

Going Our Own Way

November 15, 2020

Jonah 1:1-3

This morning, we continue our focus on the Minor Prophets, but leave the book of Malachi and turn to the book of Jonah. So, I invite you to turn with me to the book of Jonah. For me, Jonah hides in my Bible. It is short and in the middle of all those names we can't pronounce. So, I want to give you extra time to find it. We begin our look at Jonah this morning, but know that after two messages from this great little book, we will break for our advent series and then come back in January. So, hang in there, Jonah is going to take us awhile given that it is a short little book that we all think we know already.

On one hand, Jonah contains one of the most well-known stories in all of Scripture, Jonah and the whale or Jonah and the great fish. We all know the story...or we think we know it. I want you to know at the outset that the text of Scripture presents this story as absolutely true... and so that is how we are going to take it. It is not a fable, a tall tale, a mythic tale to make a point. It really happened. So, know that going in. The book of Jonah contains the miraculous story of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish...and surviving!

But I also want you to know that the book of Jonah is included in Scripture for reasons that go far beyond the story of Jonah and the great fish. This is not a book included in Scripture so that children would be interested in prophetic literature. There is an important message or perhaps messages in the book of Jonah. It is unique. It doesn't fit the pattern. Yes, it is a prophetic book, but it contains hardly any prophecy. The pattern of prophetic books is "The word of the LORD came to the prophet, 'Say to the people of I have these 5 things against you. Repent, lest I come and strike you down. There is a day coming when...'" We saw that pattern in Malachi. They tend to be records of God's message to a particular people at a particular time for a particular purpose. I think you know the pattern.

And yet, that is NOT what we find here. In fact, there is really only one sentence of such prophecy in the whole book, repeated twice, first in chapter 1 and then in chapter 3. And even with this one sentence, it has behind it a truth that is not visible in the sentence. Indeed, the book of Jonah is really the prophet's reaction to this one sentence word of the LORD that makes up the book of Jonah.

In this regard, it might be helpful to think of the book of Jonah as a prophetic book about God's perspective on being a prophet. Jonah as the prophet is the focus of the book, much more than any other prophetic book. Isaiah the prophet is not the focus of the book of Isaiah, Malachi the prophet is not the focus of the book of Malachi. But Jonah the prophet IS the focus of the book of Jonah. God's issues here are with His prophet. What needs to change is the attitude of the prophet. This point is very clear in the book.

There are other points of emphasis in the book as well, such as, "What is God's perspective on people who are lost and searching?" "What is God's perspective on repentance?" "What does it look like to have a heart of compassion for the lost?" "How should we respond when God traps us?" There, those are a few of the questions answered here. We will get to them in due time.

Okay, enough with the introduction. Let's get into the actual text of the book. The passage for today is quite long, 3 whole verses in fact. Hear these words that begin the book of Jonah, Jonah 1:1-3.

Main point: It is not wise to go the opposite direction from where God tells you to go.

Bad things tend to happen when God makes it clear what He wants you to do and you do the opposite. That is the underlying premise of the whole book of Jonah. In due time, we will find out the shocking truth about why Jonah chose to go the opposite direction. But for now, we are left on edge knowing

that good things are not likely to result from acts of rebellion. Welcome to the book of Jonah! (2 parts)

I. God uses people to accomplish His work. vv. 1-2

He doesn't have to. He could send angels to do what needs to be done. He could just speak the word and have it happen miraculously. And sometimes He does that. But, He has this habit of using people, His people to do the things that need to be done. He uses people like us, flawed and failed though we are. It might surprise us to contemplate the thought that He wants to use us, but He does. It suits His purposes. The truth is that when He uses us to do something for someone else it changes both us and them. It works for good in both parties. So, it makes sense that He would use people. It might not be as efficient as just speaking the word or using His angels, but it best suits His purposes as it does here with Jonah.

v.1- Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

The book of Jonah begins in a typical prophetic book sort of way. Flip just a page further and compare with Micah 1:1. "The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem." That is followed by the substance of this "Word of the LORD." That is the typical pattern of the prophets. It begins by identifying the prophet, making clear that this is going to involve relating messages from God and then identifying the ones to whom the word is addressed. That is the pattern.

Here in Jonah 1:1 we have that pattern. The prophet is Jonah from the word for dove. We know from 2 Kings 14:25 that he prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, who reigned from

790-750 BC. Jeroboam II was not a good king. He was an evil king, so I imagine the bulk of Jonah's messages to Jeroboam II and the people of his day were not good, not fun. He was like so many of the prophets, the bearer of bad news.

But this time was to be different. The intended message from God was intended not for the people of God, not for the leader of God's people but for someone else. And this distinction makes all the difference in the world. Yet, we must not miss the point that Jonah heard the Word of the LORD. He heard it and responded. I make this point because I am convinced that God has always and is now seeking to communicate to His people. It might be in a prophetic sort of sense as it was with Jonah, but it could also be direct to the people involved. I am convinced that God seeks to communicate with me, with you, with us. That is His character. It is how He operates. He could do so through His word, perhaps that is how He most often operates. Sometimes He communicates through other people, like the prophet here, or through wise counsel as is mentioned elsewhere.

But He might also communicate directly with us in ways that don't fit neat categories, liking waking us up in the middle of the night to pray, or impressing on our hearts to do something, or bringing a thought to mind that we know did not originate with us. I can't tell you how He might communicate with you, but I KNOW that He does so. He is a communicating God who seeks to do so with His people. Yet, if we don't think He can, then we are likely to miss it. At least Jonah recognized it when God was speaking to him. Right?

2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

There it is, the totality of the prophecy of the book of Jonah. And it sounds like typical prophecy. His first command to Jonah was to get up. We will see over these next verses that direction of travel is highlighted, up/down,

east/west. So, God begins by telling Jonah to get up. We understand what He means by this. It was a call to action. It is a call to go from doing nothing or perhaps resting to moving, going somewhere, doing something. So, from the very first word, we know that God has something He wants Jonah to do. And so, we also know the desired result: Jonah would get up and do it. As parents, we all know this. When we tell our kids to get up, it is not so they will get blood circulating in their legs. We tell them to get up because there is something that needs to be done.

In this case, the something was to go to Ninevah, described here as “that great city.” Now, this is where the story does not fit the pattern. Prophets prophecy generally to the people of God, although once in a while their prophecy is against wicked people in other places. But they don’t generally go to enemy territory to deliver blistering messages. Why? Because they would get killed! Prophets were always in danger delivering bad news even among God’s people. How much worse would it be to go to a place where the people had no fear of the LORD, who hated the people of God? That would be a suicide mission!

But notice how Nineveh is described, “that great city.” And it was. It was a capitol of Assyria, in modern-day northern Iraq. It was a large and important city, but one that would have represented everything evil to the Jewish people in the days of Jonah. It would be like being told to go to Moscow, Beijing, whatever city you perceive as being a hotbed of hostility toward you and your people (for Nebraskans, maybe New York, LA, or Washington, DC?) And this point is essential for understanding the message of the book. Think of a place where the people are predisposed to hate you. Imagine God telling you to go there and tell them to stop doing wicked things or else. How would you like to do that?

And from the text, we know that this was precisely what his message was intended to be: publically calling out the people for their sin. God was sick of their sin and was about to do something about it.

So the context for the rest of the book is that Jonah was told from God to go to a foreign capitol and publically speak out to the people, expressing Israel’s

God's condemnation of their actions. There you have it, sign me up! And yet, this was not actually Jonah's problem. We will find out in chapter 3 that Jonah's objection to God's plan was actually quite different. You can read ahead, but I'll hold off for now.

II. We must know at the beginning that it is futile to try to flee from God. v.3

As Jonah embarks on his journey, we as readers ought to be already screaming out at him. "No Jonah! Don't do that! It won't work! Turn around and go the other way!" Wait a second. Those sound like the words of a prophet. The perspective of the book is that the reader is silently preaching a message of repentance to the prophet. Isn't that ironic?

3 But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Indeed, Jonah arose. But he rose to go in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. Just look at the map. Nineveh is some 600 miles east of Joppa, or modern day Tel Aviv, Israel. Tarshish is a city along the coast of Spain, about 3,000 miles west. So, If you picture things from here, God was sending Jonah to Chicago, and so Jonah gets on a boat to a place just short of Honolulu, Hawaii. Are you getting the point? I picture Jonah going down to the port and asking which boat was going the furthest west. And in his day, the end of the known world would have been Spain, Tarshish. Perfect! How much is the fare? It is a minor detail, but one I find instructive that Jonah paid his fare. My point? When you serve God, He provides for you. When you rebel against God, you pay your own way. And given that this was as far as you could go in that direction, I suspect the ticket was expensive. But it didn't matter to Jonah. It was well worth the money.

So he came on board and went down into the ship. Notice the direction: down to the shore, down into the ship. God's call was to go up, but he went down, and there is more downward distance to travel to come.

But the part that makes us cringe as readers is that he was going "away from the presence of the LORD." He was trying to get away from God, hide from God, escape God perhaps. Now, pause for a second. Is that possible? Can you really flee from the presence of the LORD, the God who created the heavens and the earth, whom Jonah will declare later in the chapter to be the One "who made the sea and the dry land?" If He made it, He controls it. Where can you hide from Him in it?

Can you really flee that God? Psalm 139 speaks to this issue. Let me read Psalm 139:7-12. READ. I suspect these words of David rang through Jonah's mind during a certain key time in this drama, when he was captive to God, secure in God's prepared vessel.

But Jonah was insistent on going his own way. He knew where God wanted him to go...and he knew he didn't want to go there. So, he attempted to flee from God. Perhaps if he would get far enough away, God would leave him alone, find someone else, forget about him. Notice he was not only fleeing the task that God had for him, but was attempting to flee from the presence of God. He wanted nothing to do with God, instead abandoning his relationship with God, turning his back on God, walking away from the task, the calling, the relationship. That's serious! Again, how successful do you think he will be? Doesn't he know that our God does not give up on His own? He chases us down, fights 'til we're found, leaves the 99. Wait, that sounds like a really good song!

So, here we are at the very beginning of a great story, a story about the relationship between a prophet and his God. His God speaks to him, telling him something He wants him to do. Instead of going in faith-filled obedience, Jonah heads off in the opposite direction, as far as he could go. Instinctively, we already know this is not going to go well. Right? As students of Scripture, who know this God, we already know this is not going to work even if we have never heard the story of Jonah. Jonah is headed on a doomed journey.

But then we have to pause to ponder our own situation. How does that relate to us? It is clear to me that this is not just a story about that one rebellious guy and the lengths to which God went to get him to do what He wanted him to do. This is Scripture, meant to instruct, rebuke, exhort people like us. This story is structured in such a way that we relate to Jonah, learn from him, not repeat his mistakes.

So I ask you, what has God been telling you to do? Have you been listening? How are you responding? Which direction are you going?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will listen for the voice of God.

- 2) We will commit to heeding the voice of God.

- 3) We will NOT seek to run away from Him or what He tells us to do.

- 4) We will remember when you rebel against God, you are on your own.

- 5) We will remind ourselves that things don't tend to go well when you try to run away from God.