

"JONAH, WALK THRU THE BIBLE."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Jonah 1:1-3, 17; 2:1-2, 9-10; 3:10; 4:1-1

Introduction.

The prophecy of Jonah is unique among the prophetic books for several reasons. It's the only prophecy directed toward the life of a prophet rather than his message. It contains only one sentence of prophecy, the rest is narrative like we read about Elijah or Elisha.

It's different from all the other Minor Prophets in that it's completely autobiographical. It tells the story of one prophet and his relationship with God. And it's not a flattering story, which once again argues for the authenticity of God's Word. It tells the truth and doesn't whitewash reality.

The first great surprise in this little book is "But Jonah..." Wait, what's this? God told a prophet to do something, and he fled from the presence of the Lord heading west instead of east. Jonah is the only prophet of God in all of Scripture who directly disobeyed God's Word. But Jonah's disobedience is not his only sin. There is something underlying his disobedience, a disease of which this disobedience is a symptom.

The four chapters of Jonah divide neatly in half. The first two chapters are about his first divine call to prophesy against Nineveh and the second two chapters are about his second divine call to prophesy against Nineveh.

Jonah's First Call to Prophecy, Jonah 1-2.

We know the story well. God calls Jonah, a prophet from Israel, to travel 500 miles NE to Nineveh, the massive capital of Assyria. Jonah responds by booking passage on the next boat heading 1,500 miles west to the farthest point on the globe, Tarshish in Spain. In those days, Tarshish really was the end of the world.

Notice how the details of Jonah's flight all fell into place. First, he was able to get to Joppa. Then there was a boat in port heading to Tarshish, one of the farthest ports in the known world, at the other end of the Mediterranean. And they had room for one more and he had enough money on him to pay. It must have seemed providential, so much good fortune.

You can always find a convenient boat heading in the opposite direction. You can always find an excuse, you can always make up some good reason for disobeying. Our boats have names like Later, Tomorrow, Someday, When things are going better, When I get my act together, When I get married, or have kids or have a better job, When I have more time. And sometimes we are so bold as to get on the boat named “No.”

Wow, we didn't see that coming. When God speaks people listen and obey. And when God speaks to a prophet they do exactly what He says. Moses argued but eventually went to Pharaoh, Jeremiah complained he was too young, but eventually went. But Jonah does the exact opposite.

Most people want to know the will of God, Jonah runs away from the will of God. Why?

We like it when good things happen to good people and when bad things happen to bad people. We have a hard time when bad things happen to good people. And we have an even harder time when good things happen to bad people.

I tried to think of how I could capture Israel's feelings toward Assyria. It was sort of like America's attitude toward Germany or Japan during WWII. Or maybe America's attitude toward Afghanistan and Iran after the Trade Center attacks.

But none of those quite capture it. Assyria was a ruthless, bloodthirsty, terrorist tyranny that systematically beat into submission every nation around them. They were a violent, barbaric people. Their crimes against humanity were every bit as horrible as Hitler or Stalin.

In the eighth century BC Assyria was the most power nation in the world, the largest empire and the sworn enemy of Israel.

So perhaps we can at least appreciate to some extent why Jonah had a really hard time with the prospect that God wanted him to go to Nineveh and announce God's judgment so that they might repent and receive God's forgiveness. That's why Jonah is the runaway prophet.

Have any of us ever heard God speak and not done what He said to do. How many times has God spoken through His Word, through a sermon or Bible Study and we have ignored it? Is Jonah really so different than us? Don't we struggle with faith and obedience? Don't we balk at God's righteous commands and wrestle with submitting our will to His will?

God stands directly in Jonah's path which gets him a bath in the Mediterranean, a time out in a whale's belly and up-chucked on a sandy Mediterranean beach where he's told to start heading NE again.

Jonah's first lesson is that you can run but you can't hid. His second lesson is that God is a God of second chances. He learns the lessons learned by Abraham, David, Peter and most of us.

This story is a story of hope for backsliders, for prodigal sons and daughters, for wayward sinners and saints. It's good news of God's persistent faithfulness.

Always remember the "***But God***" moments in Scripture. When all is lost, all is doomed, all else has failed, God intervened. Grace stepped in. In your worst, darkest days, you are never beyond the reach of God's grace, even if we are the cause of our darkness.

Jonah's Second Call to Prophecy, Jonah 3-4.

Jonah 3:1-5 Then *the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time*, saying, [2] "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." [3] ***So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.*** Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. [4] Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" [5] And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Jonah either preaches the shortest sermon on record with incredible results or we just have a very brief summary, but great fear falls on the city and they repent in sack cloth and ashes. I don't know if there is any other place in Scripture where we hear of such an immediate and large scale revival. The people believed, from the least to the greatest. They fast and pray, they repent and turn from their violent ways.

If ever there was a "hell-freezing-over" event or a "when-pigs-fly" event this was it. No one on earth would ever believe that the wicked, evil, bloodthirsty Ninevites would ever repent.

If the book of Jonah had ended at the end of chapter 3, everything would make sense, and it would be a happily ever afterward story. Jonah preached, Nineveh repented. The End.

This brings us to ***the second huge, surprising moment in the story***. First, a prophet runs away from God and then a prophet preaches but when the people obey Jonah gets angry.

What a crazy turn of events. The pagans fear God and repent and God gives them life. The prophet is angry at God and asks for death.

Jonah 4:1-3 It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. [2] And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. [3] Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

When someone is running from God it's good to remember that there are probably some deeper reasons, something more than meets the eye.

Let's look into Jonah's heart as it's revealed to us. His blind spots are brought into the light. Why is he so ticked off? Where does anger come from?

James 4:1-4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? [2] You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. [4] You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Anger rises when we have expectations and wants and desires that aren't met in the way we want. Anger rises when things seem unfair to us. Anger rises when our rights are trampled, when we are selfish and self-centered. Anger creeps in where grace is absent.

What God did made Jonah furious. He knew God needed very little excuse to forgive sinners. All God asked for was repentance, which in Jonah's minds was a ridiculously low standard.

He did not want the Assyrians to experience anything of God's grace, and he certainly didn't want this kind of people in his church. Jonah was a racist.

Anger creeps in when grace falls out. Bitterness grows in the soil of discontent and ingratitude. Where grace is lacking, resentment is not.

God blesses someone and we resent that He hasn't given us the same blessing. God heals someone and we complain that He doesn't do the same for us. Or God helps us but then helps someone much more undeserving.

It's interesting to compare Jonah's second prayer with his first prayer. Back in chapter 2 he prayed to God to have compassion and deliver his life from the pit and when he's saved he's thankful. But now God's compassion is the cause of his anger.

Jonah needs a little remedial re-education and God is happy to do it. He sends a plant that grows quickly to give Jonah shade in the hot Middle Eastern sun. Notice this is the only time Jonah is happy in the whole book. Then God kills the plant and Jonah complains loudly. There's an intentional contrast between Jonah's joy over his own salvation and his anger over Nineveh's.

Yahweh drew a moral, contrasting Jonah's selfish concern for the plant, and God's own compassion for the people of Nineveh. God isn't compassionate only to those who are worthy or deserve it, there are none who are worthy, none who deserve it.

God teaches Jonah that He made the vine, He made the worm, He made Nineveh and He could do with them as He pleased. He will have mercy on whom He has mercy and compassion on whom He has compassion (Exodus 33:19).

God sent a great fish called grace. Then God sent a great revival called grace. Finally God sent a plant called grace. All to show Jonah what grace looks like and how much he lacked it.

Why doesn't Jonah get it? Jonah's pride and prejudice and anger blind him to God's grace. Jonah doesn't get that God's grace is undeserved. Nineveh didn't deserve it, but neither did he.

It's very interesting that we don't know what happens to Jonah in the end. Does he have a change of heart or does he stay mired in his graceless anger? Maybe it's left open to challenge us to consider what we would do in his sandals.

We cannot appreciate or fathom the depth of God's compassion and mercy until we can comprehend the depth of our own sin. The realization of our own unworthiness is the greatest tool for opening our hearts to others, including the least deserving. God is willing to send His salvation to even the cruelest nation in the world.

Jesus, One Greater than Jonah.

Matthew 12:38-41 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." [39] But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it *except the sign of the prophet Jonah*. [40] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of

the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [41] The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and ***behold, something greater than Jonah is here.***

Notice the twist, I will not give you a sign, except the very greatest sign of all.

Jonah is the only OT character to whom Jesus directly compares Himself.

Jesus uses Jonah's story as an illustration of His own story. Jesus makes two comparisons. ***First***, Jesus connects Jonah's three days in the whale to His own death and resurrection.

Second, He connects His ministry of preaching repentance and grace to Jonah's, but extends it further than Jonah could imagine.

Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish experiencing a figurative death and resurrection, and then came out to preach repentance to the Gentiles in Nineveh bringing them salvation. After His resurrection Jesus sent His disciples out to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus is the Lamb of God who comes not only to take away the sins of Israel, but the sins of the whole world. In Jesus Christ we see the full-blown glory of God's amazing grace. He has come to gather unworthy believers from every tribe, tongue, language and people.

The greater Jonah delights in our repentance, there is joy in heaven over one sinner repenting.

Application and conclusion.

This book isn't about a whale or even about Nineveh's need for the gospel, it's about Jonah's need for the gospel. This book is about Christians like us. Untested, untried and unchallenged we think we are doing just fine, but then God shows us a chink in our armor, a hidden hardness in our hearts. We're caught off guard and surprised by our ungodly reaction.

Scripture teaches us that God disciplines as sons those He loves. Like Jesus with the rich young ruler, God searches our hearts and finds those things in us that are contrary to Him and His Word. And then He sends His Word and His wind and His whale and His worm.

Are we impatient? He sends trying circumstances. Are we greedy? He sends us expensive lessons to teach us not to hang on too tightly to our money. Are we proud? He bursts our bubble with humiliating situations. Are we gossips? He makes us victims of our own sin. Do we see specks in other people's eyes? He makes us to stumble over our own log. Are we racist? God confronts our hypocritical love. Do we withhold grace and forgiveness? God reveals our cold hearts compared to His generous love.

Jonah speaks to the hearts of churches and Christians who have grown cold toward outsiders and those different than us. Jonah challenges us to examine our hearts and attitudes about the lost and pagan world.

Is there any one in your world you would withhold the gospel from? Is there any one in your mind who is unworthy of God's mercy and grace?

What's our attitude toward the world or toward Muslims or others we might be afraid of? Would you ever reach out to those who are hostile toward you or who resist you or don't like you?

Jonah had to experience God's grace in a very deep, personal and profound way before he was sent to extend it to others. Have you experienced God's grace in a very deep and personal and profound way? It's often in the forgiveness of our worst sins we see God's great grace and love.

The book of Jonah anticipates for us the extent to which God will go to save souls, but who could have ever imagined the full-blown extent of God's great grace?

1 Corinthians 2:9 As it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."

Prayer:

Holy, Righteous and Sovereign Father, thank you that from the heights of heaven to the depths of the deep you see us and hear us and know our needs. Grant us the same wisdom that moved Jonah in the trials of life to call out to you, to never for a moment entertain the lie that you are too far from us. And even when our own sins bring us to shame or despair grant that we never think ourselves too lost for your mercy and grace. Forgive us where our grace and mercy fall far short of yours. Father, forgive and remove our selfishness and self-centeredness before it leads us away from you and causes us to resist you and complain against you and even despair of life itself. Have your own way with us, for your glory and our good. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

