

The Gospel According to Jonah: On the Run
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Jonah 1:1-17
Genesis 3:1-7
Psalms 139:1-12

Dear Friends, I greet you in Jesus' name.

Beginning today and for the next three weeks, we are going to dive into the Old Testament. Of course, we include readings from this section of the Bible almost every week, readings that are foundational for the message we find in the New Testament. But we don't often focus on the Old Testament and the stories that inform our faith. As Pastor Jim will tell you, there are many reasons to study the Old Testament. One of the most important is to dispel the notion that the Old Testament is only about Law, and that the New Testament is only about Gospel. ("Law" being shorthand for "what we must do" – often pointing out where we have failed. "Gospel," in its broadest terms, is always "what *God* has done." It's *good news*.) The truth is that both Old and New Testaments contain both Law and Gospel. God speaks through both. Both are needed.

Over the next three weeks we are going to discover the "Gospel according to Jonah." Jonah is one of those small books found at the end of the Old Testament, one of the 12 Minor Prophets – minor, not because they are unimportant, but because they are short. And Jonah is one of the shorter books -- just 4 chapters – such that you could easily read it in one sitting. So let's begin by taking a moment to correct some commonly-held ideas about Jonah. It is not primarily about a fish (and note that the word "whale" never appears) – lest this story gets confused with Pinocchio. Not the same! The fish is actually quite incidental to the story, and you could tell it without mentioning the fish at all. Also, some may read the story and think that Jonah was a prophet who really hated non-Jews. Also not true – and we'll get into that. So what is it all about? Over the next three weeks, we have the delightful opportunity of reading the entire book and diving deeply into it. I hope you will sit down and read it through – and then, read it again! It is God's Word. It is also excellent literature, and you will find that the writer has employed his craft very well. Look for satire. Look for repetition of key words and phrases. Look for truth. Discover Gospel.

Today we begin with the first chapter, which we have just read. You will see immediately that Jonah is the classic tale of a person who runs away from God. You can't miss it: the writer mentions it three times in this chapter. Jonah is trying to run away from God. Why? What has God told him to do? We find it in verse 2:

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

The operative phrase here is this: "Go to *Nineveh*." It's like saying, "Go to Pyongyang" or "Moscow" or "Raqqa" or whatever you consider to be the heart of enemy territory. Nineveh was the enemy. So Jonah goes entirely in the opposite direction. He not only goes about as far as you can go in the Ancient World from Nineveh, but he goes by sea. Not by land to reach, say, Egypt. No; he gets on a ship and sails to the end of the known world. Apparently, Jonah does nothing by halves.

You see, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the very country that had attacked and wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians were the *hated enemy*. Oh, Jonah did not want to preach to the enemy! He just wasn't going there. So instead he went down to Joppa and got on a ship headed for the west coast of Spain.

We find out later in the book that Jonah is angry with God. It isn't that he doesn't understand what God is telling him to do; he understands it very well, and he doesn't like it. It's like Mark Twain once said: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Jonah understood what God wanted – and we'll find out more about that later. For now, it's enough to know that Jonah is in a state of total disobedience, born of anger. So he runs away.

But running away from God is not as easy as it might appear.

Notice that God is not passive in this book; in fact, he is quite active. Verse 4:

4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

Now these were seasoned sailors. But they were panicked. They threw overboard all their cargo – basically, their livelihood. All their income, gone. And notice too, that while God's prophet was sound asleep, the pagan sailors were calling out to their gods. They knew that this storm was of supernatural agency. They knew this was a god-thing. Finally the captain went to wake up Jonah because this was an all-hands-on-deck matter – everyone needed to pray to his god for help. They even cast lots to determine who was at fault. And guess what? The lot fell on Jonah.

So they asked him some searching questions. Who are you? Where do you come from? Whom do you worship? Ah, that's the key question. *Whom do you worship?*

9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?"

(They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

The sailors wanted to get this straight. Wait: You worship the God of the sea and then you get on a boat to run away? *What have you done?!* Because Jonah's disobedience is taking them all down with him.

Seeing the storm grow worse they seek Jonah's advice. "What shall we do?" And Jonah, again honestly and frankly tells these gentile sailors to throw him overboard. He admits that he is the one who has brought this calamity on them. He is a prophet, after all; he speaks God's word (although he doesn't always obey it). This is why I said earlier that Jonah is not anti-gentile. He actually offers to die for them. Reluctantly, although they do not want to do so, they follow Jonah's advice.

15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

You have to appreciate the satire here. God's prophet is the one who is rebellious and disobedient; the pagan sailors are the ones who believe and obey God. And – here is the first evidence of God's grace – he spares their lives. Not only that, they become believers, offering to sacrifice to God. God is good, even in the worst of times. He offers grace to those who believe,

forgiving them, rescuing them. And here's the second act of grace: God acts once again, this time to send a fish to swallow Jonah, thus sparing his life and giving him a reprieve.

17 Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (End of Chapter 1.)

I hope you have noticed that there are two stories going on here: the bigger, outer story of Nineveh, the heart of the enemy-nation of Assyria; and the smaller, inner story of God's working in Jonah's own heart. Jonah, the prophet of God, was definitely a work in progress.

There's a third dimension here too: the story of you and me in relation to God. Because whoever wrote this book about Jonah – and it clearly wasn't Jonah – had his eye not merely upon Jonah but also upon his reader. You see, Jonah isn't the only one who tries to run away from God. It's a story as old as Adam and Eve, when they hid in the garden after sinning against God. It's a story that crops up all over Scripture: the psalmist who asks, "Where can I flee from God's presence?" as we read this morning. It's a story in which the writer suddenly turns to you, the reader, and asks, "Have you ever tried to run away from God?" And if so, is that an inner or an outer thing? Is it something hidden inside you? Or is it out in the open?

With Jonah, it was pretty much out there. He did not play games, either with himself, with God or with others. He admitted it outright: *I am running away from God*. And he did so, not because he didn't understand God's intention (as we will find out later), but because he *did understand and didn't want to go there*. Are you in that boat? You know what God wants for you, but you don't want to do it. You are in a state of angry disobedience. Is that you?

Or perhaps it's more subtle – an internal struggle with doubt. Maybe you are like the sailors, caught in a storm. The wind and the waves have built up all around you – and you're pretty sure this is a God-thing – but you don't get it. I mean, *life is just tough, and you don't understand what God is trying to do*. "Are you trying to drown me, God? What's up? I don't understand." And so (unlike the sailors) you turn your back against him and say, "I don't want God in my life." A lot of people do that. They don't just run away from God; they give up on him.

Or perhaps it's just plain human greed and selfishness. Like Nineveh, capital city of a brutal and greedy nation which had conquered and pillaged all the nations around it. Whatever the case, it all goes back to that first story of Adam and Eve and the question, "Did God really say...?" Doubt. Does God really know what is best for me? Or is he holding out on me? They doubted and then disobeyed; they saw what was desirable and took it, regardless of God's warnings. Even knowing God's will and his love for you, perhaps you have done the same. *You know God's will but you don't care*. Your desires lead you away.

You understand but you're angry and you don't like it. You don't understand and so in despair, you give up on God. You understand but in your greed, you don't care. In all of these cases there is a running away. There is a fleeing from God's presence. There is a lack of trust that leads to a damaged relationship.

But my friends, God is all about relationship. He wants to heal what is broken. And the good news from Jonah today is that even when you run away from God, God does not run away from

you. He never abandons you. Look again at Psalm 139: is it even possible to run from God? Here's what it says:

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

My friends, that is Gospel! That is good news! Are there consequences to your actions? Oh, yes. Just look at Jonah. His actions brought about storm, loss of cargo, nearly a shipwreck and loss of life. Our rebellious actions will do the same. But God's purposes are much bigger than what you can see or hear or understand – it's not just about your desires; nor is it just about the storm, the wind and the waves. God's purpose is always to save – as he did to the sailors. He saved their lives; he used the storm to give them faith. God's purpose is to *build* relationships, not to destroy them. His desire is always to give life, not to take it away.

You need to trust God. The Bible – the whole of it – proclaims that God loves you and has your best interests at heart. It proclaims that God is both just and merciful. And my friends, we need both. Aren't you appalled when you feel that justice has not been served, whenever you see the awful injustice suffered by so many in Syria or some other brutal place? Justice is necessary for a safe and secure world. And here's the good news: *God is just*. That is, it's good news if the person standing before the bench is somebody else. When it is you or I, then we want mercy. And God upholds both, refusing to compromise either.

That's why Jesus went to the cross. It was a matter of justice, the penalty of sin. The wages of sin is death, says Scripture. Jesus took the penalty for each one of us, and that penalty was harsh. But he went willingly, took the sentence pronounced on each and every sinner in the world, so that God might also show his mercy, granting each one salvation. The worst thing that could happen – the brutal killing of God's perfect Son – also brought about the best possible event – the salvation of mankind. The cross is a symbol of both justice and mercy.

But like Jonah, this is the very God from whom we tend to run. In our anger, in our despair, in our greed, we can be so blind. Dear friends, hear the good news today: God never abandons you, even when you run away from him. He does not stand by passively and just let you go. He continues to seek you out, relentlessly pursuing you in his great love. And aren't you glad?

God's grace often comes in unexpected packages – like in the belly of a fish. Tune in next week.