

**Jonah**  
**Jonah 1,3,4**  
**11.20.11**      **Dean Feldmeyer**

Today we conclude our year-long sermon series on “Fifty Old Testament Stories that Every Christian Should Know.” It has been a wild ride, hasn’t it?

We have covered and learned about 2,500 years of faith history. We have met and gotten to know the grandfathers and grandmothers of our faith and heard their stories. We have seen them in love and at war, at their best and at their worst. We have climbed the family tree of our religion and met, within its branches, heroes and villains, saints and scoundrels, homeboys and foreigners, warriors and peacemakers, sages and fools.

We have watched our understanding of God evolve through God as Creator, Warrior, Shepherd, Husband and, finally, Father.

We have traveled with the ancient people of God out of the Fertile Crescent with Abraham, down to Egypt and into Canaan, then back to Egypt with Joseph and out of Egypt again with Moses and into the Promised Land of Canaan once again with Joshua. We have lived under judges and kings and watched in horror as the Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. We have sat with the Children of Israel and wept by the rivers of Babylon and learned that God did not take up residence in Jerusalem but went with his people even into that foreign city.

Later, when some of them returned home, we pitched in with them to rebuild the temple with Ezra and the city walls with Nehemiah. And we visited those who stayed in Persia and heard the campfire stories they told about their trials and their triumphs.

And, today, we conclude this magnificent journey with one of those stories, the story of Jonah.

**A PRETTY TRUE STORY**

We will start this story as we do all such stories: I don’t know if the things in this story really happened or not. In fact, I’m pretty sure that they didn’t. But I know this story is true.

It starts with a guy named Jonah, son of Amittai. And, we are told, that the word of the Lord came to him.

That’s all we know about him. We don’t know where he lived or what he did for a living or anything else. It’s the biblical way of saying, “Once upon a time there was a man named Jonah.”

And the Lord said to Jonah, “Go up to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the biggest city in the world at that time, and preach against them because I have noticed that they are evil. Don’t worry about what to say, I’ll get back to you on that. For now, just get going on up to Nineveh.”

Five hundred and sixty-six miles if Jonah lived in Jerusalem.

Nineveh was situated on the Tigris River 566 miles north, northwest of Jerusalem. About a three month journey by foot or camel.

Jonah decided that he did not want to go to Nineveh, but rather than just say, “No thanks,” and stay in whatever town he lived in, he decided to run away and hide from God. So he went over to Joppa, a seaport city on the Mediterranean coast of Israel and he bought a ticket on the first boat leaving for Tarshish.

Where is Tarshish? Anyone wanna guess?

Okay, imagine that map of Europe and the Middle East. Picture it in your mind. Here’s the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and here’s Israel. Now, look at the very opposite end of the Mediterranean Sea. Here’s Spain and the Straits of Gibraltar. And here’s Tarshish. In Spain! Just across the strait from Gibraltar.

Jonah is fleeing just as far and as fast as he can go, literally, to the end of the earth as far as people back then could imagine it.

Jonah is not much of a theologian. He thinks God is tied to certain pieces of geography, to the real estate and if you want to get away from God you just leave town for a few days. He has obviously never heard that old saying about how “you can run but you can’t hide.” And if he has, he doesn’t realize that it applies to God.

So God notes Jonah’s mad flight and throws a bad wind down upon the sea and that boat is floundering around and bobbing up and down and the sailors are crying and weeping and throwing the cargo overboard to lighten the ship and they are praying to every God they can think of and it’s not doing any good.

Jonah has gone below decks and is asleep, what with the rocking of the boat and all, and the captain comes down and wakes him up and says, “Listen, some God is mad at us and we’re about to all drown. Maybe it’s your God. Wake up and pray to him and find out what he wants.”

Jonah and the captain go up on deck and there they find the sailors casting lots to see whose fault this storm is and, whataya know, the lot falls to Jonah.

They all look at him and want to know, “What have you done?”

It seems that, earlier he told them he was fleeing from God. “Oh, hi, I guess we’ll be bunking together. Where are you headed?”

“Oh, just anywhere but here. I’m fleeing from God, you know.”

“Oh, of course. Well, nice to meet you.”

Jonah fesses up that this thing is probably all his fault and if they want to survive they had better throw him overboard. But – and I just love this part – they don't like that idea. They break out the oars and start rowing all the harder but the storm just gets worse.

Finally, they have no choice. They tell Jonah to remind his God that they didn't want to do this, that it was his idea, not theirs, and he (God) didn't really leave them any choice. And then they heave him overboard.

Immediately, the storm dies and a big fish comes swimming up and swallows Jonah whole and he's in that fish's stomach for three days.

### **PAUSE TO REFLECT**

The story of Jonah is probably one of those folk tales that was told to children and at story time around the campfire. But, unlike the fables we were told as children, it doesn't have just one moral that is revealed at the end of the story. It has several that are made as the story goes along. So we have to stop from time to time to reflect on the lesson that each part of the story is teaching.

A couple of things worth noting, here.

Of all the people we've met so far, who is the most responsive and obedient to God's will? Not Jonah, the Jew, one of the chosen people of God. No, it's the pagan sailors. They pray, they are kind and merciful, they are good, decent folks and, in the end, they are obedient.

Jonah, not so much.

The other thing we notice about this part of the story is that you can run from God but you can't hide. If God is truly calling you to do something God will not give up. Martin Luther once referred to God as the "Hound of Heaven." Many pastors I have known, and I would include myself in this group, when telling the story of their calling to ministry, speak of being hounded by God. Of trying several, even dozens of different jobs before they finally gave up and obeyed their calling to the ministry.

Make no mistake, says this story, if God wants you to do something, he won't force you, but he's going to make a very strong argument and he's going to make it over and over and over and over and...well, you get it.

### **OUT OF THE FISH, INTO NINEVEH**

All of that happens in Chapter 1 – five paragraphs.

Things move along at a pretty good clip in this story and then they come to a screeching halt in Chapter 2 for a long prayer that Jonah prays while he's in the belly of the fish. It is written in verse, a psalm or song in which Jonah says, "I was a fool for trying to flee from you and I've learned my lesson so, please deliver me and don't let me die."

And God answers Jonah's prayer by having the fish vomit – that's the biblical word, not mine – vomit Jonah up on dry land. And he no more than gets dried off and the word of God comes to him again: "Get up, go to Nineveh and proclaim to them the message I will give to you."

So this time he obeys, albeit reluctantly. He goes to Nineveh.

Now, we are told, Nineveh was an important city. A big city. *How big was it?*

Well, the author tells us, it was so big that it took three days to walk across the diameter of it. In other words, about sixty miles in diameter. Which would be ridiculous. Very few modern cities are that big even if you include the greater area around the city.

If you find this question truly compelling you can go on line and read a fifteen page published paper by Dr. Charles Halton of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, entitled, "How Big was Nineveh? Figurative vs. Literal Interpretation of City Size."

I read it – just to show you what kind of crazy person I am – and the conclusion he comes to is, and I'm paraphrasing here: "We don't know but it must have been really, really big. For its time. Not ours."

Most scholars – historians and archeologists -- estimate that the walled city, itself, was about 3 - 4 square miles or about 2,000 acres, plus the surrounding villages and communities that would have cropped up in the shadow of the city's walls. So, just as a reference, let's say the Greater Nineveh area would have covered about 6 – 7 square miles.

(The city of Wilmington is 7.4 square miles.)

So Jonah made his way to the great walled city of Nineveh and began to preach exactly as God told him to preach and not a word more or less. He walked across the city and stopped at the street corners and preached what has got to be the shortest sermon in the history of preaching: "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed."

If you want to fancy it up you can say it in the King's James version: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." But it's still just one sentence. Eight words.

And guess what happened.

Jonah is only about half way through the city, delivering his message and Nineveh repents. The whole city. The king and everyone put on sackcloth and cut their hair and smear ashes on their heads and honestly and sincerely repent of their wickedness and their idolatry and their evil ways. They are so serious about it that they even make their livestock and their pets repent. They cover them in sackcloth and ashes, too.

And they weep and pray and fast and go just a little nuts trying to convince God not to destroy them.

And God, being God, sees how sincere they are and changes his mind and decides not to kill everyone in Nineveh.

### PAUSE TO REFLECT

Okay, let's pause again to reflect.

First of all, let's look at Jonah. Reluctant. Unenthusiastic. He does the bare minimum. And IT STILL WORKS!

Interesting lesson, there, don't you think? My parents used to say that when you do something for God you should do your very best, and they were probably right, but, what this story tells us is that, even if you don't do your very best God can still use you and what you bring to the table.

Sometimes all God needs for you to do is show up. We don't always have to be happy about it or enthusiastic about it. How many times have I gone slowly and reluctantly to an event or a meeting and sat through it in the back seats with my arms crossed, just daring the leaders to even try to teach me something and then, on the way home, found myself thinking about something I heard and rehearsing it in my mind and rolling it over and the next thing I know I'm using it and reading more about it and it turns out I've learned something important almost in spite of myself. And the next thing I know I'm including it in my sermon or in a Bible Study I'm teaching or some such thing.

I'm getting this great return on something to which I made only a minimum investment.

Sometimes all God requires of us is a minimum investment. Just a grain. A mustard seed. A widow's mite.

Secondly, the Ninevites don't give the minimum required. They, the pagans, the foreigners, the non-people of God actually go above and beyond what is called for. Do you see a pattern emerging, here? The Jew, the chosen person of God gives minimally and reluctantly. The pagan foreigners are actually more like what God desires than his own people are.

If I were an ancient Jew I'm not sure I would like this story very much.

And thirdly, just a small thing. I want you to hear Chapter 3, verse 10. A direct quote: "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God **changed his mind** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.*"

Several months ago a couple was attending worship here and had been doing so for some time and they were considering joining the church and I said, in one of my sermons about another story that God had changed his mind. That week I received an angry letter from them stating that they were "Bible Believing Christians" and they knew for a fact that "God doesn't change his mind." And that, "God knows how everything is going to turn out." And, consequently, they could no longer attend a church where the pastor said something as blasphemous as "God changed his mind."

Well, I just want to point out, for the record, before anyone decides to leave, that, this morning, it was not me that said that God changed his mind. It was the author of the book of Jonah and he says it, right there in black and white that "GOD CHANGED HIS MIND."

Now, we can debate the implications of that and have a lot of fun doing so. But it does say that. It does. Really. But, for now. Back to our story.

### GOD'S MERCY AND JONAH'S FURY

So God changes his mind and decides not to kill everyone – man, woman, child and beast – in Nineveh and Jonah gets mad. "I knew you would do this. Back home, when you first called me, I said to myself, 'No way, God is gonna kill all those people. I'm gonna go up there and preach and they'll repent and then he won't kill them and I'll look like a fool who didn't know what he was talking about.'" (It's all about Jonah, see.)

God is a little flummoxed about this whole thing. He doesn't understand what Jonah's so mad about. In modern terms, we would paraphrase God's question to Jonah: "Where do you get off being mad?"

But Jonah does get mad and he storms out of town and goes up on a hill and builds himself a little lean-to and sits there to watch and wait and pout until God comes to his senses and kills everyone like they deserve.

God realizes that his helper is going to end up being more trouble than the task he asked him to help with so he decides to teach him a lesson.

God makes a vine to grow up overnight and it grows and leafs out and provides this luxurious shade for Jonah to sit under and then, the next night a worm eats the roots of the vine and it dies and withers up and Jonah is sitting in the sun again.

And again, Jonah gets all mad and curses the day he was born and cries to God how miserable he is. The book concludes with this quote from God, perhaps, one of the most beautiful in all of the Old Testament. I read from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*:

"How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than a hundred and twenty thousand childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

### **A FINAL REFLECTION**

One final reflection:

I don't know if you've noticed, but there are a lot of Christians sitting on hillsides under their figurative lean-to's waiting and hoping for that day when they will see everyone who doesn't agree with them and behave the way they think Christians should behave descend screaming into the eternal flames of hell.

They are sure that they have it right and everyone else has it wrong.

And they are just as sure that they are the select and chosen few who will be riding the bus to heaven, looking out the windows at all those who are left behind.

They are the ones who will be snatched up in the "Rapture" and given ringside seats to watch while the rest of us suffer through the tribulations that are, supposedly, told of in some obscure passages of the Bible.

They are the select saved, on the inside looking out, laughing, while the rest of us scream and cry and tear our fingernails out trying, at the last minute, to claw our way in.

They are the Jonah's of our day. And one cannot help but wonder what their response will be if God decides, at the final judgment which they are so sure is going to happen, to just spread his blanket of love over the entire world, forgive us all, open the gates, and let everyone into his kingdom.

I really think that they would be sorely disappointed. That much is clear from their response of anger and indignation after Rob Bell suggested that very possibility in his book, *Love Wins*.

Now compare those Christians to the Jews whom, they are sure, are among the damned.

The highest, holiest day of the Jewish year is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It comes every year in the autumn. In 2012 it will be September 25-26.

Yom Kippur is that holy day when the entire Jewish people – individually and collectively – turn to God, repent of their sins, fast, pray and ask for forgiveness.

Since 200 BCE it has been the tradition that, at midday of the second day of Yom Kippur, the story of Jonah is read or chanted by the entire congregation. Here is what Dr. Phyllis Trible of Union Theological Seminary says of that tradition:

*"The choice of Jonah for this occasion pertains to many themes, most prominently true repentance and divine forgiveness. On its most sacred day, Israel lifts up as the model of repentance not itself, who is like unto the Hebrew Jonah resisting God, but outsiders: pagan sailors and especially penitent Ninevites. From the transformative deeds of these outsiders Israel learns accountability and responsibility. From the divine compassion that spares them, Israel finds reassurance about itself in relationship to God and learns compassion in relationship to others."*<sup>1</sup>

I think that's a good note upon which to end this sermon and, indeed, this series: Let us all pray that we will come to know better through all of these stories, the divine compassion which spares sinners. Let us pray that we find in these stories reassurance about ourselves in relationship to God and that we learn compassion in relationship to others.

If those things come to pass, then this year of Old Testament stories will have been a year well spent – a year, very well spent, indeed.

**AMEN**

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<sup>1</sup> Trible, Phyllis. "Jonah," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, pp. 528-529 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).