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Jonah 1:1-17
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Wrestling with the Gospel

In my years working with high school boys, I've seen my share of good hearted impromptu wrestling matches. I can tell you how they always go down. After my telling them to be careful not to go too far. They usually they start off in good fun, but then one person chooses to cross the line and the other ends up getting hurt. After a few punches, colorful words, and tears, what's left are bruised egos and bad blood. All because they wouldn't listen to my word.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah was one who also failed to heed caution as he wrestled with God. You see God told him to do one thing, but Jonah in his stubborn arrogance, chose to do another. And so he ended up in a place he least expected. The belly of a whale - actually scripture says big fish.

Join me as we read from Jonah 1:1-17 and we hear how this story unfolds. I will be reading from Eugene Petersons' modern translation of the Bible called *The Message*.

1-2 One day long ago, God's Word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer."

3 But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from God as he could get.

4-6 But God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering.

The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, "What's this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we're in trouble and rescue us."

7 Then the sailors said to one another, "Let's get to the bottom of this. Let's draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who's responsible for this disaster."

So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

8 Then they grilled him: "Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?"

9 He told them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship God, the God of heaven who made sea and land.”

10 At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, “What on earth have you done!” As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from God.

11 They said to him, “What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?” By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control.

12 Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It’s all my fault. I’m the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you’ll get rid of the storm.”

13 But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging.

14 Then they prayed to God, “O God! Don’t let us drown because of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best.”

15 They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down.

16 The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.

17 Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish’s belly three days and nights.

I will continue to paraphrase the rest of the story. Inside the fish, Jonah prays to God who hears him and has the fish vomit Jonah out on dry land. Shortly afterward, the Word of God returns to Jonah a second time with the same message. This time, Jonah goes to Nineveh, preaches the message, and the entire city repents and God turns away his wrath. This makes Jonah angry because it ends up exactly as Jonah had thought...with God relenting and saving these wicked people.

As for Ninevah, their repentance was temporary and they reverted back to their prideful cruelty and were eventually destroyed in 612BC.

Let us pray.

This is a story that we learned as kids. There is great debate among scholars about its historical accuracy and why it’s even included in our scriptures. That being said, it is also well known within the Islamic faith as well. So maybe the point isn’t so much whether or not it happened as the story is told, but that it continues to happen today.

This morning we are going to talk about wrestling with the Gospel and how sometimes that goes hand in hand with our wrestling with God. In other words,

when we know the good news that God wants us to share, but then we choose to not share it or refuse to go wherever God calls. So as we explore this further, we will focus on four main questions. What does this story tell us about Jonah? What does it say about us? What does it tell us about God? And finally what is God's call to us through it?

What does this story tell us about Jonah?

2 Kings tells us that Jonah was a prophet who addressed the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II around 793 - 753 B.C.¹ 41 years~ That was a long time for a king to reign. Jeroboam was not a good guy. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn any from ANY of the sins of his predecessors. Yet, Jeroboam restored the boundaries for Israel and helped them prosper.

Assyria was Israel's worst enemy and its capital was Nineveh. If we were to locate Nineveh on a map today, Nineveh would be in Northern Iraq, near the Turkish border.

Several times throughout the Book of Jonah, the author refers to Nineveh as "The Great" city. The word "Great" in Hebrew is Hagodah. It means prominent, rich, impressive, or mighty. In Chapter 3, it is also referred to as a very important city.

Now we just visited New York City over spring break. And when people from the Northeast talk about going to Manhattan they don't say New York City or even Manhattan, they just say "The City." I think Nineveh would have had similar prominence in Jonah's day.

The significance of this descriptor Hagodah is that Nineveh had become so arrogant in its greatness that they had turned their backs on God and instead had chosen to go their own way. And as what often happens when we are self sufficient, when we don't depend on God's provisions, we too begin to rely more on our abilities and less on God's.

Sound familiar America?

Notice that Jonah had somewhat of a chip on his shoulder. He didn't want to go to Nineveh and bring God's call for repentance there. He could have cared less about them being in relationship with "His God." This wasn't uncommon. We see how many Jews even in Jesus and Paul's day were highly prejudiced against anyone who wasn't Jewish. You see they were God's chosen and included in God's covenant. As for the rest of the world, the Gentiles, who were excluded from the covenant...well to hell with them. At least that was Jonah's point of view.

God's expectations for Jonah were very clear. Go to Nineveh. Tell them to repent.

¹ 2 Kings 14:25

Jonah wrestled with those expectations and ran away from the very people God wanted him to reach. He disobeyed God and headed off in the opposite direction from Nineveh. To Tarshish...in Southwest Spain which was populated by the wealthy seafaring Phoenicians. What this decision represented for Jonah was going as far away from Nineveh and God as one could get.

And Jonah found himself lost.

"Christina Crawford in her book *Survivor* describes her own painful journey through darkness into a deeper maturity. "Lost is a place, too! To be saved, we have to first realize that we're lost, and usually our lives have to fall apart before we can come to that realization. Sometimes there's no cure for arrogance and presumption than a painful loss of certitude about our own ideas about God, faith, and religion."² In the belly of a great fish, Jonah's ideals and world fell apart.

Not only did Jonah's sin impact him, but also those around him. Of course there were the Ninevites but there were also the sailors on the ship bound for Tarshish who got caught up in the storm caused by Jonah's choices. Their lives were in jeopardy on account of the violent storm that came upon them. And so are the people around us impacted by some of the choices we make.

So what does this say about us?

Jonah is just like us. We all carry assumptions and prejudices against different people groups. In America, it's obvious that racism has continued to brew beneath the surface for some time. I think the pandemic stress and the awful political climate, revealed our true racist colors. Now you might say, "Chris, I think you're going a little bit too far. I'm not a racist." But folks, whenever we say or think things like "Those people are..." what we are doing is exposing the same racist attitudes toward the Ninevites that Jonah had.

Like Jonah and the Israelites, we Americans are a proud, stubborn, obstinate, and stiff necked people. We want it our way, on our timeline, and when we can't have it our way we pitch a fit. You know what I'm talking about.

Like Jonah we know what God desires of us. The prophet Micah and Jesus both made it very simple. "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."³ Jesus boiled it down to "love God, and love others as much as you love yourself."

Like Jonah, we know the Gospel. We know how God loved so loved the world that he gave us these beautiful gardens with specific boundaries to live within. His rule was simple. Live within these boundaries, and it will go well with you. Stray from these boundaries, and it will not. But because human nature tends to think that we know better than God, we stray beyond those boundaries and like

² Ronald Rolheizer, *Wrestling with God* (New York: Image Books, 2018), 111.

³ Micah 6:8

Jonah end up in places where we never imagined. Do you know how stinky it must have been in a fish belly? That's why God sent Jesus into our world, as a second Jonah, to preach to those in captivity, to rescue us from those places and restore us to right relationship with our Creator.

That is Good News! Right? And yet like Jonah we choose to keep it to ourselves and not to share it with people who need to hear it.

Ok. So what does this tell us about God?

The story of Jonah teaches us about God's sovereignty. God is in control of life, nature, and circumstances. We are not. He's the God of all people, who is concerned about every nation and individual on the planet. Though we are not, God will faithful to bring his all-encompassing plan of salvation to completion. Though we often drop the ball.

The story teaches us about God's compassion and mercy. God loves even the adversaries of his people and will show mercy when they repent. He may demand obedience but He is also the God of second chances.

The story also teaches us about God's mission. We are called to proclaim God's message to the entire world, even to those who oppose us. As God's Ambassadors, we are to announce this call: "Be reconciled to God." That's it. Nothing more, nothing less. How people respond to that message isn't up to us. That is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate this day of Pentecost when God poured out his Spirit upon all believers. What Good News is God calling us to share today?

To whom is God calling us to go?

Or from whom are we running away or avoiding? That is perhaps a better indicator of God's call.

Know that once Nineveh responded to the Gospel and repented of their wicked ways, it wasn't a once and done sort of thing. Eventually they returned to their evil ways. Repentance is a continual process of confessing, letting go, and being recreated into the image of Jesus. It's an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in us.

And finally what is God calling us to do?

First, we need to be in a posture where we are willing to listen to God's still quiet voice.

Second, we must obey God's call - whether we want to or not.

Third, we ought not exclude others from participating in God's kingdom by judging whether or not they are worthy of salvation.

Fourth, we need to do more than just confess our sin to God; we have to give up our evil ways. True repentance calls for action.

Fifth, we must root out prejudice and hatred in our lives; for such attitudes that are inconsistent with God's loving, compassionate nature, and will place a barrier in the way of our relationship with him and with other people.

And finally, we need to know that God's judgement and mercy are not subject to human manipulation. We cannot thwart God's plans. God will accomplish what he wants to accomplish however he chooses whether with us or without us.

So may we listen for God's call to us today. May we be faithful to share the Gospel whenever, however, and to whomever God calls. And may we trust that "He who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it in his time and his way."⁴

Let us pray.

"Holy Spirit overturn us today and breathe your life upon your Church. Turn us into new people with a heart for your peace. May we not hesitate to extend your offer of deliverance to our enemies. Turn us to repentance from our reliance upon power and force (like the Ninevites). Speak to us as we sit on the hillside in safety (like Jonah), that we might learn from you for all our decisions. Overturn us for our sake, for the sake of your creation, and for the witness of your gospel as you send us in your power to every tribe and every nation in the world. Amen."⁵

⁴ Philippians 1:6

⁵ Prayer found in footnote section of *New International Version Faith in Action Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1474.