are in agreement with its characterization as evil.

The story is meant to respond to questions about God’s mercy and fairness. The earliest Hebrew readers of this book were confused that the Northern Kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians and then the Persians conquered the Southern Kingdom and the Assyrians, but left the Assyrian capital, Babylon, intact. How could God’s mercy have been kept from the Hebrews, but extended to the Assyrians? How could the Persians have conquered

When Jonah hears God’s command to go to Ninevah to speak out against them, he immediately rises, pays his fare for travel, and boards a ship—going due West to Tarshish, about 3,000 miles. However, Ninevah was inland, maybe 700 miles East-north-east.

Jonah’s flight away from God wasn’t smooth for long though. “[] The LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.” (Jonah 1:4) Frightened, the sailors interrogate Jonah and become even more scared as they hear of his faith and defiance of God. He offers they can toss him overboard as this will clear them from the crossfire of God’s fury. Over the rail they go