

Today we start a brief four week series on the book of Jonah. But before we begin, I think we need to jump right into the deep controversy surrounding this book. The story is called “Jonah and...”

Many of us instinctively, answer “the whale.” Everyone, whether they grew up in the church or not, knows this story, and every Sunday school lesson and flannel graph picture we’ve ever seen has Jonah and a whale, usually a sperm whale. And years of Sunday school training teaches us that we never, ever argue with the flannel graph. Of course those with study bibles might answer (with a superior look) “the big fish”, because they know from the footnote that that’s what the Hebrew says (*dag gadol- great fish*).

Then, of course, there’s the deeper controversy over whether or not a grown man could actually be swallowed by fish or whale, spend three days and three nights in its innards and then be spit back up onto land still kicking. Literal minded, bible believing folk trumpet a resounding “Yes,” and rush for scientific proof to show that it’s possible. They tell the tale of a nineteenth century whaler who was swallowed for 36 hours before his friends caught the whale and cut it open revealing their bleached and unconscious, but otherwise alive, friend. Modernists shout a louder “No!” and rush for scientific proof to show that it’s simply not possible and decry such stories to be hoaxes. “Hypothermia, suffocation, stomach acid... there’s just no way!”

Well, this morning I, with nothing up my sleeves, will solve these issues once and for all. Ready? “It Doesn’t Matter.” That’s right. Fish or whale. Doesn’t matter, it’s a big aquatic thing that can swallow people when God tells it to. Can people survive being swallowed? Scientifically, probably not. Can and does God make things happen that go counter to science and the natural order of things? Absolutely. People being raised from the dead is pretty contrary to the natural order of things, but if you deny that possibility you might as well pack it up and go home right now. But one way or another, survival inside an aquatic animal is simply not the point of this story. Whether you want to read Jonah literally or as a parable, the point remains the same. It is the point of the whole Bible: God does what God wants to do, when and how God wants to do it, and usually does it out of a gracious love for a completely rebellious, totally undeserving people. That’s the real point of Jonah. This book is not about a fish. The fish is a prop and no more, a means for God to move Jonah’s story along so that God can make his grace present in His stubborn servant. This story is not about Jonah and the Whale or Jonah and the Big Fish, it’s about Jonah and the Lord, and about the Lord’s gracious purposes for people who don’t, for even a second, deserve that grace. People just like us. Let’s pray...

Jonah chapter 1, verse 1. “*The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:*” Right away we meet two of the main characters. The first is the *LORD*. Whenever you run across the word *LORD* in the Old

Testament in all capital letters, it's a translation of the divine name of God, YHWH. It's a name that is so holy that the Jewish tradition won't even speak it, a practice that is honored in many of our English translations by translating with the word *LORD*. Just hearing that name would invoke a whole range of meaning for a Hebrew audience. Immediately they would think: Almighty, Creator, the Holy One, I am that I am and I will be what I will be, the One who saves, the One who formed the whole universe, the One personal God of our Fathers who speaks through His prophets, the One God. They would recognize right off that this story deals with the God of the Universe, and that God's actions will display God's character, big and gracious.

And when they hear that “the word of the *LORD* came to so and so” they would also recognize that this story is about a prophet, a person intimately connected to God; chosen by God to be His mouthpiece to His people. In this case it's Jonah, the son of Amittai, on the who's who list of genuine prophets in Israel.

Now for the third main character in this story, the city: *2 Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.*” Even though Jonah won't get there until halfway through the story, Nineveh's shadow looms over the story from the very beginning. Nineveh's wickedness, says God, (translating literally from the Hebrew) “is up in my face.” So let's look at this great city and its people. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, a major force in the Ancient Middle East for

over a thousand years. At its height, the Assyrian empire included all, or parts of, the modern nations of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. That's a lot of real estate. Its heartland was centered in Northern Iraq. Modern day Mosul, the third largest city in Iraq, and the most Christian, is built over Nineveh's ruins. The Assyrians were aggressive, brutal, professional warriors who fed off their neighbors. For a time the Northern kingdom of Israel paid them tribute, but when they tried to break away in 722BC, they were totally destroyed, and the capitol city of Samaria was flattened. You just didn't break up with Assyria.

The Assyrians had revolutionized warfare in the ancient world. Every Assyrian male had to spend time in the army. They were highly organized, well trained, and equipped with iron weapons. They invented siege engines, battering rams and techniques for collapsing enemy walls and towers, so that no one felt safe. They also used psychological warfare, displaying the bodies of their enemies at the gates to the city so that people would be reminded of the price of resistance. They would release refugees ahead of their army's march to spread the grim news of their victories, so that the next victim could have lots of time to imagine while they waited. They used terror both to convince people to surrender and to keep them in line. In a service with children, I'll not go into details. The Assyrians were not nice people, and Nineveh was the center of their cancerous culture. Here's a quote from the prophet Nahum to give you biblical description of Nineveh:

(Nah 3:1) *“Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses- all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.”* Not very flattering.

This is the place God wants Jonah to go. 3 *“But 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.”* Notice that God doesn’t prevent Jonah from running. There’s a boat available and Jonah has the money to take it. The opportunity to sin, to disobey God, is there; it’s always there. God gives us the freedom to go against His design, and Jonah eagerly hops on board.

The other day, as I was working on this, I was watching my kids swim. They absolutely LOVE the water; they’d go swimming every day if they had their chance. They would have made terrible Israelites. The Israelites were like the cats of the ancient world. They hated the water (all except the tribe of Dan, who worked on boats... which the other tribes thought was weird.) For most Israelites, the sea was godless chaos. The Lord alone could handle that kind of mess, and he could keep it. I think that is one of the reasons it’s

such a big deal that God allows His people to cross the Red Sea and the Jordan River *on dry land*. It’s why it’s such a big deal when Jesus walks on water and commands the storm to cease. Only God does that; and only God would want to. For Jonah to seek out a boat bound for the end of the world (Spain) is a big deal. “A boat! To Spain? Oi!”

But that’s just what Jonah does. He was so desperate to get away that he literally “fled from the face of the LORD,” got on a ship and “sailed for Tarshish in order to flee from the face of the LORD” some more. In Hebrew thought, the “face of the Lord” is the same thing as the immediate “presence of the Lord.” It’s the same kind of language found in the traditional benediction. *“The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you...”* We’re not just asking God to smile on you, we’re asking God to SMILE ON YOU, to be with you. It’s the face, the eyes of the Eternal, Almighty, Holy God turned toward you, seeing all that you do, all that you are, all that you ever will be, and loving you with a divine passion. You can’t flee from that, and Jonah knows it. As he boarded the boat David’s words from Psalm 139 must have burned in his ears. *“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your face? ...in the depths, you are there...on the far side of the sea? Even there your hand will guide me.”* The eyes of the eternal God are upon Jonah, just as surely as they are upon the wickedness of Nineveh, and just as surely as they are upon us right now. There’s nowhere any of us can go to flee from that.

Notice that Jonah doesn't give a reason for fleeing. Was he afraid of the Assyrians? Did he just hate them too much? Is it something else? We'll find out in chapter 4, but right now it's not important. Right now, the point is that Jonah is trying to flee, period. We can come up with all sorts of excuses for why we don't want to do something God tells us to do, or why we want to do something God tells us not to do. We can think of reasons for why we should or shouldn't do this or that, but the bottom line is not *why* we obey or disobey, it's simply *that* we obey or disobey. It's the action, not the reasoning, that counts.

Jonah made his choice. Now it's God's turn.
4 Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 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. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The boat struggles in the storm. On its decks are these manly sailors with big muscular Popeye arms and bushy beards, and a rolling gait (and maybe an eye-patch or two, I don't know.) They work frantically to save the ship. These guys know harsh seas and they know bad weather; they've been in storms before. But now they're crying like babies and praying to every god they can think of as they throw all of their stuff overboard, because no matter what they do it's not enough. They know they're doomed.

The sea can be a scary thing. Thanksgiving Day 1983, I was thirteen years old and my family and I

were on our way from our home on Whidbey Island to Grandma's house in Seattle. It was blustery when we arrived at the ferry dock, and downright windy when we drove on board for the fifteen minute ride across. As people got out of their cars to go up to the passenger deck, they had to lean into the wind. But the real storm didn't hit until we were halfway across. I Googled the date, because I'm not always sure I remember things right, but I found a weather page that recorded the winds that day at a steady 35-40mph with gusts as high as 62mph. That may not seem like a lot, but it is when you're on a boat in the middle of it. If you've ever been on a Washington State Ferry, you know they are giant beasts; all steel and power and engineering. But that three story high boat had waves crashing over the passenger deck above us. We stayed in our car, and we could watch each wave crest and hit the front of the boat, and feel the boat shudder. Then the wave would roll down the inside of the car deck and over the top of us. The car would jerk, and then the sound of the wind and the whine of the engines would vanish and everything would turn dark and green as the water whooshed and swirled over us and out the back of the boat. It was the first time in my life I remember really praying with everything I had. I knew that was it; that only God could handle the chaos and power that had been unleashed against us.

That's where these sailors were. Their lives, their world, had been boiled down to the simplest, most elementary level. Helpless terror. They recognized their need, but they were powerless to do

anything about it. They stood on the razor’s edge between life and death, between existence and nothingness, and looked for anything that could give them hope. And all the while, Jonah slept in the deepest part of the boat, still trying to run away from God. If Jonah, the lone Israelite in the midst of all those pagan sailors, refused to wake up and do what was right, they would all perish. Jonah is the only one of them with the truth, the only one who knows the score; and he’s sleeping like a baby while all those around him teeter on the edge of non-existence. He lounges in comfort while those around him face death because of him, because of his sin. Nineveh, hundreds of miles away, faces certain doom because he can’t be bothered to speak God’s truth to them. The call for God’s people to speak God’s grace into the world is crucial. It is powerful and amazing. It is exciting and glorious. It’s the difference between life and death, heaven and hell. But Jonah denies that call.

6 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, and we will not perish.” Even the captain tries to get Jonah to do his part, but Jonah just sits there like a lump. He still doesn’t own up to his own role in the situation.

7 Then 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.

Sin doesn’t stay hidden. Sooner or later, the fruit of the sin we have planted becomes visible and we have to own it whether we want to or not.

8 So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” Apparently, having all those bushy-bearded, Popeye armed sailors corner him is enough to break Jonah’s silence. He confesses.

9 He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. His confession is not about what he’s done, but about who he is and who God is. “Yeah, I’m one of YHWH’s people. *The God, who made everything and so could actually do something about all this.”*

10 This 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.)
11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” Jonah still hasn’t offered any help. They know he’s the cause, but they still have no idea what the solution is. But now Jonah has an answer.

12 “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that is my fault that the great storm has come upon you. Now it could be said that Jonah is finally taking the high road, that he’s somehow doing the noble thing by sacrificing himself to save the ship. I’m not convinced. On the one hand, he recognizes that it’s his fault they are all in danger, and he is willing to face the consequences himself instead of forcing them on the crew any more. That’s a great start. But notice also what he doesn’t do. He doesn’t repent of his actions. He doesn’t say

“turn the ship around and take me back so that I can get on with God’s mission to Nineveh.” He’d rather die than do what God asked him to do. He’d rather die than reach out with God’s grace to a people that he feels are unworthy of that grace. He keeps running.

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Initially, Jonah was willing to let everyone die on his account. Even so, these guys dig in to try to save the life of the man who led them into danger in the first place, and caused the loss of their entire cargo because of his own stubbornness. Of course they learn quickly that Jonah’s example of defying God is not the best one to follow.

14 Then they cried to the LORD, “O YHWH, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased. They, quicker than Jonah, realize that the price of crossing God’s will is too great. They seek mercy from God, recognize His ultimate sovereignty and lean on His grace. There is only one God who holds dominion over the earth, and that God is to be obeyed, so they obey.

15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. Jonah goes in the drink and the storm stops, proving that it was a supernatural storm doing God’s will. And now a profound irony: Jonah, a mute prophet who refused to speak God’s message to unbelieving pagans... this

same Jonah, as he is disciplined by God, brings about faith and belief in the lives of these pagan sailors. As he bobs in the water, they sail away having their first church service, amazed at the graciousness and power of a God who would, and could, spare their lives.

17 But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. Now comes the infamous fish. The Hebrew word *manah* translated as “provided, or appointed,” shows that the fish is there specifically because God made it to be. It shows God’s sovereign action in using creation to accomplish His will. The wind, the waves, the fish, the pagan sailors, everyone obeys God’s will (except for His prophet.) God can use something as big as a storm or as small as a worm, something inside the natural order or something beyond it, to get his message across. What is truly amazing, though, is that while God allows Jonah the freedom to disobey and flee from His grace, he also continues to move heaven and earth to pursue him with that same grace.

And this is really what this book is about. Jonah turns his back on the grace of God and takes flight. But God’s grace doggedly pursues him, God’s awesome, magnificent power is displayed for one reason only, to bring His beloved child back to the center of His will, so that others might hear and know the same grace of this loving, personal, real God.

The stakes cannot be higher. When Jonah denies God’s grace, he sets at risk not only his own life, but thousands of others whose lives could be

impacted by his. It is not different for us. We are interconnected with those around us; and right now those around us comprise one of the most pagan areas in a pagan state in an increasingly Godless culture. When we, God’s people, turn our back on God’s will, regardless of our reasons, we put others at risk too. May we, who claim the name of Jesus Christ, be attentive to how and to where and to whom God is calling us this day, so that we may be faithful to his calling.