

JONAH

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Jonah 1.1-3

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I. Connecting With One Another

Saturday, April 14th and Sunday, April 15th we begin a study of the Book of Jonah.

What are some of your initial impressions about this story? What do you think is its central message? Are there any things in this story that you've had a hard time understanding?

Before continuing in this study, spend some time in prayer:

- a. That through this series, we – both individually and as a church family – might recognize, receive and respond to God's Word in Jonah,
- b. That God would draw both members of our church family and new attendees to our new 5pm Saturday evening worship gathering,
- c. For those leading our worship gatherings – that God would guide their planning, preparation and leadership.

II. Introduction to this Series

The book of Jonah is among a collection of twelve books ranging from Hosea to Malachi found in the Hebrew Scriptures. These twelve books are referred to as the Minor Prophets not because of their theological or spiritual import, but rather due to their brevity. For instance, Jonah features four chapters, with a total of forty-four verses, while Isaiah – a "Major" Prophet – contains sixty-six chapters, with twelve hundred and ninety-two verses!

The prophet Jonah was active during the reign of Jeroboam II, who ruled as King of Israel from 786-746 BC. This was a time of great prosperity and national pride but also religious syncretism and social injustice, of which the prophets Amos and Hosea criticized. The only biblical reference to Jonah outside of the book bearing his name is found in 2nd Kings 14.25, which reveals his hometown was Gath Hopher, five miles north of Nazareth. In this passage, we read of the fulfillment of Jonah's prophecy that Israel's borders would be restored.

While some relegate the book of Jonah to a parable or allegory, the aforementioned reference to his prophetic ministry as well as Jesus' numerous references to him provide ample evidence for the historicity of this book (see Matthew 12.38-45, 16.1-4, Luke 11.29-32). The historical authenticity of Jonah is further confirmed by the opening phrase "The word of the LORD came..." seen in verse 1, found in a number of biblical books, which always refers to historical individuals (see 1st Samuel 15.10, 2nd Samuel 7.4, 1st Kings 6.11, Jeremiah 1.4, Ezekiel 3.16, Zechariah 4.8).

III. Introduction to this Study

Jonah 1.1-3 is often referred to as the introduction to the book, since it gives general information regarding what will follow. These first three verses tell us who Jonah is, what God commands him to do, and Jonah's response to the divine call. These verses begin not

with biographical information about Jonah – of which, we are offered very little – but rather, with the “word of the LORD.”

In verse two, we read of Jonah being sent to Nineveh, a “great” Assyrian city overrun with corruption and violence, which may have recently experienced a difficulty of some kind. Verse three, however, reveals Jonah journeying in the opposite direction as Nineveh, to Tarshish, a place not of great power but wealth. Jonah’s decision to instead travel to Tarshish is mentioned three times in the original language, for effect!

IV. Study the Text

- a. The Book of Jonah begins with an imperfect verb usually used to continue a narrative instead of at its beginning. While some modern translations ignore the word entirely, the New King James Version renders the word “Now,” while an even more literal translation would be “And,” reading,

And the Word of the LORD came to Jonah...

How does your translation read? Scholars note that this simple formula is the ancient Hebrew equivalent of “Once upon a time...”, though it gives the impression that the action is already happening. How does that draw you, as the reader, into the action?

- b. The phrase “Word of the LORD” is very significant and is often used throughout prophetic literature (see Hosea 1.1, Joel 1.1, Micah 1.1, Zephaniah 1.1) What does the phrase “Word of the LORD” mean to you?

Read the ancient creation account in Genesis 1.1-2.3. Notice God’s “speaking” creation into existence! Now read John 1.1-18. How does John 1 help you understand the mystery of God speaking in Genesis 1? How do these passages help you understand Jonah 1.1?

Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (pronounced “Bart”) wrote that the Word of the LORD has three meanings: First, it refers to the Living Word, Jesus (see John 1 and Hebrews 1.1-3). Second, it refers to the Written Word, the Holy Scriptures (see 2nd Timothy 4.1-5). Third, it refers to the Preached Word, the proclamation of the church (see Galatians 1.11-12). How do these help you see the Word active in your life?

- c. In Hebrew, Jonah means “dove,” a metaphor also used for Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Hosea 7.11, 11.11 and Psalm 74.19). Can you think of other metaphors used in the Scriptures? Numbers that hold significance? If the narrative of Jonah is not only a historical account but also a symbol for God’s people, does that alter your initial impression of this story?
- d. Nineveh, a center of Assyrian military power, was well known for its wickedness throughout the ancient world. One scholar notes, “with its reputation for violence and terrorism, Nineveh was a symbol of all that opposed the Lord and the Lord’s people.” In fact, Nahum 3 refers to it as the “bloody city,” a “harlot” whom the LORD is against. How does that help explain Jonah’s decision to travel instead to Tarshish?

Though undeniably wicked, the Hebrew word “havvah,” can also be rendered “trouble,” “calamity” or “difficulty.” Read verse 2 again, inserting each of these words in the blank:

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

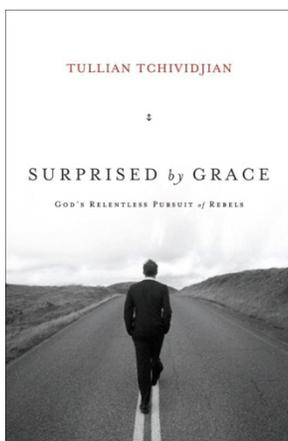
How do using these words in addition to “wickedness” alter your understanding of why Jonah has been asked to travel to Nineveh?

- e. Asked to journey to the “bloody city,” Jonah instead travels toward Tarshish – think the ancient version of Hawaii – in order to get away from God! We are offered some not so subtle clues about how the narrator feels about this: Jonah “ran away from the LORD” and sailed for Tarshish “to flee from the LORD.” Also present in the Hebrew text are references of direction: Jonah is pictured as always traveling down (down to Joppa, down into the boat, and later down even further!). Scholars see this as a way of communicating his “descent” from purposes of God.

Read Psalm 139.1-12. Was Jonah successful? Can one ever get away from God? Have you ever wanted to? Did you feel successful?

V. Reflect and Respond

- a. Are there ways you feel like “the action is already happening” – and God’s story is already being written – as in Jonah 1.1? How have you taken your place in it?
- b. How has “the Word of the LORD” come to you? Have the Scriptures and/or the preached word revealed God’s call on your life? Has the Living Word, Jesus, used other ways of revealing Himself?
- c. In what ways have we as God’s people acted like Jonah, running in the opposite direction that He calls us to? How can we be renewed to better live into His call on our lives?
- d. Have you experienced God’s mercy in the wicked and evil parts of your life? What about His grace when you have experienced trouble, calamity or difficulty?
- e. How does knowing God is always present with you change your outlook on life? How does knowing God is also always present with others change your outlook?



In his book, *Surprised by Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels*, Tullian Tchividjian writes,

“If we’re honest, we can start already to identify with Jonah. His runaway posture is *our* posture, *every time we sin*, whether in thought, word, or deed, whether it’s something we consider big or something small, whether it’s doing something we shouldn’t or failing to do something we should. Every time we sin, we’re telling God, “My way of navigating this particular situation is better than yours. My wisdom and skill are more efficient and more effective in this moment than your wisdom and skill. It’s not that we stopped believing. It’s just that *what* we believe has shifted.” (page 33)