

Hey Jonah... Nineveh is that way!

Week 1 - Running from the call

Jonah 1:1-3

Personal introduction

Good morning, For those of you who don't know me well, my name is Jeffrey and I'm nearly a life-long member here at ABC. About a year and a half ago I got a literal call out of the blue from Pastor Galen Oaks over at Amherst community church in Massillon.

He was looking for someone to preach for a few Sundays so that he and his wife could have a sabbatical. I felt a strong calling that this was an opportunity to bless our brothers and sisters at Amherst. And it was not long before God laid on my heart the idea of preaching a series on the Book of Jonah. That is where this series was born. It was heavily based on a similar sermon series by a pastor named Tim Mackie. Tim is also one of the creators behind the **Bible Project** - which is a fantastic educational resource. They make crowd funded animated videos about the bible and biblical themes.

It was about 6 years ago that I first watched Tim Mackie's sermons on Jonah. They opened my eyes - not just to the depth and wonder of the book of Jonah itself, which has become one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible, but they also opened my eyes to my own life and made me think deeply about how I was living at the time.

I was convicted by Tim's message, I acted on it, and it changed my life in a very practical sense. I'll share more of that story in a few weeks. My hope and prayer is that, in sharing this series with you over the next several weeks while Pastor Keith is on a sabbatical of his own, that God would speak to you as well, and that your lives too, would be changed for the better because of these words. That should be the purpose of any sermon!

Would you please stand as we pray?

God, thank you for the gift of your word and the wisdom that we find as we read and study it. I pray that you would bless this time today and in the coming weeks, that we would be receptive to the nudging of your Spirit. Let our eyes be open see, our ears ready to hear, and our hearts softened to understand the truth of your message for us today. We give to you this time of worship. Take us and mold us for your Glory, in Jesus name, AMEN.

Now as we begin, we need to acknowledge that the story of Jonah presents us with an interesting challenge: it is a story that, in many ways, is too familiar. Many of us grew up hearing the story in Sunday school, or perhaps, we encountered it via the strange phenomenon that is Christian children's media. Tim calls it the VeggieTales effect. Basically there are all these publishers (some of them better than others) that take Bible stories and tell them in a way that make it easier for kids to understand. So they take a story written for adults and water it down to a simple message like "Jesus loves you," or "CV "be nice to other people."

It is important to remember that there is nothing inherently wrong with that. I want my own kids to grow up experiencing Scripture in many forms. But, you have to admit that some Bible stories are easier to adapt for kids than others. Noah and the ark is the most popular, I expect, because of all the animals. But I would argue that Jonah is right up there in the top five Old Testament stories with David and Goliath, Daniel and the lion's den, and the creation story. These well-worn stories get retold in our culture in a simplified way to give a simple message. Here is one I found on my kid's bookshelves. Let's see how it tells the story of Jonah.

There, isn't that nice? I'm pretty sure we have all seen versions of Jonah like this. Many of us grew up with these simplified versions. I think we used the story for VBS when I was a little one. Again, there is nothing wrong with that, but for a lot of us, when we grow up we don't stop to really stop to think about what that story would have meant to the original listeners. We see Jonah and we are like, "oh yeah, the guy who ran away from God and got swallowed by a whale....how cute!" ... stop and think about that sentence for a minute!

Our challenge as grownups trying to grow into spiritual maturity, is to try to read Jonah with fresh eyes, to clear away the vegetation as it were, to work to uncover what the original audience would have found meaningful, surprising, and challenging; to hear the story in its own words. Is this easy? NO! Of course not - this story is something like 2400 years old. It was written in a different culture, a different language. So this is not easy. But I believe it is well worth the effort. My hope is that God will use this ancient story to speak to us in new ways today and over the next few weeks.

So let's camp out in the first few verses of Jonah today and try to orient ourselves. Those of you who like structure can think of this as exploring 4 basic questions: "What kind of story is this?", "Who is Jonah?", "Where is he going?", and "Why does he run away?"

Part 1 - what kind of story is this?

First question: What kind of story is this? Well, how does it start: "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai." Who does the word of the Lord come to? Prophets.

For example, look a few pages over - at the book of Micah: "The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem." And what follows are mostly collections of sayings or speeches from Micah to these people. Many of the books of the prophets begin this way.

So as we read this first sentence "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah" we are supposed to think "ah ha - this is going to be a collection of prophetic messages from Jonah..." are we right? No...so right off the bat this author is playing with our expectations. Here we are in the middle of a series of books that are all poetic prophecies, oracles, and speeches attributed to these prophets and what we find in Jonah is a story *about* God's prophet instead of that prophet's words. Hmmm

Part 2 - who is this Jonah guy?

The name "Jonah" means "dove" - which in Israelite culture is a symbol of innocence - innocent as a dove right? And Amittai means "steadfast," "trustworthy" or "faithful." So here is the first of many places in this story where I think we are supposed to laugh. The word of the Lord comes to Dove son of Faithfulness - and what do we find out as the story goes on? Jonah is the least innocent and the least faithful character in the whole story. He is hypocritical and apathetic and angry at God for being too merciful.

Another thing we might notice is that this is not the first time in the Bible that readers will have encountered the character of Jonah. He shows up in one other place. Turn with me, if you have your Bibles, to 2 Kings chapter 14:

Starting in verse 23: *In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.*

So King Jeroboam – was he a good king or bad king? Bad king - he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And yet it says he had this military victory that was predicted by Jonah. Hmmm. So what is Jonah, the prophet of the Lord, doing prophesying good military outcomes for an evil king? Seems kind of fishy if you ask me... (ha ha)

You see I think the first readers of Jonah would have become a little suspicious when they heard this name: Jonah son of Amittai - because there is a contrast here between what we know about Jonah and the situation he

finds himself in. The only other time Jonah, Dove son of Faithfulness, shows up in the Bible he is predicting the military defeat of Israel's enemies. But here God is calling him to go and preach a message of repentance to his enemies. Back to our text:

Part 3 - where are we going again?

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.

Something we sometimes miss is the author's word choices. It says that God tells Jonah to "arise" and "go" to Nineveh. The implication of the Hebrew here is that God is telling Jonah to get up and walk to Nineveh. But Jonah instead gets up and flees. The Hebrew word carries the idea of suddenly or surprisingly running. Like a startled rabbit. But the first word, the word translated as arise, or get up, is the same for both God and Jonah. Get up and walk compared to get up and ... flee! I get cartoon vibe from it. The language, it leaves this implied moment, in acting we call it a beat, a pause, just holding on to the anticipation of what we think is going to happen, only for the opposite to happen instead.

And of course it is the exact opposite right? Because Jonah is fleeing away from where God has instructed him to go. **Where is Israel?** - here - and where is Nineveh - to the east over here. Where is Tarshish - as far west as it was possible to go. It was the last port before you go through the straits of Gibraltar and out into the Atlantic Ocean. So Jonah doesn't JUST run away, he runs away, as far as possible, in the opposite direction!... Why?

Why does Jonah run away?

I mean, is it possible that Jonah is scared to go to Nineveh? That's what the kids' version of the story says. We will talk about Nineveh in a few weeks and see that it was, in fact, a scary assignment. Nineveh was the capital of the biggest, baddest empire the world had seen up until that point. It had a reputation of treating captured enemies very badly. So we could assume that Jonah was scared. But, if we read all the way to chapter four - we find out what? We find out that, no, he didn't run because he was scared, he runs because he hates Ninevites.

Spoiler warning! It turns out that even though Jonah knows that God is in the forgiveness business, Jonah gets angry with God for forgiving the Ninevites. Jonah thinks that the world would be a much better place if in fact the Ninevites are not forgiven. He wants God to wipe them out instead. Remember this is the guy whose only other claim to fame was this one prophecy for a bad king that there would be this military victory over Israel's enemies.

Look at Jonah: he knows what he wants out of life. He is firmly on Israel's side in the geopolitical sphere. He is perfectly happy hanging out in the king's court perhaps, being the voice of God's judgment against the bad guys: AKA the non-Israelites. "And God wants me to go where?? No thanks", he says.

The only equivalent I can think of in our current time would be supposing you or I get called by God to fly to Russia and seek an audience with Putin and tell him what God thinks of his invasion of Ukraine. (crazy right!) We'd probably end up in some prison in the arctic or something. But supposing we went anyway and God used those prophetic words to break through Putin's hard heart and he actually repented. What kind of miraculous experience would that be? And the thing is, we would be right in the middle of it witnessing the changes in his life and the results of peace and reconciliation in the world! That's the kind of mission that God has in mind for Jonah.

But Jonah doesn't want anything to do with it. He is so sure that he knows what the good life is and that going to Nineveh is NOT part of the plan. What he doesn't see is that God has a plan of his own to use Jonah to bring about this amazing repentance of this evil empire. It is far beyond what Jonah or anyone would have imagined.

So he isn't running for his life, he is running from the amazing miraculous life that God has in mind for him He isn't running for his life, he's running from it.

Conclusion

What about you? What about me? Are we running from our life? Do we think we know what is best for us or do we dare to trust that God has bigger ideas than we can possibly imagine? Has God ever asked us to do something out of our comfort zone and we were like, NOPE, not doing that. Sorry God you've got the wrong guy. Or, do we respond better than Jonah and say "OK God, I don't know what you are doing here but I guess I'll be along for the ride."

You know, this is kind of the age-old question, right? It goes back to the Garden of Eden. God puts the tree in the middle of the garden and tells us humans "Don't eat of this tree" but Adam and Eve decide to eat of it anyway. In that decision they are choosing to trust their own judgment instead of God's. All throughout the Bible God's people are faced with the same question over and over. Will we trust God or will we lean on our own understanding?

So let's do this. In your row you will find some blank pieces of paper. Everybody take one and find a pencil and we are going to take just one minute to write down a decision we need to make. Jot down the first thing that pops into your head. A decision you need to make. Maybe a small one, maybe a big one. Good.

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As we leave this place today, I want us to think about this decision. What might God be calling us to do? Are we listening to the call? It might mean a small change in our lives; it might mean a major change. It might mean waiting, being patient, or it might mean stepping out boldly in faith. Whatever you sense your call to be. I'm asking that you consider this: Does God know what he is doing? How might this decision be God's way of blessing me, my family, my neighbors, or even the world? Do I trust that God knows what is best for my life?

Would you stand with me as we pray?

God, we lay this decision, whatever it is, at your feet today. We admit that we have a terrible track record of trying to do things OUR way. Help us today to trust in your plans for us, to know deep down that You are faithful and true and that you will be with us on every step of the journey. Be with us as we go from this sanctuary and out into your mission field. Whether that be across the room, across the street or around the world, may we be your messengers and may our lives be a witness to your goodness. In Jesus name, AMEN

Benediction:

Jeremiah 29:11. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." As we go out today - take these words with you. The decision you need to make. Let us trust in God's perfect plans for our lives. Go boldly; knowing that God has a plan for each of us.