

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 6 & 7, 2013
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Against the Tide: Jonah's Fear
Jonah 1

If you have your Bibles, Jonah, chapter 1. By the way, I walked up the stairs nervous that I would slip on my robe on my final Sunday. As some of you in the great room said *my dress*, but it's a robe, people! So, Jonah 1. We are starting a new series. We are going to take this month and go through the Book of Jonah, four chapters, four weeks. I encourage you to get into the Word and read it for yourself. It's going to be a lot of fun. I'm excited about this. Before we jump into it, let's pray.

God, we are inspired by a song like that because it speaks the truth of our God who lives as we celebrated last week, who comes and rescues and redeems. As we enter Your Word and as we look at a story that maybe we don't understand, a story that has some things in it that are almost unbelievable, I pray that Your Spirit would be at work. That you would convict and challenge us and that we would hear Your call. We pray this in Your Name. And God's people said,

(All:) Amen.

Amen! Let me give you a little background to Jonah, what it's all about, and talk through some things. Jonah was one of God's prophets when Israel was divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. He is the son of the prophet Amittai, and we find out in 2nd Kings that he is a pretty popular guy because he revealed that it had been God's will to allow Israel to add a great expanse of territory to its borders [2nd Kings 14:25]. This was a time when Israel was regaining some of its power and prosperity.

Jeroboam II is King of Israel. Israel started to flourish, really, through him. He carried out some successful wars, expanding their territories, and that was what it was about; expanding the territories, becoming bigger and more powerful. Things seem like they are going well but spiritually, Jeroboam falls in the evil ways of his father Jeroboam I, in continuing the idolatrous worship of the golden calves. There was a token worship of God, however, and the prophet Amos, a contemporary of Jonah, preached against it, saying, "Your worship basically looks good on the outside, but inside your hearts are dry and distant from God. You look good. You look prosperous. Things seem like they are going well, but they are not. These are vain ritual acts devoid of any righteous intent."

As we go through Jonah, we see that this popular preacher, at a seemingly prosperous time, is called by God to go and warn the wicked and hated city of Nineveh to repent or God would bring judgment and destroy the city. Jonah was to be a messenger of God's mercy in affording Nineveh, an enemy of Israel, the opportunity to turn from its sin.

On the front side of the message today, I want to hit the question interpreters often deal with at the end of chapter 1. Is it a real fish or not? I think it is. I think those who read this Scripture as a parable

or a metaphor, miss the fact that Jonah is a real prophet. We find that in 2nd Kings. I get a little nervous when we take the miraculous away from Scriptures, but at the end of the day, the point is this. Whether it is a parable, a metaphor, or this is a real fish, what this is about is the same thing. God is calling somebody to a specific task. He is calling Jonah to bring His message of repentance and mercy to a group of people. That is what we want to talk about through this series, and the weeks will sort of build on each other.

The key question I want to bring to us this morning is this. **Do we, do you, believe God still calls us in ways that are similar to the way He called Jonah?** Implied in this question is just simply, does God speak? Does God actually speak to us in ways where we can understand it and hear it and follow it? Does He care? Can we hear what God is actually saying?

I think if you actually look at Scripture, we see that throughout the story, the narrative of God, we see a God who consistently moves toward, talks to, and interacts with His people. It starts in the garden when God comes down and talks with Adam and Eve. We see it in God coming down in human form to bring redemption through His life and death and resurrection. God consistently moves toward us. We also see that God calls people to be His agents of redemption. He called Abraham. "I'm going to bless you. You are going to be a blessing." He called Moses. He called the prophets. He called Saul. He called Peter. Again and again and again, He calls people to go and be His presence in the world around them. One of my favorite lines in Scripture is Jesus teaching His disciples, saying,

²¹ ...as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." [John 20:21]

God has a crazy plan, and I did say that. It is my last week, and some things may come out that are a little scary to John [Pastor John Crosby], but God has a crazy idea, and here is the crazy idea. I believe God can still do miracles today and do the amazing things God does. But the way, His crazy idea is that all who profess Jesus are called to be His agents of redemption, His voice in the world around us. Almost all the time, the way God works is through *us*, and that's why in dealing with Jonah and talking about a passage like this, the idea of being called is so essential. We are the called ones. We are sent on a rescue mission into the world. That is beautiful. We are going through Jonah on the heels of Easter and just as Jesus called Peter, so He calls us. I love Acts 1:8 where right before Jesus goes up to be with the Father after He has died and risen again, He says to the apostles,

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Scripture is clear, friends. God cares. God calls. Do we listen? So let's talk through chapter 1 in Jonah. We are going to break it down as we read down through it. Basically, I think, what we see in Jonah is God calling in a way that is often similar to the way He calls us. And the way Jonah reacts is similar to the way that we often react to God's call. Jonah 1, starting in verse 1, says this. I'm going to read *The Message* version. This is one of those stories that Eugene Peterson just does a great job with. So *The Message* version says this.

¹⁻² One day long ago, GOD'S Word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Up on your feet and on your way..."

Most of your translations just simply say, "Go."

“...Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.”

In those two verses we get this reality that we just talked about. God actually does call us and Jonah’s call is really simple, “Go.” “Get up on your feet and on your way.” It’s the same thing the disciples got in Matthew 28,

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

It is interesting that those who have interpreted Jonah to be a metaphor for Israel being called to be a blessing in the world or for the church being called to go and make disciples, that’s exactly what it is. Jonah, a story about an individual, is a reminder of the fact that we are called to go and be God’s presence in the world around us again and again and again. When I read through verses 1 and 2, one of the things that really challenges me is this question. How does God call? At the end of the day I believe with my whole heart that God calls us again and again and again. The challenge is, how does God call because most often we don’t get it as clearly as Jonah, “Get up and go to Nineveh. That’s your call. Go do it!”

I think God calls in a multitude of ways, often at the same time. I think one of the ways that God calls is through His Spirit. In John, chapters 15 through 17, we are told that the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of those who profess Jesus Christ, who name Him as Lord and Savior. I think one of the ways God calls us, in big ways and in small ways, is through the Holy Spirit. I told the story a couple of years ago about being in Uptown at sort of the beginning of winter and walking by this homeless gal and just having this feeling inside. I had 3, maybe 4 bucks in my pocket, and I just had this feeling of God leading me to go over to Starbuck’s when it was still up there near Lake and Hennepin and getting her a cup of coffee. I think God does things like that. I think God puts those little nudges in us through His Spirit to do things for Him in the world around us. He calls us through His Spirit.

I also think God calls us through circumstances. Once again these are often at the same time. The *Living in the Tension* group thing that John was talking about: in early January we brought into The Table the guy who sort of started these, a guy named Andrew Marin. Andrew Marin wrote a great book, *Love Is an Orientation*. I would encourage you to read it. He had grown up conservative, an evangelical guy, and was playing baseball down in Chicago, and he had three friends in the course of three months come out to him as being gay. And he did not know what to do. He had this circumstance put on him and he was like, “I don’t know what to do with this.” His circumstance and the nudging of the Spirit led him, actually, to move into the neighborhood where the GLBT community lives in Chicago. God simply led him through circumstances, through the Spirit, not to change his mind on what he believed but to just go in and be there, just to show love through the Spirit, through circumstances.

He calls us, I think, also out of who we are. That is what Stacy and I have been wrestling with in this journey of being called back to being a senior pastor again, putting the right people around us to say, is that right or wrong, and what’s the timing, and the process on that. I think we’re often called out of how we’re wired, how God has made us, where our passions are, what we think about, what we dream about. When you look out at the world around you, what are the things that break your heart? That is often what God is calling you toward. It’s a journey, a dance between being called, where our desires are, our hearts call, and where you go. I know that seems like a little too much, but I think the teaching from Jonah in verses 1 and 2, is that God calls again and again and again. Look down to verse 3. So God calls Jonah, “Get up and on your way.”

³ But Jonah got up and went the other direction....

Rich [Pastor Rich Phenow] was exactly right in the kids' sermon. Jonah went in the opposite direction in the Mediterranean from where God had called him,

...to Tarshish, running away from GOD. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from GOD as he could get.

What a great line, isn't it? God called and Jonah is going to get as far away from God as he can get. There are a lot of theological issues with that line, but Jonah runs away from God's call. I think that's also sometimes what our journey is like. God calls us and we simply say *no*. It seems like some of the wording in these two verses implies that Jonah paid a substantial amount for the ticket, probably hiring the whole ship. So he's not only going to go in the opposite direction, he's going to empty his wallet to get away from God, to get away from this call.

I love verse 5. It talks about him being in this deep sleep. I think oftentimes the reason we don't hear God, the reason we run away from the call, is that we are in a similar deep sleep. I think that the deep sleep for us, and maybe this is just me, but I think the deep sleep for us as American Christians is the word *comfort*. We often don't hear the call of God in our lives whether it is a big thing or a small thing because we are comfortable.

Back in early December a friend of mine put my name in at this church down in Mankato, and I remember when they called and asked for an interview. I told my wife and this friend, "I'm going to go down for interview practice, but there's not a chance we are moving to Mankato." Good learning: you never say *not a chance* or *no* to God. But the reason behind my saying this was, we didn't want to move. We didn't want to leave our home. We didn't want to leave our neighborhood that we've grown to love, our school, our church community. Comfortable was what we were, and what if God called us out of that comfortable place? What if He was moving us to a thing that did not fit our ideals of comfort? I think we say *no* in both passive and in very intentional ways. Whether we are just asleep or we yell *no* and run the other way, we are ignoring God calling us because we are so comfortable. I think sometimes we are so comfortable we are almost numb to God speaking. We have to wake up and scream to God that He would call us to something. Let's keep reading in verse 4 through the end of the chapter. It's just a fun story. It says this.

⁴⁻⁶ But GOD sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering. The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods.

All of these guys had many gods, often representing many different things.

They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, "What's this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we're in trouble and rescue us." ⁷ Then the sailors said to one another, "Let's get to the bottom of this. Let's draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who's responsible for this disaster." So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

The drawing of straws is like flipping a coin. The person who gets the short straw or the bad end of the coin simply has to share something evil about themselves that would maybe appease the gods. Jonah gets the straw.

⁸ Then they grilled him: “Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?”

Just tell us something bad so the gods can get happy. And Jonah says this.

⁹ He told them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship GOD, the God of heaven who made sea and land.”

¹⁰ At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, “What on earth have you done!” As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from GOD. ¹¹ They said to him, “What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?” By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control. ¹² Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It’s all my fault. I’m the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you’ll get rid of the storm.”

¹³ But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging.

In my mind I’m thinking of that George Clooney movie, I forget the name of it, but there was a huge storm, huge waves. That’s what they are going against. Verse 14,

¹⁴ Then they prayed to GOD, “O GOD! Don’t let us drown because of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for his death. You are GOD. Do what you think is best.” ¹⁵ They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down. ¹⁶ The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of GOD. They worshiped GOD, offered a sacrifice, and made vows. ¹⁷ Then GOD assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish’s belly three days and nights.

When we think about listening day in and day out for God’s call, and then finding that call, the fact is we often run away from it. I think what we find in these last verses is so true in Jonah’s life and in ours. This running from God is usually destructive, not only in our lives but in others. When I run from God, I not only miss out on being in the presence of God and serving God, but others miss out on me telling them about who this God is. I also think there is a promise at the end here. Even when we run from God, I love that wording, “Jonah was trying to go as far from God,” that is impossible, right? Even when we run from God, even when we try to say *no* to a God who is calling us to Him, God still works.

¹⁶ The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of GOD. They worshiped GOD, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.

I love the end of this chapter because I think it gives us a couple of questions, one is a challenge to take into the week and as we go through this series. The first is this: **What if God still calls you and me today?** I would encourage you to write this down, what if God still calls us? I think beyond the shadow of a doubt, He still does. I think the God who came and died and rose again, the God who rescued us, who died for our sins, who rose to give us life, calls us again and again and again to bring more of heaven to earth.

Sometimes it’s in big ways. I was reading a story in *Christianity Today* about Rick Warren [Pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California], who I encourage you to pray for. His 27-year-old son, I think yesterday or the day before, committed suicide. The son had been battling mental illness his whole life. Rick Warren, who is 59 years old, was being interviewed and he was saying how in the next decade, he wants to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the 3,400 unengaged people groups in the world. I’m reading that and I’m like, oh, that is so good. That is so awesome. I think God does

call that way sometimes. I think God called CPC to Zambia. And a few Saturdays from now, on April 27, I think God is calling CPC as a church community on Serving Saturday to go and be the hands and feet of Jesus in our communities.

I think sometimes God calls in big ways, but I also think sometimes God calls in really small ways. I was reading this book called *Love Does* by Bob Goff. Anybody read it? I encourage you, if you need to be inspired about God calling, pick it up. Each chapter is just a different story about this guy who is trying to live every day wholly in the presence of God, listening to God, following God, being called by God to do whatever God has for him. It is often the little things, the relationships around us, the people we walk by. We have a few gals at The Table who work downtown and they keep walking by people asking for money, homeless people. They decided to just start doing some small things, putting some boxes together to give to them, to be the presence of God, called by God to do something.

The second question is this: **If God still calls, are you creating space in your life to hear God's call?** If God still calls, are you creating the space to hear God? This is one of the biggest challenges, isn't it? Either we are asleep or we are too busy to hear God. This demands that we create space to hear God. There are two ways this has been happening for me recently. First, I have an app on my phone called *Hearing God*. It has some reflections from Scripture and some Dallas Willard teachings. On occasion that's the thing I have to go to because more often than not, it's really about being fully present to God speaking in my life. Then, I have revisited an author named Ruth Haley Barton. She is all about being in that place, creating the space, whether it is five minutes or an hour, where you can be fully alive and present to a God who wants not only to speak to you but also to call you to be His presence in the world around you. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that You would hear us as I pray the words of Your servant St. Francis of Assisi over us.

All-highest, glorious God, cast Your light into the darkness of our hearts. Grant us right faith, firm hope, perfect charity, and profound humility, with wisdom and perception, O Lord, so that we may always and everywhere seek to know and do what is truly Your holy will.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.