

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Against the Tide: God's Mercy
Jonah 2

Let's pray.

God, we should be able to laugh in Your presence. We should be able to make fun of ourselves. We should be in the kind of community where we love each other even through all the ups and downs of life. I pray today that You will speak to us out of Jonah's life, out of all the ups and downs of being with You and away from You and around You, not that we here might see this as a story for them, over there, back then, but that we might hear You speak to us right here, right now. In Your great Name, speak to us. Amen.

I want to emphasize three themes this spring to follow up on our winter series on the Great Commandment,

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31**....'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [Mark 12:30-31]

We live in a very conflicted world. The church is caught right in the middle of many of the conflicts we cannot get away from and it often seems to have lost its voice. How do we speak in a conflicted world? We who are preaching on Jonah want to use these four weeks to see how that fleshes out.

We want to lift up three themes. Theme No. 1: Jonah is a man more comfortable with talking about truth than grace. Do you know anybody like that? Their motto is: *often wrong; never in doubt*. Some of us love being right. How do we speak truth without sounding like jerks? Another way, how do we speak the truth we feel God teaches us, rooted in love, and not be perceived as judgmental and narrow-minded? How do we speak God's truth to the culture in which we live, sorting out our opinions and finding the right ways, right times, right tone to speak? Jonah teaches us a lot about that.

The second thing that Jonah teaches is that lost people matter to God. Lost people, wherever they are, whether they are in church or they never darken the door, *all* lost people matter to God. And people respond when God calls out to them (no matter how imperfectly) because there is a hunger or a need inside of us. How do we see the hunger and the need inside of people who feel far from God?

The third theme we'd like to talk about is that Jonah is a story about people far away from a loving God—and the religious people are the farthest away. The religious people are in more

trouble than they even think. They go away from God when God does not do what they think God should do. So I want to ask you, are you running away from God because it's not convenient or it's not popular, or are you running *with* God, or are you looking this way and that way not sure what way to go?

I want to reinforce what Brad [Pastor Brad Jackson] talked about last week. Our desire is not that you would hear our answers but that you would hear God's answers, and the way that you hear that is when you open the Bible. I would ask you each to reach out and grab either the Bible you brought with you or a pew Bible and turn to the Book of Jonah, chapter 2. Brad told people it was hard to find Jonah, but you all know where Jonah is. Jonah is right next to Obadiah, right? You got it? Turn to Obadiah. It's right next door. If you can't find Obadiah, Jonah is between Obadiah and Micah. Are you okay? If neither of those help, I think it's on page 1,381.

Jonah is located right in the middle of what we call the minor prophets. There are 12 minor prophets. We all know the major prophets, the Isaiahs, the Ezeiels, the Jeremiahs. Those are called the major prophets only because they talk longer. The minor prophets are just as important but they had shorter messages. Jonah's story is less than 600 words long. Turn to it please. Laura gave the kids the summary. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh over this way, but instead he ran that way because he didn't like the Ninevites. He jumped onto a ship to get as far away as he could, and God sent a great storm to the sea around the ship. This is where we pick up the story. The sailors have figured out that Jonah is the source of the problem, and they say to him, "What are you doing?"

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.) **11** The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" **12** "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

This is really the only gracious thing that Jonah does in the whole story. "Pick me up and throw me in the sea. It's my fault." He recognizes that other people come into storms that are caused by us, maybe our first lesson about Jonah. You never suffer alone. The storm never comes to you alone. Other people get sucked under the waves. Maybe that's where you are.

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. **14** Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." **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. **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.

Laura tried to describe what that was like to the kids. Remember the little picture? But what do you think it sounded like? What would it look like in the 21st century if this happened? I have a minute-and-a-half video to show you a modern-day Jonah.

(Video shown.)

Let's see what happens next. I want you to keep your Bibles open, but let's read Jonah, chapter 2, responsively from the screens.

1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. **2** He said:

(All:) "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

(All:) **4** I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'

5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. **6** To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.

(All:) But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.

7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

(All:) **8** "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God's love for them.

9 But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good.

(All:) I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'

10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

There is something in there about a storm, and there is something in there about prayer. Let's start with the storm. I'm not going to ask you to raise your hands, but I bet that some of you feel under water right now, or you feel like water is up to here and you're gasping. Some of you are in the middle of the storm right now. All of us sometimes spend time down in the pit. It's part of the human experience, but not all storms are alike. Some storms are not our fault at all. There's the diagnosis of cancer. There's a recession. It's not our fault. But most of the storms of life, frankly, we participate in. We have a hand in the storms of our lives.

For Jonah, it was bad choices and running away from God. For some of us, it is the bad choices *other* people make. You may be caught up in the mess of others just like the sailors. The sailors suffered right along with Jonah and learned. For some of us, it is worry that grips us so tightly. Sometimes the storm, though, doesn't look like anything is going wrong. For some of you, the storm is that emptiness inside of you that comes from getting what you want. You thought you

wanted this, and you got it and you feel empty. On the outside it looks good, and on the inside, the storm is growing.

What I want to remind you is that the storm is not an accident. God sent a killer storm to save Jonah from a broken world—from his bad choices and your bad choices, from his desire to run away from God and your desire, my desire, to run away from God. The storm is unexpected to us and it seems unfair, but we don't have a tame God. God doesn't play by our rules. When we have anything at all to do with the storm, when there is any kind of rebellion at all involved, we need to realize that human brokenness, rebellion, leads to pain, and pain has consequences. Storms are God's discipline.

Here's the thing about God's discipline. God's discipline is not to pay us back. God's storms, God's discipline, are to *win* us back. Not to pay us back for the bad but to win us back to Him. God's storms are sometimes the only way to get our attention. C. S. Lewis once said, "Pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world." When everything is going okay, "We're fine, God, thank you very much." Pain is God's megaphone to get our attention. A lot of times we don't even realize we caused the storm or participated in it.

I had lunch with someone this week who is becoming a friend. He wanted to tell me his story. Over lunch, it became clear that he is very successful. He has all the money that Jesus could want, but it's not about money. It's not about his next paycheck. He said, "You know, I got to the top five in one of these big companies here in the cities, and my boss made promises that if I did this, he would do that. But it didn't happen because somebody else bought us. Then my boss made another promise that if I did that, he would do this, and that didn't happen. I realized then that it was never going to happen because he could get from me what he wanted without giving me what I wanted, so I ended up leaving."

He said, "But I didn't just land on my feet, I'm making more money now than I ever made. It's not about money, but what it's about is, my friends look at me and see me in this little one-person office. I don't have the big office anymore or the jet, and sometimes I want them to know that I've done okay. Is that wrong?" I said, "No, absolutely not. That's not wrong, but I've got to tell you. It sounds to me like you are in the middle of a storm. You are in the middle of a storm, and I've got to tell you, this storm is God's gift to you. I think losing your job was God's gift to you, one that you never would have chosen." He said, "How do you figure that?" I said, "I see you as a very competent, very strong person. I think God wants a very humble person. I think you are all about winning, and God is all about serving and humility." He said, "Check, please!"

We had a great talk, and he started to believe that there were different ways that he could interpret this storm. I believe that the storms of life can be God-sized interventions in your life. I think the storms that come do not make you wise. The storms do not make you deep. They do not make you faithful. It is our response to the storms that changes us. For many of you, the storms have made you bitter or suspicious or small-hearted or cynical. For others of you, storms have softened your heart and given you humility you would not have had and compassion for other people. I believe that Jonah shows us that we need a theology of storms instead of just getting through it somehow. This storm, Jonah's storm, is God's discipline. It is God's intervention to catch a fleeing, falling Jonah.

I grew up in a family with drug issues and three different times participated in an intervention where we stopped one of the people we loved most in the world and said, "You are killing

yourself, and you are taking us with you. We are not jumping into the rabbit hole.” And we tried to use that very painful intervention to save her. That’s a storm. That’s what happened to Jonah. He gets thrown overboard. The sea calms. He sinks and starts to drown. And it works! If you haven’t put your Bibles away, look at verse 8. Jonah says,

8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God's love for them.

He thought it was about other people, but he realizes now that he was the one who had turned away from God’s love. If the storm is God’s discipline, the fish is God’s salvation, and that’s why Jonah prays. Talk about the storm! Talk about the prayer! I guess I never realized that the fish is God’s salvation and there are three prayers in this story already.

Remember, first is the prayer of the pagan sailors. Jonah says, “Throw me overboard.” “We can’t do that.” “God, God!” Jonah’s God, if Jonah’s God is a real God, “Don’t blame us.” They throw him overboard, and the storm stops. Now they are really freaked out because his God *is* God. They pray again and it says “made vows to God.” Then the third prayer comes from Jonah in the belly of the beast.

1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. 2 He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

Why would you talk about prayer that comes from the belly of the beast? Most of us are not in the storm, right? Some of us are, but most of us are just living regular lives. If you are not down in the belly of the beast, why would you think about this kind of prayer?

I used to spend a lot of time with high school and junior high kids, and we would talk about sex. Really, that’s *all* they wanted to talk about. They would say, “How far do I go? How far can I go? Will I get in trouble if I go that far?” I said, “Well, one of the keys is, the time to make up your mind about how far you will go physically is not when you are in the back seat. It is not when the windows start to steam up. Don’t try to make up your mind then. You have to do it before.” That’s the way that prayer is. If you haven’t been doing it before, it’s hard to do it *during*. If you haven’t been praying before, it’s hard to know how to pray when the storm comes.

There was a great English lord, Sir Jacob Astley, who was at the Battle of Edgehill in 1642. He knew about this. Just before the battle, he prayed, “Lord, Thou knowest how busy I must be this day; if I forget Thee, do not Thou forget me.” It is often the way we learn to pray *before* the storm that rescues us *in* the storm. That said, if the water is over your head, look at what Jonah learns. I think God teaches Jonah three things in this prayer. The first is, when you are down in the water, get honest. It’s about honesty. “In my distress, I called to the Lord, and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help, and You listened to my cry, ‘I’m dying here.’” Honesty! May I say that I think most of the time, most of you are full of it. I used another word last night, and it was like my wife looked at me from the back of the room and said, “Yes, you did say that out loud.” So I’m not going to say that. I’m just going to say, “Most of the time, most of you are pretending.” How is it going? “It’s going fine.” How are you? “I’m okay.” Being in the storm gives you the excuse to be honest. If not with me, if not with us, at least with God. “In my distress,” I’m in trouble here, “In my distress, I called to the Lord.” He was not honest as a religious person but he was when he started to drown.

The second aspect of prayer is, when you are in over your head, confess. "When my life was ebbing away," Jonah said, "I remembered You, God, and my prayer rose to Your temple." Then I prayed to You and said, "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them." "I had a hand in this, in this divorce, in this failed career, in this bad grade, in this terrible move, in this purchase," even sometimes, "in this sickness." What was your hand in this? A little Scottish church is having a Wednesday night prayer meeting for a revival. An old lady, a Scottish woman, says, "Oh, Lord, please clean away the cobwebs in the corners of our lives." Then from the front this Scottish voice booms out, "*Dinna fash yersel*," don't worry, "with the cobwebs, Lord. Kill the damnable spider in me." In *me!* I want to run away from God when God says, "I want you to tell them this." I need to confess that so that God cannot only say, "I know but God can move to the third part of the prayer."

When we are honest, when we confess when we ask for God's help, then comes some resolution. "I'm going to try, Lord, to be different. I got into this mess. God, can You get me out of this mess? If You get me out of this mess, then I will try." Jonah says, "What I have vowed, I will make good." What he has vowed is, "I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" "Now that You've gotten me out of this, now that I know that You're God, now that You've forgiven me, I will do what You want. I will tell other people, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" Lee [Pastor Lee Hanssen] is going to talk about what God says to Nineveh next week, but the message Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and say was, "Salvation comes from the Lord." He wanted to say, "Nuclear weapons coming from the Lord, coming to a theater near you." He hates the Ninevites, and God is saying, "Say to them, 'Turn away. Salvation comes from the Lord.'" Jonah says, "I will do it. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

The reason I know salvation comes from the Lord is because God saved me. It's not because I'm a good person. It's because I'm a broken person that I know salvation comes from the Lord. I was drowning and God saved me. I was wrong. I was so wrong, and God saved me. And God can save you, too. Jonah was a prophet. We are called to be prophets. How do you have the courage to speak truth to power when everybody else is saying the other thing? I think it only comes out of the depths. Not out of the depths of your guts. Don't just suck it up. Remember when you were drowning and only God could save you and you said, "God, You and me, right?" Speak the truth.

How do we ever speak, how do we live in a culture that resists absolute truth, especially when we have spoiled the Christian brand? You know, that is part of the problem here. People already know what we are going to say before we say it, and they already know how we are going to say it before we say it. They look at us like we are hypocrites and judgmental and angry and we don't like them very much. With all of that spoilage, the only thing that will allow them to hear that salvation comes from the Lord is when we tell them, "Because He has already been saving me. I was more screwed up than you are, and He saved me, and if He can do it for me, then maybe, maybe He can do it for you."

We cannot share God's grace if we have not received God's mercy. All we are doing before that is just giving them the rules. People don't like rules. But if we have the courage to say, "The reason I know that's the road to death is because that crash on the side of the road is me, and it wasn't until God gave me grace that anything changed." People can hear that. Then we will have a chance to say "I believe in the Lord. I believe salvation comes from the Lord." And when there are all these other voices around us, we can say, "You know, I think there is room for two

inside the whale. Come inside the whale with me and receive the grace of God in the middle of the storm.”

Lord Jesus, You love the story of Jonah. You told the story of Jonah. You lived the story of Jonah. Three days, three nights. Many of our sisters and brothers here are in the middle of a storm, looking good on the outside and paddling desperately underneath. We pray together that You will have us be honest and confess our parts. When we run away from You or when we hide, we pray that You will give us grace, grace enough to share. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. 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.