

Hey Jonah... Are you listening to yourself??

Week 3 - Severe Mercy

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Good morning. We are continuing our journey today through the Old Testament book of Jonah. How are you doing? Are you finding this ancient story at all relevant to you today?

I've been very encouraged these first few weeks because I'm hearing people ask questions and continue discussions after church. I've also had a few people email me questions and comments.

So I'm proud of you all for taking this to heart. Pastor Keith encouraged us before he left for his sabbatical to build each other up. I think a big part of that has to do with taking the bible seriously, asking the tough questions, and discussing it among each other. By the way, that also means don't take everything I say at face value, question it and dig in and push back if I say something that doesn't seem right. That's iron sharpening iron, right? That's how we as the body of Christ can continue to grow closer to each other and to God.

So let us stand and pray

God thank you this morning for the gift of yourself given to us in the scriptures. We know that you have given us your word as a blessing and designed it for building up your church. We ask that you would bless this time of study, that we would be ready to hear what you would have us hear and learn what you would have us learn through your spirit today. Amen

So today we will be exploring Jonah chapter two, but first I need to acknowledge the elephant in the room – Or, more precisely, the whale in the room. Actually, the Hebrew just says huge fish – but that doesn't stop most people from calling it a whale.

Here's the thing, suppose you had never heard the story of Jonah and you weren't sure what it was about. Suppose you decided to do some research so you do a quick google search... what would you find? **Check out this screenshot** - this is a google image search for "Jonah ", not Jonah and the whale", just Jonah.

Are you seeing the trend here! For whatever reason, our culture is obsessed with the whale. A lot of ink has been spilt over the years between people arguing about how it could have worked. So yeah, there is a whole rabbit trail we could go down at this point about the fish.

But, here's the thing, and I'll let you in a secret: the fish shows up in 3 verses in this story, but everyone makes it a main character. The fish will play an important role here in chapter two. But, and I can't stress this enough, this isn't really a story about Jonah and a fish - this is a story about God and his rebellious prophet and God's will to bring about revival in Nineveh whether or not Jonah is cool with the idea.

We need to hold on to this concept as we work through this chapter because we have been so conditioned by our culture to kind of skip past everything else here and just focus on the fish.

I like how the poet Thomas Carlisle put it:

*I was so obsessed
With what was going on
Inside the whale
That I missed
Seeing the drama
Inside Jonah*

That's what we are looking at today: the drama inside Jonah. Remember how we talked about Jonah's downward spiral last week. How he closed himself off to God. He was coasting down the hill of destruction, a picture of spiritual apathy. In the end he gets hurled into the sea and swallowed up.

If the story ended right there - is it a good ending? No, it is a tragic ending. But the story doesn't end. **Instead we get chapter 2:**

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

*"I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;*

*out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.*

*For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.*

*Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;*

*yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'*

*The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;*

*weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.*

*I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;*

*yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.*

*When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,*

*and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.*

Let's pause here and take stock of what we are hearing. Remember try to think about this as if we had never read it before.

Is this the prayer we should expect from a guy that just got eaten? I would probably have expected more of a "Dear God Help me, Ahhgg Help, Please, God, I'm sorry I ran away, I promise, I'll go to Nineveh, I'll go wherever you want just get me out of here. Help!..." Right? Too much?

At any rate, that's not what we get. Instead we get this beautifully crafted Hebrew poetry, Why?

Well on one hand maybe we are supposed to notice that Jonah hasn't spoken to God once this whole story but when he does pray here it is in stark contrast to his surroundings. Maybe we are just supposed to laugh at the absurdity!

On the other hand, it turns out that many of these poetic lines are developments or quotes from the psalms. Here are a few examples:

Psalm 18:4-6:

*The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.*

*In my distress I called upon the Lord;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,*

Sound familiar?

Or what about **Psalm 42:7**

*Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.*

One more, **Psalm 124:2-5**

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when people rose up against us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone
the raging waters.*

I'm sure you remember that the Hebrew people, the Israelites, had gone astray, they were worshiping idols and supporting a succession of evil kings, and eventually the consequence of that rebellion was the Babylonian empire coming in and taking Israel off to exile. And a common symbol for this traumatic experience in the Old Testament is this idea of being swallowed by a massive beast or else being swept away by a flood. So Israelites reading Jonah while in exile in Babylon would have made the connection very quickly.

Jonah, in this sense, represents rebellious, hypocritical, Israel getting swallowed by Babylon when THEY had turned away from God. The fish becomes for them a symbol of God's severe mercy, God's ultimate way of getting his people to wake up and return to faithfulness. But here we are starting to go down the fish sidetrack again. Let's get back to Jonah.

You see some commentators think that Jonah is piecing together bits of psalms for this prayer. He was devout, right? He probably had lots of psalms memorized. So, in his distress, those words come back to him. That happens to me too with verses I have memorized, or with song lyrics. When I am in trouble that's what pops into my head.

I think that makes more sense than for him to be coming up with all these poetic lines on the spot. But it gets tricky **in verses 8 and 9.**

*Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"*

Hang on? Who is Jonah talking about in Verse 8? *“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love?”* Is Jonah talking about himself here - or someone else?

We faced a similar interpretive challenge last week. Remember when the sailors ask Jonah what they should do to make the storm calm down and he says “throw me overboard”?

It could be in that case that Jonah had a moment of clarity and realized that he was at fault for their plight. OR it could be that Jonah was trying to run further from God - to make sure the message did not get to Nineveh by taking it with him to the grave. Was Jonah softening his heart, or hardening it further? Which is it? We don't know and commentators disagree.

This is the same kind of thing. Is Jonah switching gears here and talking about someone else? Or is he simply quoting a Psalm he knows but actually he's talking about himself - saying HE has chased after vain idols, that he has forsaken any hope of receiving God's love.

Let's unpack each possibility.

Suppose Jonah is switching gears and now he's talking about someone else - presumably the Ninevites - or even the pagan sailors from chapter 1. So he's saying; “ here I am at the bottom of the ocean, I've been swallowed up, the water is over my head and I'm going down... but, at least I'm not like those idol worshipers (AKA those gentiles) THEY forsake your mercy, but I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

What an arrogant, hypocritical response. Can you believe this guy? Here he is in the belly of a fish and he still thinks he is more righteous than practically everybody else. Just who does he think he is? Why, I would never say something like that... I would never... Oh, wait.

Ha! Do you see what's happening here? As soon as we start feeling superior to Jonah the Holy Spirit is going to poke us and say “oh yeah? Haven't you EVER compared yourself to someone else?”

Jesus sends a similar message in [Luke 18:10-14](#). Jesus is telling one of his famous parables.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

One of my professors in college pointed out that if we take this interpretation, if Jonah is being hypocritical, holding himself up above the other characters in the story, then it should just about make us sick. Here he is spouting out this beautiful poetry and then wham - at least I'm not like those guys who worship vain idols. THEY forsake your mercy, but I will sacrifice to you. GAG REFLEX
And you know, that is what happens right? Look in verse 10: And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

I think we are supposed to laugh! The only two beings that can hear Jonah right now are God and the fish - and after 3 days of this they have had enough of his sickening attitude. BLEGH.

But now let's look now at the other possibility - which is that in these last few verses Jonah is in fact talking about himself. "How is that possible?" you say - he clearly switches pronouns - why talk about himself in the 3rd person? Well remember he is piecing together bits of psalms he knows - maybe this is the wording that comes to mind in the moment.

And that can happen: For example, there was a time when my daughter Abigail was going through a stage where she would wake up in the middle of night with night terrors –bad dreams. She would come into our room, we would snuggle for a while, and then I would carry her back to bed. But since she is still scared I start singing her little lullabies or whatever. **One night the song that popped into my head** at 3 AM was this one:

*I cast all my cares upon you
I lay all of my burdens, down at your feet
And anytime, I don't know, what to do
I will cast all my cares upon you.*

So wait, am I singing this song to Abigail? Casting my cares upon her? Of course not, I'm singing it to God on her behalf. I could have rewritten it to change all the pronouns. Just cast all your cares upon Jesus, Just lay all of your burdens down at his feet? Right, you can do that – but not at 3AM right!? You just sing the words you know and we know that God understands our heart in the moment.

So maybe Jonah is saying "Those who pay regard to vain idols - I realize Lord that that is ME - they forsake the hope of steadfast love. God I don't deserve your mercy. Yet I will uphold my vow. If you get me out of this, God, I'll go to Nineveh, what I have vowed I will pay."

In this interpretation, the storm and getting swallowed have finally woken him up from his spiritually apathy.

It turns out that one of the hardest things for us to understand in this life is why a loving God would allow us to suffer. It's a classic theological conundrum. If there is a God who is all powerful, all knowing, and good, how can there also be so much suffering? Any attempted explanation is called a theodicy.

I'm not going to stand here and suggest that I know the right answer to THAT question. But we *do know* that God USES the suffering that we go through for a variety of purposes. Sometimes God uses trials and tribulations to test our faith. Sometimes he uses our perseverance as a witness to others. Sometimes he uses suffering to build up our character. I also think our suffering can be a kind of severe mercy. In other words it is God's saving grace, pulling us back from the brink of destruction. It might just not look like it to us at the time.

Now the important thing to remember at this point is that we must not become like Job's friends and assume that WE know the reason for someone ELSE's suffering. Because we cannot know. But we can look inward, we can examine our own hearts. And if we find ourselves suffering as a result of our bad choices then the Holy Spirit will likely be knocking on our hearts trying to wake us up and smell the fish guts, right?

It reminds me of another of Jesus' stories - this time Luke 15. It's the classic story of the prodigal son.

You know how this one goes right? The son takes half of his father's money - his share of the inheritance, and runs off to Vegas, essentially, and wastes everything on wild living. Then when he is out of money and stuck feeding pigs he realizes that the place he ran away from is the place he needs to be.

And so he says in Verse 18: *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."*

And we know the ending right? I like how Andrew Peterson put it in his song called **"In The Night"**

*"Like the son who thought he'd gone beyond forgiveness
Too ashamed to lift his head, but if he would lift his head
He would see his father running from the distance
So in the night my hope lives on"*

The consistent promise of scripture is that God is quick to forgive the moment we humble ourselves and repent. And Jonah too, is shown mercy here. *"And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."*

"OK, hang on," I hear you thinking. Which way is it? Is Jonah actually repenting here, is he talking about himself in verse 8? Or is he switching gears and talking about the pagans and being a massive hypocrite? Which is it!?

Ah, yes, but that's the wrong question. It's not about whether *Jonah* is repenting or being hypocritical... we don't know and commentators disagree: The question we need to ask ourselves is how WE will respond to suffering.

When I'm cruising down the road, checked out and letting my body drive on auto pilot, and I see those flashing lights in the rearview mirror... what is my response to the officer tapping on the window? "Come on man, everyone else was going just as fast, why me?" or, "Yeah, you're right, I was speeding. Thank you for stopping me and waking me up!"

When you and I find ourselves in days of trouble; when God allows the consequences of our sin to overwhelm us, will we choose to take responsibility for our own actions or blame someone else? Will we humble ourselves and repent, or point the finger at our neighbor?

Would you stand and pray with me.

Dear Jesus, sometimes it feels like are being swept away by raging waters. Sometimes the hardship of this life feels like we are getting swallowed alive. So God thank you for this reminder from the story of Jonah, that even in the midst of our darkest hour, even when we feel overwhelmed, that you are right there with us. We remember that there is nowhere we can flee from your presence. Nowhere we can go that you are not right there with us. And so we thank you for your severe mercies. We thank you for loving us enough to die for us, to get swallowed by the beast yourself, so that we can rise to life with you. Thank you for answering us when we call to you in our distress. And thank you for promising to be with us always, even to the end of the age. Amen

Benediction:

Now may the God of hope, fill you with joy and peace in believing. May you abound in all hope, may you abound in all joy, by the power of the spirit, the spirit of God in you. Go in peace.