

"Jonah"

Jonah 1-4

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Four Lakes Church of Christ



Introduction:

I wonder how many of us here this morning have played hide-and-seek at some point in our lives. In fact, it might be easier to wonder how many have NOT played hide-and-seek. It seems that hide-and-seek is a game that just about all of us are probably very familiar with. I know we played it at our house quite a bit when we were growing up, and sometimes we would even play it at the church building. One of my few memories from the church down in Freeport, Illinois, is hiding in the baptistery changing room and being terrified by the hip waders that were used for baptisms. I would have been 3 or 4 years old, and those hip waders hanging on the wall were very, very scary! Hide-and-seek, then, can be a fun game—it can give us some interesting memories—and yet, unfortunately, sometimes adults play the game as they occasionally try to hide from God.

We can think all the way back to the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis. According to **Genesis 3:7**, after Adam and Eve had sinned, the Bible says that, ***"...the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden."*** And from that point on, many, many people have tried to hide from God.

Well, this morning, I would like for us to study the life of a prophet from the Old Testament who also tried to hide from God. I am referring to the prophet Jonah. In our pew Bibles, the book is found starting on page 1448. Most of us are probably at least a little bit familiar with what happened to Jonah. God told Jonah to go preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. We need to know that the Assyrians were enemies of the Israelites. They hated each other. And Jonah's message was to be that they were all going to die in forty days. So certainly we can understand why Jonah might want to hide.

When we think of Jonah, though, most of us probably think (more than anything else) about Jonah being swallowed by the giant fish. A lot of people have said, ***"There is no way I could ever believe that a giant fish swallowed a man and kept him alive for three days."*** However, if we believe in Jesus, if we believe that Jesus was a real person who told the truth, then we must also believe in the account of Jonah, because as brother Harold read for us in **Matthew 12**, Jesus Himself very clearly believes in the account of Jonah being swallowed by the fish. And so we find that the big fish swallowing Jonah was a miracle, just as the resurrection of Jesus was also a miracle. If we believe in one, we must believe in the other.

Perhaps some of you have heard the story of the little girl who was reading a storybook on an airplane, and the book was titled, **“Jonah and the Whale.”** A man sitting nearby asked the little girl, **“You don’t really believe that, do you?”** And the girl replied that she did, in fact, believe the story. He pressed her on it a little bit, and then he asked, **“How can you prove that the story is true?”** She thought for a moment and said, **“When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah.”** The man thought he had won the argument and said, **“Then what will you do if Jonah is not in heaven?”** The little girl thought for a bit and replied, **“Well, if Jonah is not in heaven, then you can ask him!”**

In a lot of the research on this subject, I kept finding historical accounts of big fish swallowing people who survived. But again, that is not the point. The whole situation was a miracle. However, as I have read through the book of Jonah over and over in my lifetime, I have realized that the giant fish is only mentioned in three verses in the entire book. So, even though it makes for a very interesting story, and even though it is historically accurate, we start to realize that the fish must not be the most important thing that God wants us to remember from this book.

As I was doing the research for this morning’s lesson, I kept running across some interesting sermon titles, and those titles reflected various messages from the book of Jonah. It was almost as if some preachers got into a contest to see who could come up with the most interesting headlines:

- **»PPT»** Pleading Passenger Purchased Pardon
- **»PPT»** Simple Sailors Seek Solutions
- **»PPT»** Crafty Clergyman Challenges Compassionate Creator
- **»PPT»** Cowardly Confession Causes Consternation
- **»PPT»** Fleeing Fugitive Faces Frightened Fellows
- **»PPT»** Preoccupied Passenger Provokes Pilot
- **»PPT»** Problem Prophet’s Pitiful Plight
- **»PPT»** Sleepy Sailor Scares Seasoned Seamen

These may all be accurate in their own ways, and yet as the only prophet to ever travel on a mission to preach to a foreign nation, I would suggest that the main point of the book of Jonah has something to do with telling others about the amazing grace of God. **»PPT»** That will be our focus for this morning...

I. Jonah seems to spend a lot of time running, so this morning I would like for us to start by noticing that JONAH WAS RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD. **»PPT»**

If you will, please look with me at the first chapter of the book of Jonah—**Jonah 1:1-17**. We are about to find that the prophet Jonah is one of the worst examples of evangelism anywhere in the entire Bible. This is what the Bible says...

¹ ***The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,***

- 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."**
- 3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.**
- 4 The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.**
- 5 Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.**
- 6 So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."**
- 7 Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.**
- 8 Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"**
- 9 He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."**
- 10 Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**
- 11 So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.**
- 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."**
- 13 However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.**
- 14 Then they called on the LORD and said, "We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased."**
- 15 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.**
- 16 Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.**
- 17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.**

We see right away that the book of Jonah is different from almost all of the other Minor Prophets. This is not really a book of prophecy—there are only a few words of prophecy in the whole book—but it is a book about a prophet. And so we find, starting in **verse 1**, that the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Jonah is told to go and preach to Nineveh. And so we find right away that, once again, this book is quite unusual. Usually the prophets preached to the nation of Israel. Usually they stayed home. But here we have the only time where a prophet is commanded to go preach in a far off land—very strange, very different from the way it normally happened. And so we find here that God is concerned about the behavior people outside the nation of Israel. God does not ignore sin, even if it takes place hundreds of miles away. Apparently it got so bad that God had to send a prophet.

We know from history that the Assyrians were terrible people, they were incredibly cruel. They were abusive to their enemies. We can look to the field of archeology, and we find snapshots here and there that just crack the window open a little bit concerning how they treated their enemies. **»PPT»** We know, for example, that when the Assyrians would conquer a city, they had a policy that no one would be taken alive. The children were burned alive. The soldiers would cut off people's ears, gouge out their eyes, pull out their tongues, and then cut off their heads (as you can see in the picture here). They would play with the heads. They would stack them in piles, and pyramids, and pillars. They would wear them like a necklace. Bodies would be impaled in stacks. The king of the conquered nation would be brought back to Nineveh to be skinned alive in front of the king of Assyria. This we know from history.

Some have speculated that Jonah, then, was afraid of preaching to such brutal people. But as far as we can tell, Jonah was not afraid of getting his head cut off, he was not afraid of being skinned alive. But we will find in **Chapter 4** that Jonah was actually afraid that the people would repent! Jonah was preaching a message of repentance, but he was afraid that the people would actually listen! Remember, the Assyrians are the enemies of Israel. Think with me for a moment: Can you imagine going back home and saying, **"Hey, I preached to the Assyrians, they listened, and God canceled His plans to destroy them!"** No! The Israelites were terrified of the Assyrians. They wanted the Assyrians to die, and Jonah wanted no part whatsoever in turning away the wrath of God on the city of Nineveh.

And so in response to his fear, we find in **verse 3** **»PPT»** that Jonah starts running away from God to the city of Tarshish. Most archaeologists believe that Tarshish was a city on the coast of Spain. Nineveh would have been about 600 miles to the northeast. Tarshish would have been two or three times that distance directly west. Tarshish would have been on the edge of the known world at that time. According to people at that time, Spain was right there on the edge of the earth—there was nothing beyond. And that is where Jonah was headed.

When I first started preparing this section of the lesson, I was going to say that Jonah went a little bit overboard...but that didn't really come out right, considering what happens next! Jonah, though, went in the opposite direction, and he did it with

style—he really went in the opposite direction. In fact, Tarshish is so far away that it is not even on this map!

Jonah, then, did not care. He had no interest in turning away the wrath of God from the city of Nineveh. In fact, he wanted them to be destroyed. For just a moment, we need to think about our own motivation for telling people about the good news even today. Are we motivated? Do we care that God's judgment is coming? Do we love our friends and neighbors enough to warn them of the coming destruction? As we think about our situation today, it is very important that we hate the sin but truly love the sinner, that we pass along the message regardless of how we think that it might be received. We are not to run away from our responsibility. We need to ask ourselves: Do we have a Nineveh in our lives? Is there someone God is asking us to reach?

Jonah, though, had it wrong, and in response to running away from God, we find in the rest of **Chapter 1** that God arranged for Jonah to be thrown overboard. The pagan sailors were looking for someone to take responsibility, and Jonah stepped forward. I recently read about a man who was hiring someone to fill a position. He made it known that they were looking for someone who was **"responsible."** One young man stepped forward and said, **"That's me. Everywhere I've ever worked, whenever anything went wrong, they said that I was responsible."** And so maybe in a similar way, Jonah took responsibility for the storm. The Bible tells us that as soon as Jonah hit the water, the storm was over. How strange that must have been! Jonah hits the water, the sun comes out, the birds start singing, the wind stops, and the sea becomes perfectly calm—the only evidence of a storm—a rain-soaked deck and ripped sails. In response to that change in weather, the pagan sailors offer a sacrifice to the one true God.

At this point, God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. In **verse 17**, we find that he spent three days and three nights in the stomach of the fish. **»PPT»** All of this was in response to the fact that Jonah was running away from God.

II. As we go back to the book of Jonah, we go on to find in Chapter 2 that JONAH WAS RUNNING BACK TO GOD. **»PPT»**

Let's look at what happens next—**Jonah 2:1-10**...

- ¹ ***Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish,***
- ² ***and he said, "I called out of my distress to the LORD, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice.***
- ³ ***"For You had cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me.***
- ⁴ ***"So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.'***

- 5 ***"Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, Weeds were wrapped around my head.***
- 6 ***"I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.***
- 7 ***"While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, And my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple.***
- 8 ***"Those who regard vain idols Forsake their faithfulness,***
- 9 ***But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the LORD."***
- 10 ***Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.***

It is interesting to me that at the end of **Chapter 1**, Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights. And *then*, apparently only at the *end* of that period, the Bible tells us in the first verse of **Chapter 2** (only after being there for those three days) that Jonah started praying. And what a prayer it is!

Some time ago, I read a story about three ministers who were talking about prayer with one another, and they were debating the most effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background. One minister argued that he felt the key was in the hands, and so he always held his hands together as he prayed. Another minister said that to offer a real prayer you had to be on your knees, and he quoted some powerful verses about kneeling before God in prayer. The other minister argued that the most effective way to pray was stretched out on the ground—flat on your face. At this point, the telephone guy couldn't stand it anymore, so he spoke up and he said, **"I have found that the most powerful prayer I ever prayed was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended 40 feet above the ground."** I think we might say something similar here. Jonah was praying in the stomach of a fish, and what a prayer it was!

Jonah admits (in **verse 3**) that God had cast him into the deep (he was not actually put there by the pagan sailors)—he admits that *God* put him there! He admits (at the end of **verse 3**) that the waves belong to God—that this particular storm was not a coincidence. In **verse 4**, he expresses hope that he will someday see the temple in Jerusalem once again. He goes to God. And at the very end, he makes a promise to fulfill his obligation to the Lord. And then in **verse 10**, we find that the fish vomits Jonah up onto the dry land. And what a great lesson for all of us here this morning! If we find ourselves in a position where we are running from God, we can always go to God in prayer. We can change our direction. We can change our behavior. We can run back to God.

III. All of this brings us to Chapter 3, as we find that JONAH STARTS RUNNING WITH GOD. »PPT»

If you will, please look with me at **Jonah 3—Jonah 3:1-10**...

- ¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,**
- ² "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."**
- ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.**
- ⁴ Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**
- ⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.**
- ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.**
- ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.**
- ⁸ "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.**
- ⁹ "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."**
- ¹⁰ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.**

What I notice here is that God starts with Jonah on a fresh new page. In **verse 1**, we find that, **"...the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time...."** There is no mention of Jonah's failure, but certainly this time the prophet saw this message from a new perspective. And so we find that Jonah goes immediately to the city of Nineveh. No more running away—God is not to be messed with. God must be obeyed.

And we find that when Jonah preaches his eight word message [five words in the Hebrew language] that the entire city turned back to God. The amazing power of God's word! The power was not in Jonah, the power was in the word of God. Perhaps you remember our study of Jeremiah and the picture of the potter and the clay. In **Jeremiah 18:7-8**, God said, **"At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."** Jonah's mission, therefore, was simply to speak the word of God. Jonah's mission was to preach, and after that God would take it up directly with the city of Nineveh.

This morning, we need to ask ourselves: Are we telling others what God has told us to tell them? Are we passing along the good news? And the news is good! We see

the love and the mercy of God all through the book of Jonah—God’s love for Jonah, God’s love for the sailors on the ship, God’s love for the city of Nineveh.

We are reminded of a few verses we studied just two weeks ago, ***"The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness"*** (Lamentations 3:22-23). And so we find that Jonah eventually began running with God.

IV. Before we close, though, we also need to consider the fact that in the final chapter, we find that JONAH IS ACTUALLY RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD. »PPT» In some ways, we might even say that Jonah was *running* God. Jonah wanted to be in charge. Jonah put himself in the position of God.

If you will, please look with me at Chapter 4, as Jonah discovers that God has decided not to destroy the city of Nineveh—Jonah 4:1-11...

- ¹ ***But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.***
- ² ***He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.***
- ³ ***"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."***
- ⁴ ***The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"***
- ⁵ ***Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.***
- ⁶ ***So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.***
- ⁷ ***But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered.***
- ⁸ ***When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."***
- ⁹ ***Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."***
- ¹⁰ ***Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.***
- ¹¹ ***"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"***

And so we find in the final chapter that Jonah was obeying God, but he was doing it with the wrong motive. He wanted judgment for others but mercy for himself. He was sitting there on the outskirts of Nineveh—basically waiting for the “**shock and awe.**” He had his little shade plant there, and he was waiting for the fire and brimstone. **Verse 6** tells us that, “**...Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.**” He was not extremely happy that an entire city had actually listened to his preaching! He was mad that his sermon had been a success!

This is one messed-up book! God’s prophet refuses to speak. Pagan sailors pray and offer sacrifices to the one true God. The wind and the waves listen to God. A giant fish listens to God, but Jonah does not. A pagan city of ear-cutting, eye-gouging, tongue-yanking, head-chopping savages listens to God. The shade plant listens to God. Even the worm listens to God! Everyone and everything in the book of Jonah listens to God—except the prophet Jonah. Of all people, Jonah should have understood repentance and mercy, but as we end the book Jonah apparently thinks that he is right and God is wrong. He was running *ahead* of God.

This morning we need to ask the question: Do we see just a little bit of Jonah in ourselves? Here we are almost 3,000 years later, and we are shocked that Jonah would not want to go preach. We are shocked that Jonah was not concerned with the spiritual health of thousands of people. We are amazed that Jonah seems indifferent to the coming destruction. But let us also ask: What are we doing? What are we personally doing to prevent the spiritual death of the nearly half-million people here in Dane County?

It is quite possible that we may be tempted to be more upset about our shade plant than the spiritual condition of the world around us. It is so easy to get too busy with cars and houses and careers and toys and entertainment to really care about the lost as we should. It is tempting—it is tempting for a preacher—but let us learn the lesson from Jonah. Jonah, therefore, did not really care. He wanted to make the decision for God. He was running ahead of God.

Conclusion & Invitation:

This morning, then, we have learned that the book of Jonah is not really about the big fish. In fact, the story is not really about Jonah, but the main story is about the love and the mercy of God. God’s love was not limited to Israel, but God’s love (even in the Old Testament) was extended to all people who were willing to demonstrate their faith in God.

God called Jonah to preach to Nineveh. In a slightly similar way, God has called all of us to preach the gospel to the whole world—starting with our friends and neighbors right here in south-central Wisconsin and in the city of Madison.

Did you notice how the book ends? The book ends with a question: ***Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city...?*** And here we are, face-to-face

with the love of God! The book does not end with an answer. The question is up to us to answer. Do we value what God values? Is God's concern our concern?

We have learned this morning that God wants more than obedience—He wants us to value what He values—He wants us to value the souls that we see around us.

As brother Harold read for us in our Scripture reading, something greater than Jonah is here (**Matthew 12:41**). The Bible teaches that we must turn away from our sins, and in faith we are to allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will talk to us right away. But if you are ready to be baptized right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org