

## **Sermon on Jonah 1 In Peril on the Sea**

**A variation on a Woody Allen quip seems appropriate on a few levels as we enter into the story of Jonah.**

A man leaving church says, “Rev’d I came to listen today because I didn’t understand the subject. After hearing you I still don’t understand it, but now I don’t understand it on a higher plane.”

Reading the book of Jonah, a prophet unique in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a lot like this.

If you want easy answers to difficult questions, Jonah is not the book for you.

If you want nice neat conclusions in life or faith, Jonah is not the book for you.

If you want comfortable religion which requires little more than the occasional prayer or good deed, Jonah is not the book for you.

If you want straight up and down stories which offer truths directly and obviously, Jonah is not the book for you.

On the other hand, if you earnestly seek after God, eager for a deepening of your faith, hopeful that your imaginations will be stirred and your minds stretched with new possibilities, listening for the voice of Christ which you may well hear in powerful and unexpected ways, the book of Jonah is indeed for you.

For the next four weeks we will encounter in this unique prophetic tale, a reluctant messenger, a great fish, turbulent seas and turbulent emotions, heartfelt prayer, human sin and fear, a repentant city with a repentant King as well as repentant animals, a worm, a wind, and a withered tree, among other strange and wonderful things.

Even an open ended conclusion which imagines an ongoing dialogue, an ongoing story, an ongoing wrestling with the deep things of faith.

It should be quite a journey!

But most importantly, our prayer is that we will encounter the living God (as Jonah did!) and be shaped by the divine predisposition towards love, mercy, forgiveness and grace, a disposition we encounter embodied in all its fullness in the Lord of all, Jesus Christ.

This is Jonah’s story, it is also our story.

Centrally, though, it is God's story, God is the main character in this drama.

The book begins and ends with God speaking.

Everything in between (just like our own lives) is read within that context.

**And as we enter into reflection on chapter 1, the first thing we need to say is just how elusive this narrative really is.**

Like Jonah escaping from God, the narrative almost wants to escape from the reader!

It is notoriously difficult to pin down and interpret on a whole lot of levels which means we do well to be cautious as we approach it.

A little context helps us understand from where its coming.

Jonah the prophet is mentioned elsewhere in the OT only in the book of 2 Kings and there placed in the mid 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

You will recall that following King Solomon, the united Kingdom divides into two parts leaving Israel in the north, and Judah in the south.

Jonah is thus apparently a prophet of the north in the decades before the fall of Samaria (and ultimately the entire Northern Kingdom) to the Assyrians in around 722 BCE.

Yet as scholars have noted certain aspects of the language, as well as some historical anachronisms, suggest that Jonah was written much later, probably after the exile of the Jewish nation in Babylon, and its return in the late 6<sup>th</sup> C BCE.

The most likely conclusion, then, is that the author used a historical character, Jonah, to create a narrative which spoke to the present realities of the people of God at least a couple of centuries later...

not unlike the way a novel of historical fiction will use historical characters and events to frame an imagined story with its own purposes.

**The challenge of dating Jonah is matched by the challenge of deciding what kind of literature it is in order to know how to read it.**

Certainly the consensus of interpreters is that it reads more like a parable or as Joan Cook describes it a 'novella', making use of humour, exaggeration, allegory, irony to get its message across.

Yet it does so with reference to concrete historical realities like the city of Nineveh, the port of Joppa, and of course, Jonah, the prophet himself.

Likewise, Jonah is unique among the prophetic books of the OT in that Jonah himself really only utters one prophetic 'oracle' or word (ch 3:4), and even then it is only a matter of a few words.

The rest is the wider story being told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator.

Thus the book is less about the prophetic preaching of Jonah, and more about what is being revealed in and through his story, adding weight to the wisdom of reading it as something like a parable.

The beauty of seeing it in this light is that it actually opens up meaning and richness for us rather than closing it down.

It increases possibilities of insight.

Just like any of the numerous parables Jesus told, the story can be read in different ways, characters and happenings can be seen in different lights, and theological nuances can be held in creative tension rather than massaged into conformity.

The seriously open ended conclusion to the book (God asking Jonah a question which we never hear answered), perhaps suggests to us that we too might have questions about our own faith and the promises of God which will remain open and with which we will wrestle.

Thoughtful questions, as much as conclusive answers, are reflective of an engaged and sincere faith.

We have no answer from Jonah himself to God's final question in chapter 4, it is left open...just as our lives are still open to the possibilities of God's working and grace...

...but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

**So chapter 1.**

**God speaks to Jonah and tells him to, 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'...but Jonah, we're told, without even a word, gets out of there quick smart.**

Like a number of the other prophets, Jonah is unsure about his calling.

Unlike a number of the others he doesn't enter into a discussion with God about it, or declare his own inadequacy, he just gets out of there.

Exit stage left, as it were.

Who can blame him really?

The Assyrians were loathed for their harshness and here was the little prophet of God from a faraway land going to tell them they were all doomed unless they repented?

I think I would have run away too!

I wonder how often in our own lives of faith we've felt like doing the same?

Like running away from God?

So Jonah heads off on the futile exercise of trying to escape from God, as if, if he just runs fast enough he'll surely get away.

No such luck of course.

God stirs up the sea, the sailors become terrified, Jonah is identified as the cause, he tells them to throw him overboard but they try and row out of the storm.

They fail.

Interestingly at this point they cry out to Jonah's God, whom he had identified to them as, 'the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

They throw Jonah overboard, the sea calms down, and the sailors worship Jonah's God.

Jonah is then, in the most famous moment of the story swallowed by a giant fish where he remained for three days and three nights.

So ends Chapter 1.

**Remembering that while the story itself is set in the 8<sup>th</sup> C BCE, it is very likely being read by the Jewish people of the late 6<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> C BCE, even through this brief opening, already some of the book's key themes are emerging.**

Nineveh, a major city of Assyria, though in Jonah's day not the capital, is of course Gentile...as are the sailors on the boat...as were the Babylonians who carried off the southern Kingdom of Judah into exile.

Jonah, the only Hebrew character of the entire book, is being asked to go and preach to Gentiles and a Gentile city.

He flees from this task only to find himself in the midst of, and importantly, helping to save the lives of other Gentiles, who then turn and worship Jonah's God.

The ironies abound, very typical of the style of parables.

Although he flees away from God's initial mission, he finds himself engaged in a not dissimilar role of witnessing to Gentiles of the Lord's almighty power.

You can run, but you can't hide.

Running from God is like stretching a rubber band, the text seems to want to say, however far you stretch it, it will pull you back in the end.

We may try and escape from God's difficult call on our lives, but all it means is that God will find another way.

So already the relationship between Jew and Gentile, of God's chosen people and the people of all the nations, and how God's purposes are being worked out among them, is being put on the table.

Already we're being asked to imagine how God relates to the peoples of the earth, and how far God's love and mercy extends.

Already in chapter 1 of the story, Gentiles are being saved, through the witness of one of God's chosen.

See Jonah as in some way representing the Hebrew people as a whole, and it is suggestive of a story about how Israel was called to be a light to the nations, and that all the peoples of the world would be blessed through their blessing.

### **Is any of this sounding familiar?**

A Hebrew prophet come to call the world to repentance, cast out in order to save all the people of the world?

Three days engulfed in the darkness of death?

When Jesus is pressed for a sign to prove his authority by the religious authorities, he says the only sign there will be will be the sign of Jonah...

three days in the belly of a catastrophe, but rising out of the place of death to new life, by which all the peoples of the world might repent and sing praise to the Lord and know the peace of Christ.

The literal meaning of the name Jonah is dove, a sign of peace in the OT as it remains today.

Jonah was to be the messenger of God's disruptive peace to the Ninevites, just as Jesus would become the messenger, indeed the prince of peace sent by God from far away for the entire world and all its peoples.

There are obvious parallels here where one part of the story of God informs and illuminates another.

In passing, it should not escape our attention that the ancient city of Nineveh was located in modern day Iraq where so much of the world's attention and concern is currently focussed.

If ever there was a place which needed to hear and heed a call to peace, a call to seek love not hate, it is there.

Jonah continues to speak to the world across centuries, as, of course, does Jesus.

**So, at the end of chapter 1 of Jonah, we're left, as the hymn we sang just before says with, 'those in peril on the sea'.**

The sailors are in peril initially because the sea is rough and they fear for their lives.

By the end they are in peril because the sea is calm and in a slightly different way they fear the Lord, so we're told.

Jonah is in the most peril of all in the belly of the great fish.

The sea was a symbol of chaos in those days, and it still fits the bill pretty well today.

I was talking to someone recently about the highs and lows of faith, how sometimes you feel like you're on the crest of a wave, and then it seems to come crashing down.

How sometimes even when the sea around you is calm there can arise a sense of indifference or apathy.

I'm sure we all know these fluctuations of faith.

We are, after all, fickle beings, Jonah is a good representative in that sense.

One of the central themes of book, and especially chapter 1, is that God's power and mercy and presence in the world are not contingent on how we feel or what's going on around us.

God brings calm in amid chaos.

We may at times feel a long way from God, or that God is a long way from us, yet they could be exactly the times God is closest.

We may run away and find ourselves in choppy seas, only to realise that there is an eternal peace we can always trust, even when our lives seem anything but peaceful.

We may feel in peril on the sea, like Jonah, but then remember that we worship the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

We may remember Paul's words recorded by Luke in the book of Acts that, 'God is not far from any one of us, and in him we live and move and have our being.'

**We may run from God, we all do from time to time, but God never runs from us.**

Indeed God comes to us in Christ, just as this wonderful story of faith began by saying... 'and the word of the Lord came to Jonah.'

This is a hopeful beginning.

Life, faith, begins with the word of the Lord.

And for the start of our first foray into the book of Jonah, that seems a good place to end.

**Amen.**