

# Quest For Help From a God Who Is Real

November 22, 2020

Jonah I:4-6

This morning, we continue our study of the book of Jonah. As a reminder, this is the last sermon from Jonah until January. We will break for our annual advent series, which Pastor Brad will kick off next week while I'm in Indiana. So, know that we are leaving this story of Jonah and the big fish in the middle, before we are even introduced to the fish. Hang in there!

This morning, we are introduced to a new set of characters. And what characters they must have been: the sailors on the ship. What we learn about them is minimal, but highly instructive. Indeed, they might be considered the picture of the whole point of the book! They represent the whole point God is making in the book of Jonah. Indeed, it is my perspective that they are the equivalent of the people of Nineveh in chapter 3. They are giving us a glimpse into God's perspective on the lost around us.

As I hope is becoming clearer even at this point in our study, I believe the story of the book of Jonah is much richer, much deeper than the average reader initially suspects. There is a lot of good solid meat here. We just have to be patient enough and diligent enough and intrigued enough to find it. That is why we are going so slowly through the book.

So, today's text is just as long as last week's: three whole verses. Follow along as I read Jonah I:4-6, introducing us to the next important characters in the story: the sailors. READ.

Main point: God places sincere (but sometimes messed up) seekers into places where they can find Him.

What might look to us as coincidence or luck or fate or crisis or even tragedy, to the God who created all and is sovereign over all, such situations are part of the plan of God to draw people who are His to Himself. We see the beginning of that here in chapter I with the sailors. We might view the sailors as wandering lost souls, but God views them as primed, ready hearers who are all set to interact with Him. They just don't know it yet!

So, as we are introduced to these characters, I ask you to use the occasion to prompt your thinking and prod you toward changing your perspective about the lost people around you. They may seem to be messed up, really messed up, but they might also be people God has been prepping to hear from Him and He might just use you to make it happen.

I. The LORD sometimes puts events in our lives to get our attention. v. 4

As I am writing this, I am thinking, "Duh! What do you think 2020 has been???" This is the most obvious thing I could possibly say!" And yet it is true. What we might see as a disaster, a crisis, a tragedy, He brings or in this case "throws" at us just to get our attention, to bring us to Him, or to cause us to stop and turn around and go the right way. This IS what He does.

v.4- But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

Again, we set the scene. God has spoken to His servant, the prophet Jonah and told him He wanted him to go to Nineveh, the great city, the capitol of Assyria, and cry out against it. At this point, we do not know why Jonah was resistant to going. We will find out eventually in an unexpected way, but for now we just know that He had no interest in going. So, he headed off in the exact opposite direction as far as he could go. He bought a ticket aboard a ship headed to Tarshish, Spain, went on board, and was on his way to a place far, far from Nineveh. Just as we saw in our study of Acts, when Paul went aboard a cargo ship to get him safely to Rome, so Jonah here is presented as additional

cargo on a normal cargo ship run from Israel to Spain. But as with Paul, the addition of this cargo changed everything.

You see, that was not to be the end of the story. We pick it up here in v.4. The text tells us that Yahweh hurled a great wind upon the sea. I think the wording here is instructive. This is not just all powerful God who does this. This is the LORD, Yahweh, the covenant keeping God of Scripture, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and all the rest. He is not only all powerful, He has a plan, a personal plan that is based on His character and comes in the form of promises, iron clad commitments that He makes with His people. The LORD keeps His Word! The LORD cannot be stopped by human action! The LORD's will IS going to take place.

So here, Jonah was sent east but was attempting to escape the presence of the LORD by going west. So what does this LORD do? He sends a storm upon the sea. But again, the wording here is strong and instructive, He "hurled" a great wind upon the sea. He threw it, hard. It was heavy but the weight meant nothing to Him. He could hurl a storm with the same ease as He might flick a pea. The only thing different would be the consequences of His action. When you flick a pea, little damage is done. But when you hurl a great wind, the consequences would be devastating. And when the surface is the sea, what happens? What happens when it gets really, really windy on a large body of water? Waves, waves happen. Big waves happen. Crashing waves happen. We are talking here about a massive storm of gigantic proportion. This trip across the Mediterranean Sea has turned into a battle between a tiny helpless ship and an all-powerful determined God. Who is going to win that battle? When He winds up and throws the wind at you, what might be the results?

Well, the text tells us. The result is a storm strong enough that the ship was in danger of breaking up. But again, the wording is instructive. It was not a tsunami wave that instantly swamped the ship and sent it to the bottom of the sea. It was a gentler wild storm. There was time to adjust to the storm, seek relief or find a solution. God was giving them time. I want you to make sure you see that here. There was a period of time between the sending of the storm and the total destruction of the ship for the drama to unfold, for adjustments to be made, for God to work in the hearts of the participants.

Can you see my point? Even if you find yourself in the middle of such a storm, you must also recognize that God has given you time to change, adjust, turn to Him perhaps. Judgment would look different than this. Judgment is sure, instantaneous, selective. But this is just a storm, a condition caused by God to accomplish His purposes, to turn us around, to get people to contemplate the deeper things of life. As you might suspect, that would be my view of 2020. God has brought this storm upon us, it has upended our lives. But it has done so in such a way as to cause us to stop, ponder, and turn to Him. We might think it is dragging on. I know I certainly do. But to Him, this is just providing ample opportunity for people to re-evaluate their lives. The question then is this? Are you utilizing this time in the midst of the storm to re-evaluate? Or are you wasting the time you have been given?

But notice the looming possibility, “so that the ship threatened to break up.” It’s out there, it could happen. It is hanging over their heads in a very real way. And given the fact that they are in the middle of the sea, what would that mean for them if their ship broke up? They would all be dead. Their only hope was that their ship stayed intact. Their ship was their lifeboat, their only hope of survival. Sink the ship and they would be dead. And that is my point. Their sole source of security had been threatened in a very real way. Their lives were in danger. They could die from this. This was a life defining event, just the sort of thing that God sometimes sends to get our attention.

II. In crisis, people will grasp whatever they think MIGHT save them. vv. 5-6

Can you see how God might use this to bring people to Himself? When people are desperate, they will grasp for anything, cling for dear life to whatever offers them a level of hope. Should it surprise us that God might use such situations, set up such situations? It ought not. After all, this is likely how He got your attention. Right?

5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But

Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

Just look at this first sentence, “Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god.” The two halves of the sentence go together. Their fear led them to cry out to their god. Once more, should it surprise us that God sets up situations where we are overwhelmed by fear, knowing that it tends to lead us to cry out to Him, even if we do not know who the “Him” is? He knows us well. When things are going well, He takes a backseat. But when we are faced with life threatening challenges, we tend to suddenly remember that there might be a god who can save us. In previous days, we called this “foxhole conversions.” As the bullets are whizzing overhead, the rumble of tanks is unmistakable, and we calculate that there are way more of them than us, suddenly we find ourselves crying out to God, some God, any god, the God who hears. Fear can set up scenarios for faith.

So, their first response is to cry out to their gods. And given the nature of the group, sailors aboard a merchant ship, there would have likely been as many gods as sailors, perhaps even more! But pause: can you see how this changes everything? When everyone is crying out to their own god, we get to see which god is real! And what do we know about our God? He tends to make sure He wins such battles of the gods. Right?

Then we see that the next thing they do is lighten the load. Just as they did in Acts with Paul, so they did here. The hurled over the very things that they were being paid to deliver. So, their livelihood, their paychecks are sacrificed first. All of a sudden, that paycheck was NOT the most important thing. All of that cargo was just dead weight.

Then we are let in on the comparison: Jonah. The camera switches to Jonah. Where do we find him? He went DOWN into the ship, had laid DOWN, and had FALLEN into a deep sleep. He was low, very low. He seemed oblivious to it all. Now, is that possible? Was he such a sea traveler that he slept best on a moving boat, a rocking boat, a creaking, crackling, sounds like it is going to fall apart boat? Does this invite deep sleep? I doubt it. Something else is going on.

It reminds me of Mark 4:35-41 when Jesus was out on a lake with His disciples and a similar storm came up. While the disciples were trying to get to shore and keep the boat from swamping, Jesus was sound asleep at the rear of the boat. Same thing? Yes, but no. It was actually the total opposite. Jesus could sleep through the storm because He was in total control of the storm. He could and did stop it in an instant.

But here, Jonah could sleep through the storm because he didn't care. He had no fear because he didn't care if he died. He didn't call upon his God because he was ticked off at his God right now, thank you very much. He probably was angry knowing that God had found him. As we will see when we get further into the story, Jonah knew exactly what was going on. He knew which God was behind the storm, why this God was sending it, and even what had to take place to stop the storm. He knew all of that and yet was willing to go down with the ship rather than cry out to his God. He didn't care if he died and he didn't care if he took others with him! And this was God's spokesman! Ouch!

6 So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

The captain of the ship confronts Jonah. All of a sudden, the presence of this "special" cargo mattered. All hands on deck meant ALL hands on deck. The task at hand was praying to God, any god, and Jonah was asleep rather than praying. Jonah was slacking at his duties. It was time to WAKE UP!

Notice the captain tells him to get up, giving another marker of direction. Jonah needs to go up, get up, get busy, get to work. There was a crisis and Jonah was laying down on the job. Once more, I hope you can see the connection between the visual picture and the deeper reality. One is a picture of the other. Jonah would rather die than do what God wanted him to do. Jonah would

rather other people die than submit to God's direction for him. Yes, the picture of Jonah and the captain inside the ship in the middle of a storm when the ship is breaking up encapsulates a lot of the message of the book. As we see in the next sentence, the real question is whether we care that people are going to die.

Once more, our focus shifts back to the captain, the captain who is in charge of this ship but we have no indication that he knows the One True God. He can see already that this storm is not just a storm. This storm has been hurled at them by a god. He believes in god, a god, any god who will save him. He believes in the power of prayer, desperate prayer, lifesaving prayer. He doesn't want people to perish. He has already ordered the cargo to be thrown overboard. His attention is now solely on the people. Will the people under his control live or die? He wants them to live. The others have done everything in their power to exert influence on their gods so they might not perish. But his last hope is that this unknown passenger might have some pull with a god that the others do not have. But that unknown passenger is sleeping while everyone else is doing everything they can. Something is wrong here. This guy has to be the key. How can he get this guy to join them in their fight to stay alive?

Once more, are you sensing how this scene pictures the whole book? The man of God, the prophet is below deck, out of sight, not in the game, while the people he has been sent to save are doing everything in their power to save themselves. They are correctly analyzing the situation, they are seeking help, they are open to that help coming from a source they do not even know. They believe in God, they believe in the power of prayer, they don't want to die. They just need to be introduced to the God they seek. But the man sent to tell them refuses to get involved. Why??? This is the scenario presented in the book of Jonah. And now we wait until January!

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

I) We will see situations for what they are, even crises: attempts by God to get our attention. Crises do not allow us to coast.

2) We will use such situations to ponder our relationship with God.

3) We will expect God to be at work in the lives of others during such times.

4) We will meet them in their attempts rather than condemn them for their failures.

5) We will make ourselves available for God to use, rather than hide and wish it would all go away.