

Hey Jonah... Wake up!  
Week 2 - Asleep at the Wheel  
Jonah 1:1-17

Good morning! I'm excited to be back today to continue our journey through the book of Jonah. Would you stand with me as we pray?

*Blessed are you oh God, King of the universe, and blessed is your name above all names. Thank you for drawing each of us to this place of worship. Fill us this morning with the spirit of truth, and help us to learn and grow together as we study the gift of your word, which points us ever closer to you. Amen*

Now if you remember our series introduction from last week, we are on a kind of rescue mission - to try to look past the watered down versions of Jonah that are so common in our culture and to try to read Jonah as the original readers (or listeners) would have understood it.

And what we find out, as we allow the story to tell itself to us in its own words, is that Jonah is... a weird story. Here we are in the middle of a series of prophetic books that are all poems and oracles – words that God is speaking to people through the prophets – and yet Jonah is a story *about* a prophet who runs away from his mission.

We find out that Jonah is written in an exaggerated comical fashion where everything is bigger than usual. The storm is HUGE, the fish is HUGE, Nineveh is HUGE. Jonah is extremely happy or extremely angry. And each of the characters we meet behave the opposite of what we would expect. Jonah, God's prophet, is apathetic, hypocritical, and angry, but the "bad guys" the sailors and the people of Nineveh are quick to repent and worship God.

And finally we find out that Jonah does something to you as you read it. I think the idea is to get you in a place where you are laughing at Jonah. "Would you look at this guy! He thinks he can just run away from God. And look how oblivious he is to this storm. Everybody *else* sees what is going on. Ha! I would never be so clueless. Well, I would never... Oh... wait... rats." See, this story, it reels us in, gets us laughing, and then, wham! As soon as we start judging Jonah the Holy Spirit reminds us of those times when we try to run from God or to do things our own way.

So I would invite you now to open your Bibles if you have them handy - and follow along in whatever translation you happen to have. I'm working mostly out of the ESV

*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

Two quick things to review from last week:

1. The name, Jonah son of Amittai, means “dove, son of faithfulness”. And so we are supposed to laugh because Jonah is the least innocent and least faithful character in the whole story!
2. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh - which is in which direction? East, and Jonah goes where instead? Tarshish, as far west as it was possible to go.

Now in Verse 3 my translation also says that he goes down to Joppa to get on the ship. Some translations miss this but it is important, he goes DOWN to Joppa and pays the fare and then goes DOWN onto the ship.

Picking up in verse 4:

*But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.*

*Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.*

*But Jonah had gone DOWN into the inner part of the ship and had lain DOWN and was fast asleep.*

In these first verses the author is making a point with this repeated use of the word DOWN. DOWN to Joppa, DOWN onto the ship, DOWN below deck, laying DOWN and then asleep. Jonah is on a kind of downward spiral. It is a picture of spiritual slumber, of spiritual apathy. How can we understand this?

Perhaps you have had this experience while driving: Have you ever been on a well-traveled route? Maybe the one that takes you to work or school? And your body will just go through the motions of driving, you know, out of habit. Veer left here, turn right at this light. And you can travel for miles and then sort of come to and realize that you have no memory of the last few minutes. Has this ever happened to you? It happens to me more than I'd like to admit! I mean, this is dangerous right? Here we are, just on auto pilot, letting our body go through the motions while in our head we are completely checked out. And we are driving of all things! That's the picture we get of Jonah in here - only instead of being mentally checked out he is morally and spiritually checked out.

Verse 6: *So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”*

The ESV translation misses an opportunity here. I like how some other translations say “perhaps your god will notice us” - because that's funny, right? Does Jonah's God notice them? Very much so - the storm is there precisely because Jonah's God has already noticed them. Right?

*And they (the sailors) said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” I guess they don't give Jonah long to pray...)* *So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. (surprise!)* *Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this*

*evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"*

So this is a great contrast to Jonah - who you can pretty easily imagine rubbing his eyes and yawning in a daze through this part of the story He is still half asleep. What about the sailors? Are the sailors awake? YES, very awake. They are asking him these questions left and right. What is your job, where are you from, what town, what country, who are you? Tell us, tell us!

*And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, (OK that's answering one of their questions) and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

Small aside here – as a reminder, when you see the word LORD in all capital letters in the old testament that is the translator's way of indicating to the reader that in the original Hebrew text that is where the personal name of God is written - not just the generic god - but Yahweh "I am" the name that God gives to Moses.

So Jonah says "I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, [he's the one] who made the sea and the dry land."

*Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" and here the author kind of whispers in our ear "For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had already told them."*

So what is going on here? It seems like the author has implied a mini flashback to the scene in Joppa when Jonah is boarding the ship. It takes a bit of imagination but I think it went something like this:

"Good morning, I'd like a one-way ticket to Tarshish please."

"Ok, business or leisure?"

"Oh well, neither really, you see, I'm running away from my God."

"Oh, well, that is a new one, but hey, you paid the fare, so welcome aboard."

- Is this odd? - not really. These are polytheists - they believe in the existence of hundreds of gods. Every town and city and sometimes household had their own personal gods. So running away from one was probably not that unheard of.

But now that we have that background we can imagine the sailors working this out in real time:

"WAIT a minute - you said you were running from your god - but now you are saying he is the god of heaven, who made the sea AND the dry land. And you are running from him on OUR boat! DUDE!"

See, this is funny... I mean, I think it is funny, do you think it is funny? Do the sailors think it is funny? No, they are terrified.

Oh this is such an ironic scene. Who only says he fears Yahweh? Jonah. Who actually fears Yahweh? The pagan sailors who only learned his name 2 minutes ago! It says they were exceedingly afraid. If Jonah actually feared God then he would not have run away, right?

*Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; (get it, God hurls the storm, they the sailors hurl the cargo overboard and now Jonah says, hurl me)...hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."*

Now we are so familiar with this story that we might not notice how unexpected an answer this is. "What should we do?" "Hurl me overboard." Basically, Kill me. "Whoa, Jonah that seems kind of drastic don't you think?"

So some commentators, probably the majority of commentators, make sense of this by suggesting that in this moment Jonah is coming to grips with the consequences of his sin and knowing that now he needs to do the right thing and sacrifice himself for the good of everyone else. This is Jonah actually waking up from his slumber and coming to terms with the fact that the storm is his fault.

But there is another, darker, possibility.

Is it possible that with this answer Jonah is running even further away from God? Remember, we will find out in chapter 4 that Jonah is running away not because he is afraid of the Ninevites, but because he hates them and he thinks the world will be much better off if God wipes Nineveh off the face of the planet. He is running to prevent God's message of forgiveness from reaching his enemies.

So what better way to ensure that the message does not get delivered? Take it with him to the grave, the bottom of the ocean. Is this out of character for Jonah? Not really. He calls for God to kill him on two other occasions later in the story. He would rather die than see his enemies reconciled to God. Amazingly, this interpretation does not show up in the kid's books! (I wonder why?!)

I kind of like that interpretation, I may be wrong, but whatever interpretation we think most likely, the sailor's response is the same: They think this is what? A terrible plan! So the narrator tells us that:

*Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you."*

More irony: This is the first prayer to Yahweh in the whole book. Who does it not come from?? God's own prophet. Who does it come from? pagan sailors!

*So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a giant fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

If the story ended here is it a good ending or a bad ending? It's a tragedy! When you get swallowed up by a huge fish after being thrown into the sea THAT is bad news!

How did Jonah *get* to this point? Go back to the first few verses where we began. Remember how he goes down to Joppa, down to the sea, down onto the ship, down below deck: this downward spiral gets out of control and, before he knows it, Jonah is down into the sea and down the gullet of the fish - as far down as it is possible to go don't you think?

But the lesson for us to think about today is that Jonah not only jeopardizes his own life, he nearly gets everyone else on the ship killed too. At the very least their trip is ruined - remember the cargo got hurled into the sea - that's their livelihood. Did Jonah cause all this damage on purpose? Did he wake up that morning and say "I'm going to Tarshish and I don't care if anyone else gets hurt along the way." No - he was on autopilot, not thinking about the sailors, not really thinking at all. He was asleep at the wheel, coasting down the hill, allowing his rebellious attitude to do the steering.

...

For a story that's 2400 years old, there is a certain familiarity to it isn't there? How many of us know people who are just coasting along not really caring what happens to the people around them? If we are honest with ourselves, how many of us have been asleep at the wheel of our own lives?

The crazy thing is we live in a society that basically encourages this inward looking selfishness. Our culture assumes an individualistic moral relativity. "Oh, what happens in Vegas... You know, it stays there... you know as long as I'm not hurting anyone else... who are you to judge MY choices, it's my life." Anyone heard any variations on these?

This is crazy, and you don't even have to be religious to see how crazy this is. You see we can live like this - just making these selfish moral choices, and it might be OK for a while. Sure, I'm not going out of my way to hurt anyone, but someday, sooner or later, the consequences of my bad decisions spill over the walls of my life and ruin somebody else's.

Maybe an illustration will help us all to remember this. Have you ever played Jenga? I have one set up here on the table. So you know how this works right, everyone takes turns pulling out one piece and stacking it on top, higher and higher until the stack falls over right?

Well, our society has conditioned us to think that life is like playing Jenga in solo mode. We are building our own little towers, and you know what, if you make bad decisions and knock your tower over, well, bummer for you; just don't tell me which piece to pull, I'll make my own decisions, thank you very much.

But this model is fundamentally wrong, we don't play Jenga alone and we don't live disconnected from everybody else. Imagine that on this table I had 4 or 5 Jenga towers - and the whole family is playing - sure, we each have our own set of blocks - but what happens when I foolishly try to move this piece here?? Ahh! Down goes my tower. But the blocks from my falling tower just might hit yours too.

### **Conclusion**

That's what Jonah 1 is about. It's about a guy who is so tied up in his own little world and what he wants, and what his plans are, that he completely misses what's going on around him - and there are dire consequences for both himself and his fellow travelers.

...

Sooner or later, the consequences of our bad moral decisions spill over the walls of our lives and ruin someone else's. We don't have to look far in this day and age to see the leaders, the teachers, the pastors, who have been toppled by the consequences of their moral failures. Those small compromises, those sins we think we can cover up, until we can't cover them up anymore.

Arise, call on your God! Wake up! Do you need to hear that today? Do I need to hear it? Let us heed the warning here in Jonah 1 and repent before it is too late.

Would you stand and pray?

*Lord, We confess that all too often we let our selfish choices take control of our lives. All too often we are apathetic and numb to the leading of your spirit. And we admit that we have hurt those we love through thoughtless words and actions. Lord, forgive us for this sin. Forgive us for being asleep at the wheel. Help us to wake up and call on you, for we know that you and you alone can right the ship when the storms of life hit us. We know that you and you alone can save us, and those around us, from the consequences of our sin. Have mercy on us Lord Jesus.*

### **Benediction**

One last thought for this week: what did Jonah DO to wake himself up from his spiritually apathy? Trick question - he didn't do anything! God acted in mighty power to get Jonah's attention and wake him up. We will see how Jonah responds to this next week.

As our closing song reminded us and as we will continue to discover as we read this story, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. May we trust in that perfect love and may God in his mercy open our eyes today. May God use this opportunity to wake us up and guide us in the way we should go.

Go in peace