

June 18th: On the Run

Today we embark on a new journey together into the story of Jonah. As we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

Today we begin in Jonah chapter 1, but before we get started, would you pray with me?

O Ancient Voice,

We hear your whisper in the stillness of the morning, we hear your persistent call to us in the dawning of each day. Help us to quiet our hearts so that we may fully listen for what you have to say to us. Aide us in shutting out the noise of our busy days and frantic weeks, so that we may fully be present with you. For we know that when we fully listen and are fully present, you speak to us in surprising and beautiful ways. You speak life into our tired bones, you speak truth into our weary souls, you speak peace into our anxious bodies. Be with us now, as we come to your holy text. Be with us on our journey, we pray.

Amen.

I think that over the course of Christian history, this text has been reduced to a simple children's story—told almost like a cute bedtime story. You know the type—Jonah is a naughty boy who runs away from home and gets swallowed by a whale, but eventually is saved and becomes a hero.

The real story is a lot more complicated than that. This is a complex story, with deep questions. It's not something that can be easily explained, and despite the relatively brevity of this book—it's not a story that should be read quickly. In order to understand it well, it must be unpacked slowly and deliberately.

One of the first things that people ask when they read the Book of Jonah is, "is this a true story?" In my experience of teaching this story to congregations and college students, they always ask, "Did it actually happen that a man named Jonah was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell the tale?"

And while there are no wrong questions when it comes to faith, this isn't what I want us to pay attention to this morning. We'll get to the question of Jonah's historical accuracy in a later sermon, so be sure to come back for that.

But first, here's what we do know about the true and historical person of Jonah:

Jonah was born in the 9th century BCE in the northern kingdom of Israel in the decades after the United Monarchy fell apart and the kingdom of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon was split into two separate lands. From this vantage point of the ten northern tribes in the nation of Israel, Jonah grows up in a small border town. In adulthood, Jonah became a prophet, and his work was noteworthy enough that it was mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 14:25, our text records, "Jeroboam 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-heper." Jonah was a contemporary of

another Old Testament prophet named Amos, but the two of them had very different perspectives on their leadership and environment.

At this point, it was the 8th century BCE, and the political landscape of the Middle East was rapidly changed by the growing presence and power of a new dynasty called the Assyrians. In just a generation, the Assyrian army will be on the doorstep of the kingdom of Israel, and their cities and towns will be ravaged by these invading forces. So Jonah is preaching and working in a time of uncertainty and conflict, themes which are woven into the story we read today.

With all that in mind, let's turn to the text itself.

We're introduced to our main character in verse 1, and then immediately in verse 2, we hear that God has very specific instructions for Jonah. We hear, "The word of the LORD came to Jonah..." which is a classic pattern for prophetic texts. We hear a similar wording in 1 Samuel 15:10, "The word of God came to Samuel," and Isaiah 38:4, "Then the word of God came to Isaiah." This is repeated all over the Old Testament, from Jeremiah 1 to 1 Kings 16, and lots of other texts. Suffice it to say that the idea of "the word of God" coming to human beings was a normal and natural aspect of being part of God's family.

In these other parts of the Old Testament, when a prophet or important person receives a word from God, there is an expectation of obedience. **It's a simple formula: God calls, humans answer. God gives a command, humans obey.** Even in difficult circumstances, like in Hosea 1 when God calls the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute, there is still an expectation that human beings will do what God says.

So what happens here?

Our text says that God commanded Jonah, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." That seems pretty clear, but for some reason, Jonah isn't necessarily interested in obeying God. That makes Jonah quite an unpredictable and unusual prophet.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Israel's enemy, so this might be on par with Hosea's situation in terms of difficulty and complexity.

Our biblical author records that Jonah left his hometown in a hurry, saying, "Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD."

In order to make sense of these verses, we need a little ancient geography lesson, so I want you to picture in your mind the Mediterranean Sea. Think about the land of Israel all the way on the eastern shores, with Egypt to the South, Turkey to the north, and Greece, Italy, and Spain to the West. This was the hub of the first century world, at least in our biblical imaginations. All of these lands were connected by trading routes and massive armadas of boats that connected these nations and people groups. But still, travel was not as easy as it is today. There were no cruise ships with all-you-can-eat buffets, or mega yachts to sunbathe on, or planes you could hop on when the sea waters got too choppy to sail.

But still, Jonah is determined. From his village, he makes his way to the port city of Joppa, bound for a place called Tarshish. Now that might not be a familiar name for us, it's not a city or a region that we might be able to point to on a modern map. Some biblical scholars insist that the exact location of Tarshish has been lost to time, but others write that in Jonah's day, Tarshish was likely a place on the shores of Spain, facing the Atlantic Ocean, near the modern day city of Cadiz.

In order to get to Tarshish, Jonah would have been forced to be on a wooden boat for weeks, if not months. As he traveled east, he would have been forced to sail past Alexandria and its famous lighthouse, past the island of Crete with its sun-drenched beaches, past Athens and its bustling markets, past Sicily and its olive groves, past Ibiza and its lively nightclubs (okay, that part might be a lie), past the Strait of Gibraltar and into the open ocean beyond. Countless

days and nights aboard a ship, tossed and turned by storms and waves, with limited resources and the potential for danger. Only to hopefully arrive in an unfamiliar place, in a strange land, where he would not speak the language, where he would have no family, no friends, no connections, no money, no firm plans for a future.

So what our Old Testament author is really saying is that Jonah is so insistent on running in the opposite direction of God's call, that he is willing to go to the known ends of ancient civilization to hide from these instructions.

That's what our character Jonah is willing to risk in his attempt to run away from God.

To our spiritual ancestors, this would have been unthinkable. In the Israelite mentality, their faith was so tied to the physical land—the territory that had been promised to previous generations, the fields and vineyards that were tangible evidence of God's presence and continued love for his people, the hills and mountains where altars were built to offer sacrifices and receive divine wisdom. To move to another place is not only a journey of the body, but of the soul as well. To relocate is to reorient one's very being, to be cut off from your culture and your history and your belief system.

But maybe this is the point. Maybe this is why Jonah is so compelled to leave. He cannot remain in his homeland and disobey God's instructions without being constantly reminded of his seeming failure. He cannot continue to dwell in the territories of the twelve tribes without being surrounded by his people's story, their spirituality, their everyday practices. He can't be at peace in this land because his actions are at odds with the values of his community.

Jonah soon finds out that his misguided quest to Tarshish is laughably futile.

Verses 4 and 5 say, "Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were

afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.”

Like the diverse trade routes that criss-crossed the Mediterranean Sea, it sounds like Jonah’s traveling companions are similarly diverse. In the midst of the storm, each of these men are praying to the gods of their homelands, trying desperately to fix the situation. Prayer doesn’t seem to work, so they turn to throwing cargo overboard, hoping that this will prevent the boat from capsizing into the wind and waves.

Jonah doesn’t seem to be worried though—he’s fallen asleep down below deck. Our text continues, “The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

Jonah is instructed to pray just like the other men, who are all hoping that someone’s god will finally put a stop to the storm. But when that doesn’t work, the men on board do something called “casting lots” to find out who is the cause of this bad situation. Not surprisingly, the men identify Jonah as the culprit, so they go to him and say, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

Jonah responds, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” This is apparently the wrong thing to say, and definitely not what his fellow sailors want to hear, because our passage concludes with this question and statement: ““What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)”

What has Jonah done?

Maybe I’m a little weird, but when I was reading through this passage this week and I came to the end of verse 10, I heard the Law and Order sound

effect in my head. You know, the DUN DUN. You know things are about to get real when you hear this particular sound, don't you?

It seems like all of his fellow sailors seem to understand the gravity of the situation, all of them are terrified to learn the consequences of Jonah's disobedience. Even though none of them are Israelites or Jewish or from his land, they still know the formula: the God of Israel calls, humans obey.

So I think the major questions for the beginning of this story are:

Why is Jonah so determined to disobey God's call?

Why does Jonah have such a hard time with what God has asked him to do?

Why does this prophet seem so unwilling to listen to God's voice?

Why does Jonah run away?

Those questions were ringing in my head all week, so I'm passing them along to you. Perhaps you'll come up with more answers than I did.

Next week, we'll recap this story a little bit and then reflect on this idea of disobedience.

Today, we'll end this with this:

I think from our distance of almost three thousand years, it could be easy to condemn Jonah for his lack of faith and his inability to follow God's instructions. It could be easy for us to criticize him or feel superior to him because we can clearly see where he falls short.

But this series isn't just about Jonah's journey, it's about our journey too. It's about our own tumultuous lives, our own tendencies to disobey, our own willingness to run from God, our own fear. I hope that over the course of these ten weeks together, we find some compassion for Jonah, and some hope for ourselves—hope that even if we are “a Jonah” in our own way, that God still has plans for us.

Amen.