

“JONAH: There’s a Jonah in All of Us”

A sermon by
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TEXTS: Jonah 1:1-17 and Matthew 28:16-20

Jonah 1:1-17

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

But 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. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’

The sailors said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, ‘Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ ‘I am a Hebrew,’ he replied. ‘I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?’ For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the LORD, ‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Merriam-Webster defines a “fish story” as “an incredible or extravagant tale.” One of my favorites is about the fisherman who encounters the Game Warden as he is walking from back from a river in West Virginia with two creels full of brown trout. The officer asks to see the man’s fishing license. The angler replies, “Officer, I was not fishing, and I did not catch these brown trout. They are my pets. Every day I come down to the river. I put these fish into the river and take them for a swim down to the bridge. I walk along the shore. When I'm ready to go I whistle, and they jump back into the creels and we go home.” “Show me,” said the warden. They walk back to the river and the angler complies. The fish go in the river. The warden says, “Now whistle to your fish and show me that they will jump out of the water and into the creels.”

The fisherman innocently turns to the officer and says, “What fish?” Some would call the Book of Jonah a “fish story.” Jesus did not think so. When the Jewish leaders asked for a sign, he told them that no sign would be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah who was three days in the belly of the great fish.

Jonah was an historical person. He was a prophet, that is, one through whom God spoke to God’s people. In the Second Book of Kings 14:25, we read, *“He [King Jereboam II] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-Hepher.”* [2 Kings 14:25] Jonah’s name means, “Dove.” His father, Amittai, has a name that means, “Truth.” The Book of Jonah begins unlike any other book in the Old Testament. It begins with these words, *“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai . . .”* Seven times we find the phrase *“the word of the Lord”* in the short Book of Jonah.

The word of the Lord to Jonah is, “Go!” It is the same message and command Jesus shares with his disciples after the resurrection. Go! Go! God is sending Jonah to Nineveh to preach coming judgment. Jesus sends His disciples into the world to proclaim Good News. Jesus sends us to be God’s agents and spokespersons in the world.

There is a bit of Jonah in all of us!

I GOD OFTEN ASKS US TO STEP OUTSIDE OUR COMFORT ZONE

“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” - --Jonah 1:2

God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the nation of Assyria. Jonah doesn’t want to go. God wants Jonah to proclaim judgment against Nineveh. First, these are Gentiles, outside of God’s grace (so Jonah believes). Secondly, these Ninevites are nasty wicked. Jonah knows Assyria by reputation. Jonah knows that the wickedness of Nineveh is great. Jonah is afraid.

He has good reason to be afraid. Until Alexander the Great came along, the Assyrian Empire was the largest and most feared empire to ever rule in Mesopotamia and the Middle East. At the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, the Assyrian army struck terror into neighboring states because they possessed the best and newest military technology.

The Assyrians had the first professional, fully-trained standing army. Historian D. Brendan Nagle writes, “The [Assyrian] army was an integrated fighting force of infantry, cavalry, and such special forces as slingers and archers. It was the first army to systematically combine engineering and fighting techniques. Its engineers developed siege engines, built bridges, dug tunnels, and perfected supply and communication systems. Its widespread use of iron weaponry enabled it to put large numbers of soldiers into the field.” Assyrian soldiers were known for their savagery. The Bible Exposition Commentary says of Nineveh, “Nineveh was great in sin, for the Assyrians were known far and wide for their violence, showing no mercy to

their enemies. They impaled live victims on sharp poles, leaving them to roast in the desert sun; they beheaded people by the thousands and stacked their skulls up in piles by the city gates; and they even skinned people alive. They respected neither age nor sex and followed a policy of killing babies and young children so they wouldn't have to care for them (Nahum 3:10)."ⁱ

Jonah was sent to a hostile foreign culture known for its wickedness. Jesus sent the disciples to be witnesses to the Roman Empire that had just crucified Jesus. God calls us to be witnesses for Him in the culture in which we live. We face nothing like what Jonah and the disciples faced. What is stopping us? Certainly not fear for our lives! Certainly not fear of persecution! Certainly not fear of violent opposition! What stops us? The same thing that stopped Jonah. Jonah thought he knew better than God. The Ninevites were wicked. Jonah knew they wouldn't change. He knew they wouldn't repent. Besides, going to Nineveh was way outside his comfort zone. It was 500 miles away by foot. Why waste all that time and effort on a wicked, evil people? Why be a witness? Why preach the Gospel? When the word of God comes to us, we are called to be obedient. We are not called to produce results. Results are God's responsibility!

What is your Nineveh? Your Nineveh is likely the place where pulls you out of your comfort zone. Your Nineveh is the place God calls you to address, a place where you would just rather not go. Your Nineveh is the place where God wants to work and the place you want to avoid. When it comes to wrong, wickedness, and evil, we can easily feel that someone should do something, someone should say something. Yet, we remain silent and dare not risk acting because we are outside our comfort zone. What will other people think? What will other people do?

When we get outside our comfort zone, we have two choices. We can obey or we can disobey. We will often make excuses, whether it is in the area of forgiveness, gossip, anger, or something else, we will justify it by saying, "I know what God says, but . . ." We then make an exception to excuse our disobedience. And . . .

II WE CAN ALWAYS FIND A BOAT SAILING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION

"But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so, he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord." ---Jonah 1:3

The word of God came to Jonah. God says, "Go to Nineveh" which is in the east. Jonah says, "No thanks, God," and heads southwest to Joppa. There he buys a ticket to Tarshish. Where is Tarshish?

Tarshish was a Philistine outpost seaport near the Strait of Gibraltar in southern Spain. It was approximately 2500 miles due west of Joppa. Why go to Tarshish? Tarshish was about as far west as you could go and remain in the civilized world. Very few sailors would venture beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The world beyond was unknown.

However, Jonah did not merely go to the ends of the map. He was not merely running from responsibility. He was running from God. Let's go back to the text in verse 3, ". . . so he [Jonah] paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord." [Jonah 1:3]

We smile and think, "How do you think you can run from God?" When you choose to disobey, there is always a boat ready to take you Tarshish. If you are intent on disobeying, you will look for it. You will find it.

I grew up in a Christian home. If there is a motto for our family crest, I am pretty sure it is, "*Be sure your sins will find you out.*" (Numbers 32:23) I certainly heard that verse enough. However, my experience has been that it is true.

A good example is the drunk husband who came home late and snuck up the stairs quietly. He looked in the bathroom mirror and bandaged the bumps and bruises he'd received in a fight earlier that night. He then proceeded to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he'd pulled one over on his wife. When morning came, he opened his eyes and there stood his wife. "You were drunk again last night weren't you!" "No, dear, of course not." "Well, if you weren't, then who put all the band-aids on the bathroom mirror?" You can run, but you cannot hide! Your sins will find you out.

The Psalmist knew there is no fleeing the presence of God. It is impossible. In Psalm 139, he writes, "*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are*

there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." (Psalm 139:7-12) Through the Prophet Jeremiah, God speaks these words, "Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord." (Jeremiah 24:23-24)

We can try to run from God, but we can never, ever escape the presence of God. The good news is that we can never run too far to the point that God cannot reach us or save us.

This entire book is not about Jonah. It is not even about a big fish. The book is about God. How do I know? The fish is mentioned 4 times. The city of Nineveh is mentioned 9 times. Jonah is mentioned 18 times. God is mentioned 38 times.

The God revealed in the book of Jonah is a God of grace who seeks redemption for all people. God sees the wickedness of Nineveh. God sends Jonah to Nineveh. Jonah runs. Jonah hides. However, the original commission stands. Jonah may have given up on both God and Nineveh, but God has not given up on either.

God sends a storm.

III GOD MAY SEND A STORM TO GRAB YOUR ATTENTION

"But 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)

Note that this is not merely a random storm. God specifically sends the storm. It is a providential storm, sent to achieve God's will for Jonah and God's will for Nineveh. It must have been quite a storm, for the sailors, normally capable seamen, cry aloud to their gods for rescue. They are so desperate that they throw the cargo overboard in order to lighten the load. This was their livelihood. Sailors did not get paid until they had safely delivered their cargo to port. The idea that they would jettison the cargo to save their own lives speaks to their desperation.

Where is Jonah? Jonah is asleep in the hold of the ship. The storm doesn't wake him. The shouts and cries of the sailors do not awaken him. Why is Jonah still asleep? He's not sleeping because he has a clear conscience. He has made it this far. Perhaps he believes that he has escaped. Yet, even here he cannot escape God.

The sailors awaken him. "We have cried out to our gods and we're not getting anywhere. Wake up and try your god. Maybe your god will listen to you."

How do you think Jonah might have felt in that moment? "Uh, God and I aren't talking right now. In fact, I'm running from God."

A temporary calm settles upon the ship. The sailors cast lots to find the cause of the storm. The lot falls to Jonah. "Who are you?" "Where do you come from?" "What is your occupation?" they cry. (Jonah) answered, "I am a Hebrew," he replied. 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.' Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so." ---Jonah 1:9-10

Jonah, do you really worship the God of the Hebrews? It looks a lot like you are running away from the God of the Hebrews. Worship, the declaration of God's worth, involves more than just ritual and outward expression. It requires obedience to the call that God places on your life.

Jonah knows where the storm has come from. He knows he is the cause.

Sometimes it takes a storm to bring us up short. Sometimes God must call us up short and get our attention. It takes a storm in life to get us thinking. Sometimes God uses circumstances to prompt us to stop running from Him and the things God calls us to do. In those moments, we have opportunity to listen when previously we have only heard. It is the same story as Peter denying Jesus in the courtyard of the High Priest minutes after telling Jesus he will follow anywhere. It is the same story as Paul on the Road to Damascus, caught up short by a vision of the Risen Christ whose disciples he is persecuting.

Is there a storm brewing or raging in your life today? What is God trying to communicate to you through the storm?

Jonah knew why the storm raged. He believed he was the cause. "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then it will quiet down for you; for I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (Jonah 1:12)

IV JONAH'S WORST NIGHTMARE WAS EXACTLY WHAT WAS NEEDED

Jonah assumes his life is over. He doesn't want to be the cause of death for these sailors. He tells them to throw him overboard. They refuse. They fight the storm. The storm gets even worse. At that moment the sailors decide to do what Jonah has told them to do.

"Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.' So, they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." (Jonah 1:14-16)

They throw Jonah overboard and the sea immediately becomes calm. Did you catch that? Jonah is a missionary prophet. He has just made his first converts. He never told them about His God. He only told why he was fleeing His God. God used Jonah despite his disobedience. The sailors cry out to Jonah's God. They fear Jonah's God even more. They make sacrifices and vows to Jonah's God.

"But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17)

It is so easy to see the storms of life as negative experiences to avoid instead of vehicles through which God may be speaking. As Jonah went over the side of the boat into the sea, he must have thought his life was over and his end had come. As he watched the boat sail away, he was likely convinced God was punishing him. On the contrary, Jonah grew up inland. I doubt he knew how to swim. He was on this boat because of necessity, not because he was an able seaman.

God provides a large fish. The fish swallows Jonah. Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish.

God has Jonah's attention.

The storm is grace. The big fish is grace.

For us, the storm seems like punishment. The answer God sends, like the big fish, may seem unlikely, extreme and harsh. With the gift of time and distance, we realize that God's love toward us, though sometimes seeming harsh, is never meant to harm us.

It is meant to save us.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory! AMEN.

ⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament—The Prophets Isaiah-Malachi*, (Colorado Springs, David C. Cook, 2008, Second Edition, 383)