

“Jonah, the Prophet You Don’t Follow”

Jonah 1:1-17, Luke 11:29-36

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Opening Prayer

The book of Jonah, with its four short chapters, tells the story of one of the worst prophets in scripture. That may seem harsh, but the entire book is filled with the account of this man’s unwillingness to do as God had commanded. It is probably written by Jonah himself, sometime later, when he has by God’s grace come to terms with his calling and the Lord’s plans. Beloved, for many of us, the story of Jonah is well remembered for the giant fish. If you have read this book or paid good attention, you may even remember much of the arc of the story. Jonah is called by God to a city named Nineveh. Unwilling to go he tries to run away, he is cast into the sea, he is swallowed by a giant fish, and three days later is on the shore of Nineveh and he goes and preaches there. But Beloved, the story in this book is not as much about Jonah as it is about God’s mercy and salvation for all who would bow before Him. In fact, you might even say that the book of Jonah is about anyone but the man himself. A fact that is backed up by Jesus’s reference of the sign of Jonah in our second reading. If you remember nothing else, remember that the Lord desires that none should perish... even those who we would consider being beyond salvation.

The book of Jonah opens with God’s call to the prophet. “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” The account takes place before the Babylonians (remember Daniel?) destroy the southern kingdom. Some 150 years before the exile, the main enemy of the northern kingdom of Israel was the nation of Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital. The city had a well-earned reputation for cruelty, for idolatry, and for evil. About forty years after this book was written, Assyria would rise in strength and would take over the northern kingdom from which Jonah hailed. In this time, they were fierce enemies. The Israelites and the Assyrians in this time could be compared to the Ukrainians and the Russians today, or the Taiwanese and the Chinese. There is much political, economic, and especially spiritual strife present. Jonah, when he hears the call, does not heed it. He rises up and flees from the presence of the Lord, going to Joppa and finding a ship to the city of Tarshish...

thought to be 2,500 miles west. Jonah runs away from God's calling. He does not want to go to Nineveh.

Normally when we think about prophets, we talk about their faithfulness or their willingness to do as commanded or some other noble trait. Jonah is the opposite. He is the only prophet who outright refuses God's call. The next closest example would be Jeremiah, who wanted to not preach God's commands, but he found he had to. Jonah is the only prophet where we are to do the opposite of what he did. You might think that it is out of fear that Jonah refuses to go. That is understandable. The Ninevites were not the sort of people a Jew would feel safe around. But that actually isn't the reason. Jonah isn't scared to go, he isn't afraid, he isn't weak. Far worst, Jonah knows the Lord's compassion, and he hates the Ninevites so much that he would rather run from God or even die, than see them come to salvation.

If you were with us last Lenten season, we spent that time talking about forgiveness. One of the biggest difficulties with regards to forgiveness is understanding that those who we cannot stand or maybe even hate, are just as loved by the Lord as us. The Lord desires to show mercy to any and all who would call upon Him. Jonah knows this, so he flees. On the long journey to Tarshish, the Lord sends a great storm. With the ship on the verge of destruction, the sailors throw overboard the cargo to lighten the ship. They also cry out, each to their own pagan god, hoping that salvation will come their way. While throwing out the cargo, they find Jonah sound asleep below deck, and they bring him up and ask to have him call upon his own god. Jonah, who knows the Lord, says nothing Beloved. The sailors in terror cast lots to see who it is that is at fault for the calamity, and the lot falls to Jonah. It is at this point that Jonah shares who he worships. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." Hearing this, the sailors put together the pieces of what is going on. Jonah is a prophet who has fled from the Lord, and the great maelstrom that was engulfing them was solely Jonah's fault. The sailors, far from being angry, instead ask what they can do so that the sea may be calm, so that they might all survive. Jonah's response? "Pick me up and throw me into the sea."

Beloved, this was not the only thing Jonah could have said or done. Truthfully, what is happening here is that Jonah would rather die than go and preach God's message to Israel's sworn enemies. Jonah himself says as much at the end of the

book when Nineveh does repent. He could have had the sailors turn the ship around. They could have taken him to Nineveh or at least back to a port. Instead, he would have rather them all die or at least only he himself die, than Nineveh live. Nineveh was a city of 120,000 people, of which Jonah hated them all. He desired to see them perish, and had no concern for any of them. In stark contrast, the sailors who have only met Jonah, who have just heard about the Lord for the first time, and who know Jonah is the one responsible for their predicament, refuse Jonah's request at first. While Jonah desires to see 120,000 people die by wrath, they don't want even this sinful man to die by their hands.

The sailors first attempt to row harder, but the winds pick up even more. When it is apparent that all is futile, they call on the Lord Himself. "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased." There is no evil intention, and a plain prayer that they would not be held responsible for Jonah's life. The pagan sailors get what Jonah does not... that the Lord desires to be merciful to His creations. They, after their prayer, pick Jonah up and throw him into the sea. Immediately the sea was calm, and the sailors again do what Jonah was not willing to do. They fear the Lord greatly, calling on His name and making sacrifices and vows to Him. Jonah, is swallowed by the fish and in three days finds himself on the shore of Nineveh.

It is a remarkable story isn't it? I find it so incredibly humbling in reading it, for far too often I find myself in Jonah's shoes. Maybe you do too. It is so easy to forget that God's grace and mercy is not only for the "good people" of the world, but for any and all who would call on His name. Even people who are wholesale not walking with Him at present. Those people are not to be hated by us as Christians. They are not to be despised. Rather, they are to be evangelized and prayed for and reached out to. The Lord's mercy is great, and He desires to share it even with such people as the Ninevites. For you and me, it is good to ponder who are our Ninevites today? Who is it that we would rather see perish, than come to the light? When Jesus refers to the account, He is being very clear with the Pharisees how they are missing the mark just like Jonah did.

The words of Christ in Luke 11:29-36 are repeated in Matthew 12:39-42 and Mark 8:12. The context, is that the Pharisees were looking for a sign from Jesus. They wanted Him to perform a miracle in front of them on command of astronomical

proportions. The irony is that Jesus had performed many miracles at this point in front of them that were beyond human means, but they were still unwilling to believe. So, Jesus instead of acquiescing to their request instead states that the sign of Jonah is what they will receive. The sign of Jonah to the Ninevites was a warning of coming destruction. As Jesus notes in verse 32, the Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching, and yet the Pharisees do not believe Jesus who is far greater than Jonah. The problem for the Pharisees was not that they had no evidence to believe. They had plenty of revelation, they did not have hearts that were open to the Father. They had hardened their hearts, were set in their ways, and were unwilling to change even in the face of overwhelming proof that Jesus had come to save sinners from destruction. Beloved, to bring this into our world, we have to be so wary that we are not like Jonah or the Pharisees. We have to both be willing to follow Christ's call and to have hearts that are attuned to Him.

Speaking in layman's terms, there are two ways we can fail in our calling that I hope we ponder as we leave here today. There are more, but in our scripture readings there are two that really jump out. One is to run from God's calling, as Jonah did. In a church this size, there are almost certainly a few of us who are running from the Lord's calling. It might be something like the call into a ministry here. Sunday School, Youth Group, Bible Study, Small Group, serving on a committee, joining in membership, or any number of other congregation related ministries might be what God is putting on your heart. Don't run from that calling, don't ignore it. It might be some kind of ministry that is outside our sanctuary walls. You yourself might be called into pastoral ministry, or you might be called into outreach (all of us have a little of this!). Maybe you can identify with Jonah here, that you would rather die than do this thing that God is placing on your heart for whatever reason. I get it, I had no intention of ever entering into ministry, and I ran from it too. Don't follow his example, or mine... you don't want to get swallowed by a fish. That shows by the way that we cannot outrun God's calling. He always brings it full circle. Might as well head to Nineveh straight away, because that is where you are going. There is no way to be fully satisfied in life if you are not following God's calling for you. If you aren't sure what His calling is for your life, then ask Him in prayer. He will answer you, especially if you pray it often and are looking and listening for His answer.

The second way we can fail in our calling is to do what the Pharisees did, and not open our hearts to God's call at all. As Jesus noted "No one, after lighting a lamp,

puts it away in a cellar nor under a blanket, but on the lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.” Beloved, you have been given a great gift. If you are here with us in our midst, then you have heard about the salvation that comes through Christ alone this morning. You heard about it and saw the affirmation of that belief in those here through communion. You have heard that the Lord loves you and desires that none should perish. You have heard that He desires your heart and the hearts of any and all who would heed that call. Don’t take that glorious light and stuff it under a blanket, don’t hide it away. If you have been waffling in your faith or if you have been ignoring the Lord’s work in your heart, then this final call this morning is for you. Don’t ignore what God is doing in your heart. Don’t nod your head in agreement to Christ’s words, then walk out the door or turn off your computer without taking the next step. Get in touch with us here, talk to me or a small group leader or someone else who loves Jesus that you know, and follow the calling that God has given you. God’s mercy is so infinitely great and mighty, don’t make the mistake that Jonah did and think that it shouldn’t extend to those who are lost and don’t make the mistake the Pharisees did and ignore Christ’s merciful call. You were and are worth everything to your Creator. Repent, be free, and follow Him. That is what you were made for after all. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer