

God's Unexpected Message

A sermon on Jonah 1
by Russell Smith

Before we dig into the text, some quick history will help you get centered around this story: Jonah's ministry took place in the 8th century BC – sometime between 780 and 755 b.c. We see him mentioned in 2 Kings 14:23-25 as predicting the expansion of Israel's territory during the reign of Jeroboam II. Remember that this was a time when the Israelites had divided their nation into two separate kingdoms – the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. They continued to worship the same God, but they were two separate kingdoms. We see here that Jonah is from the town of Gath Hopher, which was in the territory of the tribe of Zebulun – not far from Nazareth. He was clearly a prophet of respect and stature. And so it makes sense when God sends him on a mission. The language is the usual prophetic formula – “the word of the Lord came to Jonah”.

Jonah 1

¹The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh! Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.”

³But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction in order to get away from the LORD. He went down to the seacoast, to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping that by going away to the west he could escape from the LORD.

⁴But as the ship was sailing along, suddenly the LORD flung a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to send them to the bottom. ⁵Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. And all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold. ⁶So the captain went down after him. “How can you sleep at a time like this?” he shouted. “Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will have mercy on us and spare our lives.”

⁷Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, Jonah lost the toss. ⁸“What have you done to bring this awful storm down on us?” they demanded. “Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?”

⁹And Jonah answered, “I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” ¹⁰Then he told them that he was running away from the LORD.

The sailors were terrified when they heard this. “Oh, why did you do it?” they groaned. ¹¹And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, “What should we do to you to stop this storm?”

¹²“Throw me into the sea,” Jonah said, “and it will become calm again. For I know that this terrible storm is all my fault.”

¹³Instead, the sailors tried even harder to row the boat ashore. But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they couldn't make it. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, Jonah's God. “O LORD,” they pleaded, “don't make us die for this man's sin. And don't hold us responsible for his death, because it isn't our fault. O LORD, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons.”

¹⁵Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the storm stopped at once!

¹⁶The sailors were awestruck by the LORD's great power, and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him.

¹⁷Now the LORD had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

Now here we see that God sends Jonah to Nineveh, and that was the unexpected message. Nineveh was one of the major cities in the vast Assyrian Empire. To give you some geographical sense, the ruins of Nineveh are directly outside the modern day Iraqi city of Mosul – which you've certainly seen in the headlines this past year. The Assyrians had grown in influence and power all through the previous century – seriously contesting the might of the Arameans, who were a powerful people to the North of Israel. Israel got caught in the power politics of these two states, and as you read through the history, you can catch glimpses of the shifting alliances, political intrigue, and high stakes power games. The Assyrians were not very kind to the Israelites – their power was vast and their cruelty was legendary.

Now God's commission seems simple "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." What about this commission from God caused Jonah to run? Simply put, it was that God's messages of judgment carry with them the possibility of forgiveness where there is repentance and turning to Him in trust. Throughout the prophets, when you see an announcement of judgment, the announcement is designed to move the recipients to cry out to God for mercy and to change their ways. Consider Jeremiah 18:7-10 "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it." That's what prophecy was – most of the time it was not an ecstatic prediction of future events – most of the time it was a call to change your ways before it was too late. God is essentially saying to Jonah "Prophecy to Nineveh because I want to show them mercy."

And Jonah understands this. He is so deeply offended by the idea of God showing mercy to the Ninevites that he runs in the opposite direction. Jonah can't accept this unexpected message from God. Catching a Phoenician boat bound for Tarshish – which is widely believed to be in Southern Spain, Jonah flees. He is literally running in the opposite direction. He doesn't want to show mercy to his country's enemies – he wants them destroyed. He wants them to get what they deserve. He knows that if Nineveh repents and receives forgiveness, they will prosper, which will endanger Israelite interests in the region.

There's the first lesson – God's unexpected message is sometimes unpleasant. I know so many people who wrestle with "what is God's will for my life – how do I know what God wants me to do?" The simple answer is "What do the scriptures say? You can't begin to know God's particular will for your life until you work on understand his General will for his people." But I don't like what God says – Neither did Jonah. God is not as concerned about our liking what he has to say than he is with our following what He has to say.

In just a few days, the most anticipated movie of the year will be released. It is the third installment in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Many of you know I'm a huge follower of the series, which is based on JRR Tolkien's magnum opus. The story is about a magic ring of unimaginable power that was created by an evil wizard so that he could conquer the mythical world of Middle Earth. This ring falls into the hands of the forces of good. Gandalf, the good wizard who is essentially God's prophet in the book, convinces them that the ring must be destroyed by undertaking a dangerous quest deep into the heart of the evil wizard's territory to throw the ring into the raging heart of the volcano in which it was created. Frodo, the hobbit, is the ring bearer, and he is accompanied by several companions. They discover that they are being tracked by Gollum, the former owner of the ring. Gollum had once been a normal creature, but the evil in the ring had twisted his spirit so that he was evil, malicious, cunning, murderous, and self-seeking. He's pictured in the film as a pathetic, hunched, emaciated, and panicky creature waiting for his opportunity to strike and retrieve the ring for himself.

Early on in the first book, Gollum is captured by the forces of good. Frodo and Gandalf have this conversation:

"... I do not feel any pity for Gollum."

"You have not seen him" Gandalf broke in.

"No, and I don't want to," said Frodo, "I can't understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all the horrible deeds? He deserves death."

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it... My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end...."¹

It turns out that Gollum does have a very important part to play in the end. If you want to know what that part is, you'll have to see the movie for yourself. The point here being that the forces of good have been stuck with God's unpleasant message – an unpleasant task – destroy this object of power. And they are charged with showing mercy to an unpleasant person – in this case, Gollum.

Scripture asks us to do many things that are unpleasant, inconvenient, and downright painful. The easy route is the route of dismissal, saying "I don't believe that". However God challenges us to become transformed by His word. He challenges us to wrestle with it, grapple with it, and let it shape and mold our lives.

Then we see the second lesson – God's unexpected message will not be denied. Look at the story of Jonah on the ship. He's with a bunch of pagan Phoenician sailors – each of whom worshipped a pantheon of different Gods. God calls up the storm while Jonah is asleep in the boat. This sleep makes total sense – Jonah is in violation of God's command. He knows that there's nowhere to run – I imagine he's severely depressed because he's digging himself a hole out of which he doesn't think he will come. He's sleeping to escape it all. He's huddled up in a

¹ From *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Ballantine books, 1965. Pg 92-93.

cocoon under a blanket, hoping that the sleep will take away the crushing weight of his problems.

The captain wakes Jonah up, they cast lots to see who is responsible, and it falls upon Jonah. They fire this barrage of questions, and Jonah answers them legitimately. Even though he was running from proclaiming the Lord, He finds himself proclaiming the Lord. Look at the results, pagans come to trust in God. Look at verse 16 -- they feared the Lord, they made sacrifices, and they made vows, indicating an ongoing relationship. Jonah didn't want God to extend mercy to these pagans, and yet God used Jonah to extend mercy to the pagans.

Do you see the incredible irony here – Jonah is running from preaching to pagans, but God in His providence, sets up the situation where he preaches to pagans and they repent and turn to Him. God's unexpected message will not be denied. The question is, will you fight God or will you go along and enjoy the ride?

We see this truth in the story of Joseph. The children in our Preschool Sunday school have been learning this story – Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. While he was a slave in Egypt he went into prison, but then rose to become the chief administrator in the land. He prepared the kingdom for coming years of famine, and when the famine struck, Egypt was ready because of his forethought. His brothers came asking for help during the famine – and when he revealed himself as their brother, they were afraid he would seek vengeance. “But Joseph said this to them “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:19-21)

The understanding is that there is no waste in God's economy – Even when we do bad things, even when we make terrible mistakes – God is able to redeem those things for his ends. He'd rather that we obeyed, but he's able to use our disobedience to accomplish his ends.

What does all this have to do with Advent, the season leading up to Christmas? We believe that all the Old Testament looks forward to Christ. What we'll see in the next few weeks is how God's compassion toward Nineveh anticipates his compassion toward the whole world – all the nations who are in need of God.

But for this week, I believe the application is much more personal. Jonah received a shock – a message that is unpleasant and he tried to run away and hide from it. I suggest to you that for many that's what Christmas has become – the attempt to run away and hide. The season between Thanksgiving and Christmas has become one endless calliope of parties, shopping, card sending, food preparation, events, gift giving, and other activities. And the image and aura that we're supposed to project is that we're having the time of our lives. We're supposed to project the image of being shiny happy people holding hands; shiny happy people laughing.

The truth is that some of us don't have jobs and we're wondering when the bills will get paid. The truth is that many of us are wrestling with illness. The truth is that a lot of us are worried

about friends and loved ones who are dealing with mental illness, or physical failure. The truth is that many of us struggle with persistent sin – doing bad things that we know we ought not do, but we just can't shake it. Some of us are lonely and depressed, some are angry at the lot we've been given. and many live in fear that at any moment the rug will be pulled out from under our feet and we'll come crashing down.

The unexpected message of Christmas is that's who the messiah comes to save – the imperfect and the flawed people. The message of Christmas is that he will love you no matter how bad you've messed up. The message of Christmas is that God knows all that you've done wrong – he knows the darkness in your own heart; he knows those things you'd rather not tell anyone else; he knows all the secret regrets; he knows the disobedience and the arrogance and the pride. You have no secrets before God – you are completely bare before him. And he doesn't destroy.

A few decades after Jonah's ministry, Isaiah had his ministry, and told of a coming king who would provide forever the same kind of mercy God extends to Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites. Isaiah 53:4-6. For six centuries, Israel waited for the king to be born who would fulfill these verses. A king unlike any other who would take the punishment we deserve unto himself. He would provide for us God's rich mercy.

He knows that you're like a Ninevite, and he doesn't destroy you. He knows that you're like Jonah, and he still uses you in the advancement of his kingdom. God's unexpected message is this – to swallow your pride and bow down at the manger. To admit the wrongs you've done and come to Jesus, the only one who can heal your heart and restore your relationship with God.

Rev. Russell B. Smith is pastor of Covenant-First Presbyterian Church, 717 Elm St., Cincinnati, OH (phone 513-621-4144; fax 513-621-1066)