

## Awaiting the Manger: Jonah

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Jonah 1

Jonah served a congregation on the outskirts of Joppa. It was a great little fellowship on the edge of that seaside town. In fact, it was quite close to the sea. From his office, Jonah could see the blue waters of the Mediterranean shimmering in the distance. Even on bad days, even when he was really struggling with his sermon he could look up from his papyrus, see the water and feel a sense of contentment. This was his home. There was nowhere else he wanted to be.

Jonah loved his work. He loved preaching to a group of familiar faces every week. He loved telling them about God's covenant promises. Week after week he would remind them how they were God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. He loved preaching on those Bible stories where God saved His people from their enemies and gave them victory: David and Goliath, the parting of the Red Sea, battle of Jericho. If God is for us, who can be against us? He would also warn them against all the sinful ways of the world. Beware of the pagan nations! They worshipped idols! They bowed down to Baal! They practice every kind of immoral behavior! He warned against all the pagan nations of course, but he saved his sharpest warnings for Nineveh, Israel's mortal enemy. The armies of Nineveh had destroyed whole towns full of God's people! They were heartless and cruel! When Nineveh came up in the sermons, Jonah would sound like the prophet Nahum: "*Woe to [Nineveh] the city of blood! Full of lies! Full of plunder!*" The congregation loved his preaching. It gave them a clear sense of boundaries. It confirmed what they believed to be true about the world. It made them feel secure and loved there in their cozy little seaside town.

Which was why God's call was so upsetting. Jonah was sitting in his office, drinking his coffee, and looking out over the blue Mediterranean when the call of the Lord fell on him like thunder. "*Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me!*" "*Jonah, go to Nineveh, go to your enemies, and tell those people to repent!*" Nothing about this made any sense to Jonah. The "great city" of Nineveh. Great city?! How about the city of murder and lies. Go to the city and preach to them. Leave my cozy city!? Leave my beloved congregation and use all my ministry energy preaching to our enemies?! Call Nineveh to repent?! Give them a chance to change?! Why not just destroy them! Rain down fire upon them for their sins and be done with it! Jonah spends one sleepless night obsessing on God's strange call. In the morning, he makes up his mind. He sets his jaw. He goes down to the Joppa harbor. He walks with his eyes to the ground, he doesn't look up he doesn't meet the eyes of the townspeople. He finds a ship belonging to some of those pagans he preached against every Sunday, and he sails to Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Obviously this little account is entirely speculative. We know very little about Jonah's actual life. But the account of Jonah's mindset isn't speculative. The book of Jonah makes it very clear that Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He hates Nineveh and wants it to be destroyed. He just wants to stay home and be with his friends and preach to his own people. You might say that Jonah flees because the call of the Lord shakes his entire understanding of who God is. The God who calls him to go to Nineveh is not the God he thought he was serving. The God who calls him to go to Nineveh is not the God Jonah wants.

What kind of God did Jonah think he was serving? What kind of God did Jonah want? Jonah wants the God of the white picket fence. Jonah wants a God who will make Israelite

homes safe, a God who will make Israelite fields grow thick with grain, a God who will make Israelite families happy and strong. On the flip side of that Jonah wants a God who will punish Israel's enemies, a God who will destroy the pagans out there, preferably starting with Nineveh. That's the God of Jonah's imagination. That's the God Jonah thought he was working for. The God of Jonah's imagination, the God of the white picket fence is a very popular God. The God who protects me and my tribe, and rewards me and my tribe, and gives happiness to me and my tribe, and who vanquishes my enemies – he's always been a bestseller. Stand up in a pulpit and preach that God, and you'll always have a crowd.

When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah begins to realize that Yahweh, the Lord, the Living God of heaven and earth, may not be the God of his imagination. He realizes that that the Lord might be both more gracious and more dangerous than the tame God he'd had in his head. Jonah isn't at all sure he likes this dangerous and gracious side of the Living God so he runs from God and his call.

If the God of Jonah's imagination is the God of the white picket fence, who is the Living God who reveals himself to Jonah in this story? Our text reveals three things about God. He's the God of the Storm. When Jonah refuses to embrace God's call for him, God sends a great wind upon the sea which causes a storm so violent that even seasoned sailors fall to their knees in prayer. We just want to be happy; the Living God wants to make us holy. We just want to be content; the Living God wants justice and righteousness in our heart and justice and righteousness in every corner of the world. We just want to be cozy and home but the Living God wants to send us on an adventure. And if we have trouble getting started, God will sometimes send a storm to shake us up and get us moving.

The Heidelberg catechism describes how sanctification takes place. Drawing on the teaching of scripture, found in passages like this one, the catechism says that genuine repentance or conversion has two parts to it: the dying away of the old self and the coming to life of the new self. When the love of God through Jesus transforms you, it's not just the joyful coming to life of a new self; it's the painful death of an old self. Some of us here are in the stages of the dying away of the old self. Your life is in an upheaval, you have been buffeted by storms and you are tired. You are not in Jonah's cozy position, and you haven't been for some time. I pray for your shalom. I pray for a little more white picket fence in your life. May your season of dying away end. May you experience the joy of something new coming to life. Some of us have been in a season of contentment for a long time. Things are going great and we are happy. Expect that God will push you. Expect that God might push you out into the storm so that he can change your heart, and so that he can change the world. Either way, Jonah's God is the God of the storms who never stops pushing us down the path of sanctification.

He's also the God of the pagans. Michael Williams, professor of Old Testament at Calvin Seminary and member of our congregation recently wrote a book that includes commentary on the book of Jonah. In that book he notes that Jonah is the meanest person in his own book. It's true. Jonah does not come off well in this story. You know comes off way better than Jonah? All the pagans. All the Gentiles. All the people Jonah has been preaching against his whole life. Just look at the contrast between Jonah and the others. When the storm comes, what do the sailors do? They fall to their knees and pray. Granted they pray to the wrong gods, but at least they have a spiritual impulse. And they work to save others! They throw the cargo overboard. What does Jonah do? He does not pray; he goes down into the ship's hold and sleeps. It's the pagans who have to wake him up and call him to prayer! Jonah has shown he cares nothing for the lives of Ninevites. He'd just as soon see them destroyed. How do the pagans feel about Jonah's life? When the sailors find out Jonah is responsible for the storm and he wants them to throw him into the sea, the sailors try to save Jonah's life! They try to row to shore instead of throwing him

overboard. And finally, when they actually throw Jonah into the sea they ask for forgiveness before they throw him in, and afterwards, when the sea grows calm, the men greatly fear the Lord and offer sacrifices to Him. Turns out these pagans are good guys.

God is the God of the pagans. The wild grace of God doesn't just get behind Jonah to push him beyond his white picket fence; the grace of God goes ahead of Jonah to prepare the way. We tend to think of the church as the community of God's grace. We tend to think of our fellowship as the place where the God's goodness and mercy flows, and of course that's right. But make no mistake, the grace of God is way to wild and wonderful to be contained within the bounds of this place. The grace of God goes ahead of us out into the world, out into the darkest streets, it goes ahead of us to prepare the way for his salvation.

Finally the God of the book of Jonah is the God of the fish. Here's a question that Tim Keller brought to my attention this week. When Jonah commands the other sailors to throw him into the sea, is he repentant? Maybe. That's what I always thought. I always thought that Jonah was finally giving in to the Lord at this point. But is Jonah giving in? Or is this one final attempt to escape God's call? If Jonah was really submitting to the Lord, why doesn't he tell the sailors to bring him back to shore so he complete his mission? Is it possible that the request to be thrown overboard is Jonah's final refusal of his mission? He tries to flee the Lord by going to the depths of the sea. If so, it will not be the last time Jonah will be so angry with God that he will want to extinguish himself. In chapter 4 Jonah gets angry because God shows mercy to Nineveh. Do you remember how Jonah expresses that anger? *"I'm so angry I wish I were dead."* He says it twice. His own bitterness makes him love the darkness. At the end of the book, he curses God's mercy and wishes for extinction. When mercy angers you and when goodness makes you wish you were dead, you are in a very dark place.

So Jonah sinks down to the depths the waters closing around him, he sinks down into the heart of darkness, Jonah sinks down to the place where it is all pressure and no light and what finds Jonah down there in the darkness? Or better: what finds him? The grace of God. God sends a fish which swallows him. How's that as an image for the grace of God? The grace of God as a man-eating fish. The grace of God as a swallowing sea monster. We are a long way from the white picket fence. In the book of Jonah, the saving grace of God is not safe and domesticated. It is wild and wonderful. The grace of God is wide enough to go out to the streets of pagan Nineveh and deep enough to reach down to broken people who find themselves out of options and sinking.

In a couple of days it will be Christmas. Our advent journey will end and we will find ourselves looking into the manger. There he is, the little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay. Our Lord come to us in the flesh. Everybody loves that image of Jesus. How could you not? A sweet little baby, round cheeks and bright eyes. Part of why we love this image of Jesus is that it's so cozy. The baby Jesus makes no demands of us, he doesn't confront us, he doesn't point a finger at us, he just coos and smiles. In this cute, infant state, it's easy for us to project onto Jesus whatever we want him to be, to imagine him as the God who came to this world to make us happy. But don't be fooled, I promise you that this baby is not safe; He is the storm. Of course there's love and contentment in this child, of course there are tidings of comfort and joy, and I wish you cheer and happiness this Christmas. But this child will make the crooked straight, this child will bring down the proud, this child will confront evil and speak out for the small, this child will walk into the center of a hurricane containing all the worlds sin and misery and with a cry that makes the sun go dark, he will take it all on himself, this child will send a grace into your life that will not let you go. So come to the manger and receive your king. Let your heart prepare him room, and let heaven and nature sing.