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Jonah 1-2

First Message

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## PAGAN SAILORS AND A FOOLISH PROPHET

The story of Jonah – or at least the first part of it – is familiar to most people. Over the next two Sundays I hope to offer you some new insights into this funny and disturbing story. My point of view about the book is certainly not shared by everyone who has carefully studied this unique prophetic book. I would not call my perspective unusual or radical, but it is distinct, and some reputable scholars see the book differently.

Let me put my cards on the table and explain my perspective so that you are not left guessing as you listen: I believe that the prophet Jonah is being held up in this text as a negative example.<sup>1</sup> He typifies many things that we must *not* do if we claim to know and trust in Yahweh. Almost everyone accepts that this is a valid perspective at the beginning of the story: How else do you explain Jonah's disobedience in not going to Nineveh when God tells him to? Yet one common point of view is to understand Jonah's experience in the "whale" as a turning point in the prophet's life which leads him to positive behavior. I don't think this view fits the facts. Rather, as you will soon hear, I find Jonah's prayer in the belly of the great fish to be despicable and perhaps the lowest point of the entire book.

In the end, I believe that the Book of Jonah is asking every reader a deeply profound question: What does it mean to be in covenant with Yahweh, a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and who repents of evil"? What does it mean for a covenant people (Israel and now the Church) and what does it mean to each member of the covenant community? To help us feel the weight of this question, Jonah the Prophet is deliberately portrayed as understanding but opposed to this view of God: He is hard of heart and in him we have the chance to see our own failure in accepting the loyal love of God. As the book ends God reaches out in compassion to a wayward people and this gigantic question looms unwritten but clearly spoken: Will Jonah accept his God or is the life of love and compassion too hard? Will you, the reader, accept Yahweh and his merciful compassion, or will you turn away?

This morning we will examine the first two chapters of Jonah.<sup>2</sup> Our focus will be on Jonah the Prophet and his failures as a herald of God's love. Next week we will examine the less familiar chapters (3-4). From those chapters, we will examine the question of what it means for God to "repent" because of his love.

**Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness 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 on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3)**

We know very little about Jonah outside of what can be gleaned from the prophetic book named after him and in which he plays the starring role. Outside of Jonah, the only other OT information we have about him can be found in 2 Kings 14:25, where he is mentioned as being from Gathhepher and that he prophesied about the restoration of the boundaries of the Northern Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam II, who

can be dated to the early part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Perhaps more important is our knowledge of Nineveh, the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire. Assyria and Israel were enemies, and it was Assyria that brought the Northern Kingdom to an end in 722 B.C. and almost destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah as well. The place of Assyria as a great national enemy of Israel and Judah is helpful in understanding why Jonah was reluctant to prophecy in Assyria's capital city. But the point of this marvelously told story would be clear even without this background information.

Verse 2 contains an important interpretative challenge, emerging from the image of the "wickedness" that is rising up from Nineveh to God. What is this "wickedness"?<sup>3</sup> Many translations use "wickedness" or a synonym. But there are other reasonable options. Later, in Jonah 4:6, this same word is used to describe Jonah's discomfort and misery beneath the beating sun and the scorching wind as he waits to see what would happen to Nineveh. Here, a translation of "wickedness" would not make sense. I don't like to argue with the translators of these great Bible translations. They are much more knowledgeable than I am. But I think you can see how it sets a tone for what follows if we picture the Assyrians as being perpetrators of enormous evil that has become so foul that the stench of their sin has risen up before God. There is a different nuance to the opening of this story if we picture that it is the trouble, dismay, misery or distress of Nineveh that God notices. Perhaps the misery or discomfort that had come upon them was largely of their own doing. This is often the case. But we will approach the Assyrians differently if we think of them as being in need of help, pity, encouragement or challenge, rather than as being ready to be blasted away by an angry God. Already in this single word a fundamental challenge of the story is being presented. What is a merciful response to the mess of life? Does our heart take us first toward anger or towards grief when we are confronted with sin?

The second thing to notice about these opening verses is easy to miss. Think about the other prophetic books of the OT. How do they usually begin? Isn't the pattern like that in Isaiah?

**The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken....**

Jonah does not begin this way. In fact we never hear "the word of the Lord" for Nineveh. We are told that Yahweh tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. But neither before he gets there, nor after (except for the brief summary sentence in Jonah 3:4, which consists of five Hebrew words) do we ever hear "the word of the Lord" in this entire book. It is the only prophetic book that contains no prophecy. Instead we have a story: about a prophet and his God. I think this should immediately alert us to the possibility that we are to consider this book in a different way than we do the other books of OT prophecy. In the other prophetic books we spend our time examining the prophecy. In Jonah, our gaze is fixed upon the prophet himself.<sup>4</sup>

Some of you may know about the geography that is behind the story of where Jonah went next. We can laugh about someone trying to get

“away from the presence of the Lord.” Jonah knows full well that this is impossible, but he makes a whole-hearted effort to accomplish it nonetheless. It is this attempt to make the impossible happen that creates a tone of humor to everything about these verses. The journey to Nineveh is overland to the east and north. Jonah gets on a boat and goes west. He should be going “up” toward Nineveh, and instead goes “down” to Joppa. There is even some humor in the fact that the text tells us that he “paid the fare” for his journey by sea. This escape from God is going to be legitimately funded!

But Yahweh loves the people of Nineveh too much to let the prophet escape.

**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 to his god; and they threw the wares that were 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. (1:4-5)**

I had the opportunity of translating Jonah in the third quarter of my introductory Hebrew class with Dr. David Eckman at Western Seminary. Dr. Eckman has spoken from our own pulpit here in Cupertino on several occasions. His insights into this book have guided much of my thinking about this text. Dr. Eckman pointed out to us that these verses contain a humorous picture about the boat that Jonah is in that is typically smoothed over in translation. Literally, the Hebrew says, “and the ship considered to itself that it was breaking apart.” The image is cartoon-like. The boat comes to life, as it were, and shares its thoughts with the reader: “Hey, I’m falling apart here.” But the humor has a serious point – one we will see again and again in the rest of this chapter. Jonah doesn’t get it. God commands the sea, and it obeys. The result is a huge storm. The sailors understand their peril and they respond. They start tossing valuable things overboard. (Something more valuable will be tossed overboard in just a few verses!) Even the boat gets what is going on. But does Jonah? No. Amazingly (and ludicrously?) he has “gone down into the inner part of the ship and...lain down, and was fast asleep.”

If my sense of the tone of this passage is right, then this is truly a ridiculous picture. How, after all, could someone actually go to sleep in the midst of a storm that is even causing a boat to crack up? It’s almost as absurd as thinking that you can get away from the presence of God!

In the next part of the story I want you to see something that is very important, but perhaps underemphasized, in the story of Jonah. This important element is the extreme care and effort taken on by the sailors to deal with their desperate situation while still caring for the passenger that is causing them so much trouble. Note also how accurate their understanding is of spiritual reality compared to Jonah.

**So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish.” And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us, on whose account this evil has come upon us? What is your occupation? And whence do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?” And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, 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!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. (1:6-10)**

The ship’s captain immediately understands and accepts that they are in need of help. He is holding up a huge “Help Wanted” sign: All divine beings welcome to apply! First, the captain simply wants Jonah to get

engaged. The trouble here is real. All help is needed. He can’t believe that Jonah isn’t doing his part, so he encourages him to pray. Note, once again, the irony: It is the pagan sailor who recommends prayer to the prophet of God. You might expect it to be the reverse. But not with Jonah!

Apparently Jonah is at first reluctant to explain what is going on. He eventually reveals that he has been trying to escape from the presence of the Lord, but the sailors first go through a kind of fairness test. No one is going to presume guilt about anyone else. Lots will reveal the truth. When they learn that the God of Jonah is their problem, they immediately try to find out more. Jonah’s response could not be more discouraging. When you are in the midst of a ship-cracking storm, there are two elements that you care most about: (1) all the water that is crashing in around you, and (2) the dry land that you would like to get to in order to get out of trouble. Jonah tells them that the God he has offended is none other than the “God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

Once again showing their accurate spiritual sensitivities, the sailors are “exceeding afraid.” The God who controls the elements of their doom has been offended by one of the passengers. What would you have done?

Let me make an application here. What if the elders and body here at PBC Cupertino determined, after a long a difficult struggle which was having an extremely negative impact on the church, that the cause of the problem was the personal sin of one or a few attendees of the church? You and I both know that churches get enmeshed in all kinds of difficult problems. Rarely is the moral cause as easy to determine as the example of Jonah aboard the ship bound for Tarshish, trying to escape the presence of God. I can just envision the rush to Matthew 18, the passage that gives instruction about church discipline, which would occur in many churches. But one thing that we often fail to see in Matthew 18 is that the whole point of the passage is to encourage reconciliation among sinners in God’s church. The passage was not written to explain how to excommunicate sinners. Yes, that truth is covered. The purpose of the passage is to explain the difficult, patient process of achieving reconciliation with a wayward brother.

Not surprisingly, then, the sailors overcome their fear and seek truth in a spirit of obedience. They ask Jonah, as the representative of the God of the sea and the dry land, what they ought to do.

**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, “Take me up and throw 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.” Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried to the LORD, “We beseech thee, O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood; for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee.” (1:11-14)**

There are many things that I could say about these four verses, but let me simply note two things. First, Jonah has absolutely no justification, either from the Law or his knowledge of God, that assisted suicide is something that will appease God. I don’t recall a single verse from the law that recommends suicide as a remedy for sin. The sailors understand the horrific thing Jonah is asking them to do, and they not only try to avoid doing it, they call out to Yahweh, Jonah’s God, not to punish them for doing something that is so obviously terrible. Second, observe the strenuous effort of the sailors to save Jonah’s life. They risk the ravages of the ever-increasing storm to attempt to row Jonah to dry land and safety. But they can’t manage it. Only at the end, after every effort has been made, do they comply with Jonah’s suicidal request. And even as

they do, they pray for forgiveness and safety for the innocent blood that they are about to shed.

Let's turn back to my point of application. In our disputes within our churches do we exhibit the same sense of urgency and care that these pagan sailors showed to sinful Jonah? Would we spend every last ounce of energy, meanwhile crying out for God's mercy, in trying to restore our wayward brother? This is a beautiful picture of love. In a moment of great danger and turmoil, it is the pagans in the story who get it right. Jonah, pathetically, does it all wrong. Have you ever stopped to think that he could have just leapt overboard himself? He didn't need the help of the sailors to commit suicide. There is now another dimension to add to our increasingly depressing picture of this prophet: Jonah was a chicken. He does not have the moral courage to do what he says must be done and so he risks the moral wellbeing of the sailors in getting them to assist in his suicide.

**So they took up Jonah and threw 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. (1:15-16)**

The crescendo of action comes to a stop. The storm stops. But the pagan sailors continue to learn. These idolaters understand something about the power of Yahweh, and they enter into a place of great wisdom: the fear of the Lord. In addition, the story tells us that they made sacrifices and vows. These pagans learned something in spite of Jonah. They moved closer to the true God as they performed heroic acts of service and kindness. Ultimately, the acts failed, and the knowledge of these pagan men remained somewhat darkened because the prophet of God was unwilling to speak the truth and help these men into a deeper understanding of what it is to be in a covenant with Yahweh.

Stop for just a moment and consider something before we go on to Jonah's prayer in the belly of the great fish. What would you have thought of the sailors if their response to Jonah had been, "Jonah, your god is weak. Yahweh didn't make the land and the sea. Baal did. You should forget this god from whom you are trying to run away. We are loyal to Baal (or Marduk, or Astarte, or whoever...). We are going to stay with that loyalty and ignore your dumb god. He can take care of you, but he has nothing to do with us!" The sailors, as polytheists, would have no problem with adding another god to their to-be-worshipped list. Monotheism was rare in the ancient world, and the virtues of loyalty and faithfulness which accompany it were not high on the list of religious qualities that the pagan sailors were choosing to practice. In short, the sailors turned to Yahweh in their time of trouble. Shouldn't Jonah have rejoiced in this? We will see Jonah's reaction in Chapter 2.

**And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (1:17)**

Most of you probably realized that there is no "whale" in the Book of Jonah. Rather, the creature is simply described as a "great fish." For a man to be swallowed up by a fish and live inside of it for three days is so amazing that it is easy to miss something that is happening at this point in the story. The text says that the Lord "appointed" a great fish. When we reach chapter four, there is a threefold repetition of this idea. In rapid succession, the Lord "appoints" a plant, a worm, and a wind. The element of the story that is being emphasized here is that Yahweh is indeed ruler of the seas and the dry land. When he appoints something, even something inanimate like the wind, it performs its task in obedience to Yahweh's command. But Jonah, created in the very image of Yahweh, fails in this very area. What fish, plant, worm, and wind can do, Jonah does not do.

When I heard the story of Jonah as a child, and for most of my adult life as well, I thought that the fish came to swallow Jonah as God's method of forced transportation for Jonah. It's as if God were saying, "Okay Jonah, you seem to be doing everything to avoid going to Nineveh.

Here! Get in this fish and I'll have you delivered to the place you are refusing to go to." I think this even led in my thinking to believing that when the fish vomits Jonah up, Jonah is deposited near Nineveh.<sup>5</sup> But this is simply not true. Not only is Nineveh far away from the sea, the point of the text is not about "forced transportation." I believe that once again the author is showing us God's sovereign power over his creation. Notice that the fish (from the sea) deposits Jonah "on dry land." Over and over the story reminds us of God's sovereign power, as well as Jonah's free ability to refuse to do what God would have him do.

We come now to Jonah's prayer inside the great fish. Once again, my interpretation of this prayer may be somewhat different from what you have heard elsewhere. My position is that this prayer is despicable. It is founded on lies and religious hypocrisy. It is full of ingratitude and abuses the great prayer book of the Bible, the Psalms. These are strong statements. To help you see why I think this, consider a few questions about the story of Jonah as it has been told so far:

1. Has Jonah at any point in the story called out to the Lord for any kind of help?
2. Whose idea was it that Jonah be cast into the sea? Who cast Jonah into the sea?
3. Did God drive Jonah away from God's presence? Who is it that the text says was trying to go away from the presence of God?
4. If I am right about Jonah being suicidal in Chapter 1, who is to blame for Jonah nearly losing his life in the sea?
5. Who are the idol worshippers in this story?
6. Who is it who vowed vows and sacrificed sacrifices to Yahweh in Chapter 1?

With these questions in mind, let's listen to Jonah's prayer.<sup>6</sup>

**Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. 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; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around 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. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!" Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. (2:1-10)**

I think the point is clear. Jonah not only lies about his actions and motives in this prayer, but he also says despicable things about the sailors who tried so valiantly to save his life and who understood the true significance of casting away one's life. As far as I am concerned, if someone had been praying like that inside of me, I would have thrown up too!

There is one other point I would like to make about this prayer. If you get the chance sometime, look up the references that I've provided in the written text to this sermon and examine the parallels between Jonah's prayer and phrases from the Psalms.<sup>7</sup> It is my contention that Jonah, in good Hebrew fashion, uses the language of the Psalms in this prayer. However, when he uses them untruthfully, he insults the beauty and power of this wonderful prayer book.

This was a distressing conclusion for me to reach. As many of you know, I have been going through the Psalms in the last ten years. I have had to take a break (I'm in the middle of Psalm 11), but I have learned

so much about the Lord and about prayer from these glorious poems. I have learned how to pray using the word of God from the Psalms and I have been tremendously blessed. Yet even this can be a source of sin for me. I can twist and abuse these words in prayer if my heart is deceitful and proud. I can stitch together a string of wonderful sounding words which only produce a stinking darkness in the sight of God.

So, what shall we conclude from the first two chapters of Jonah? At this point, the message is predominantly negative because Jonah the Prophet is presented to us as a profoundly negative example. Nonetheless, let me offer two applications for us to consider:

First, the most straightforward way to apply this text to our lives today is to think of outreach to the troubled and confused world that we live in. What is our heart toward this world? Do we have a heart like Jonah's, one that becomes increasingly self-absorbed and self-righteous when confronted with pain and anguish? Do we treat our lost and anguished neighbors with anything like the love and self-sacrifice of the pagan sailors who tried to save Jonah's life? Are we looking to find points of contact between the distress of our friends and co-workers and the places of vulnerability in our own lives, or do we, like Jonah, ultimately prefer oblivion to sacrificial love? When we see pain and guilt and sin all around us, do we grieve or do we get rigid? Do we reach out or do we turn inward? Does our self-absorption even disfigure our prayer lives, such that we even try to lie to our Heavenly Father for the sake of self-vindication?

Second, and we will see this even more clearly next week, there is always hope for sinners. Repentance is always possible. We must not, like Jonah, let our anger and self-absorption defeat us. There was a time when the Jewish leaders came to Jesus to ask him for a sign so that they might know by whose authority he did the things he was doing. Listen to his response as it is given in Matthew 12:38-41:

**Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!"<sup>8</sup>**

An entire sermon is needed to truly unpack these verses. Notice that Jesus does not praise Jonah. Rather, he holds up the repentance of the people of Nineveh as a model for us to follow. It is these pagan people who understand that there is still hope; there is still time to repent. This is a simple message, but it is profound. Right now, do you find yourself overwhelmed by the challenges that you face? Have you closed in upon yourself, like Jonah did, and shut down in the face of these challenges? Have you shut yourself off from others who might like to help you? Have you constructed for yourself a way of living that puts barriers between you and God, between you and those around you? Do you struggle with sins that seem incurable or unconquerable? Are you frustrated by your lack of maturity or growth?

We know full well that we are too much like Jonah. We talk about wanting the will of God, but in the secret places of our hearts, we have a hard time escaping from our self-absorbed pity and pride. We secretly wish for revenge and for others to get what we think ought to be coming to them. But Jesus asks us to look at his time "in the heart of the earth." In the face of the most amazing act of sacrificial love ever done, we can find hope. That is what Jesus asks us to do in this life: contemplate his life and his death, and do the one needful thing: repent.

<sup>1</sup> Among the commentators whom I find persuasive for this point of view, I recommend Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 31, Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, 1987). There are other excellent commentaries which, while taking a perspective somewhat different than mine, are very useful. Perhaps most accessible is Desmond Alexander's commentary in the *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* series (Vol. 23a).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the Revised Standard Version (2<sup>nd</sup> Catholic Edition) is being used.

<sup>3</sup> The same word is used in Jonah 3:10 (RSV translates as "evil") of what God intended for Nineveh. There are many instances in which this word does not mean simply moral evil.

<sup>4</sup> This is one of the reasons why I think that the question of the historicity of the Book of Jonah is relatively unimportant. Yes, we know that there was a Jonah, son of Amittai, who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. But the Book of Jonah is not that prophetic word. Rather, this is a story about Jonah the Prophet and it is not unreasonable to

see it as not being written by the prophet himself.

<sup>5</sup> Did I misunderstand my Sunday school teachers? I couldn't help noticing that some of the "Christian Clip Art" I've seen has Jonah being thrown up by the fish (usually a whale) right next to Nineveh! I guess I'm not the only one who has made this mistake.

<sup>6</sup> The translation of the prayer in Jonah 2 is given here in the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>7</sup> There are probably other parallel texts to examine, but the reader can begin with Psalm 18:4-5; 31:6; 42:7; 69:1-2 and 15; 88:3-6; and 120:1.

<sup>8</sup> The section is from the New Revised Standard version.

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