

Jonah

Running in the Wrong Direction

Jonah 1:1-17

Sunday's Scripture Reading ***Jonah 1:1-17***

¹The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai:

²"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

³But 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.

⁴Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

⁵All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

⁶The 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."

⁷Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸So they asked him, "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?"

⁹He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

¹⁰This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

¹²"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

¹³Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

¹⁴Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased."

¹⁵Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

¹⁶At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

¹⁷Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

This Week's Message
February 4, 2024

Jonah: Running in the Wrong Direction

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

Jonah 1:3
(New International Version)

On Sunday, I will begin a series of messages on the book of Jonah.

I like the book of Jonah, but not so much Jonah the person. I'm just not a fan. In my opinion, he is arrogant, self-centered, and completely devoid of compassion, among other faults. To me, he is one of the most unlikable characters in all of Scripture. So there. I guess I've made my feelings about Jonah more than clear.

The book of Jonah is very brief. It only has 48 verses spread across 4 chapters. Known mostly for the part of the story where Jonah is swallowed by a great fish, it is a tale that is about much more than that singular episode. In fact, the portion of the story that tells of the great fish (which is only 11 of the book's verses) has become so well-known that the most important point of the book is often overlooked.

The story of Jonah is a story of the love and the compassion of God. In contrast to God's love and compassion, Jonah is completely lacking in either quality. The manner in which God desires that Jonah reach out to Nineveh is a powerful rebuke to not only Jonah, but to all people who are not willing to show love and compassion.

Questions to Consider –

* What do you know about the book of Jonah, outside of him fleeing from where God told him to go and his being swallowed by a great fish?

* What do you think is the primary lesson of the story of Jonah?

* In the words of one author, Jonah was *a selfish, whining, religious snob*. Why do you think Jonah's faith had not made him more sympathetic and compassionate? How can some people, in spite of their religious faith, be *selfish, whining, religious snobs*? Shouldn't faith make more of a difference in the way a person lives and treats others?

* How do you think Jonah managed to sleep while the ship was in such danger? Was it a lack of conscience? A lack of concern about the others on the ship?

* Jonah obviously didn't like the people of Nineveh, and probably didn't feel they were worthy of God's love. Who would be comparable to the Ninevites today? What groups would be objectionable to some religious people, or some religious groups, today?

The city of Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Located on the banks of the Tigris River, its location corresponds to what is now northern Iraq. The beginnings of Nineveh date far back into antiquity. Settled as early as 6,000 BC, it was a center of worship for the goddess Ishtar. In its heyday, Nineveh was an important city because of commercial trade routes that crisscrossed the area, which made Nineveh a wealthy city. The city rose to an era of especially great prominence under Sennacherib. At that point in the city's history, about 100,000 to 150,000 people lived in Nineveh, making it one of the largest cities in the world. During his reign, Sennacherib built a renowned garden that some scholars believe may have been the original Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But it was also during the reign of Sennacherib that the Israelites suffered greatly under the Assyrian kingdom. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the time of King Hezekiah's reign, when Sennacherib created many hardships for the people of Israel.

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Jonah, for his part, would most likely claim this was a primary reason for him to resist the call of God to go to Nineveh. Jonah wouldn't have wanted to express compassion to people he considered to be his enemies, and he probably felt that God should consider them enemies as well. It's tempting for us to believe that our friends are also God's friends and our enemies are God's enemies. Being religious does not create a shield against hatred and bigotry, as Jonah demonstrated, unfortunately.

The story of Jonah is like many others in the Old Testament, in that its message resonates very powerfully today, in spite of its ancient setting. Too often, people deem the Old Testament to be simply old and irrelevant, but nothing can be farther from the truth. The truths we learn in a story such as Jonah's are a very powerful reminder to our modern age of lessons that humanity still needs to learn. From Jonah, that lesson is compassion, which is so greatly needed today.

I look forward to seeing you on Sunday – God bless you!