

Jonah 1:7-10

Pray:

Recap / Intro: I'm starting to feel like every time I am asked to preach it's on a text that's especially heavy and slightly depressing. Now this morning's text won't immediately strike you this way, but once I give sufficient background on the book and how our passage fits into its narrative, it will. By the time I'm done explaining who the Ninevites really were and what our modern equivalent for them would be, you won't be questioning Jonah's actions so much as you will be questioning God's. In fact, all of Jonah's actions from here on out are going to seem to you quite logical and possibly even noble, which is really going to make you uncomfortable when the story paints such a dark picture of him. My goal in this introduction is to get you to have the same attitude toward this story as its original hearers would have, and then from that place, read and interact with the portion of it we will be covering this morning properly.

So, the Ninevites. I don't know if poor teaching from decades of Sunday School is to blame or the Veggie Tales rendition of the story of Jonah, but most people read this book as a light hearted children's story with a goofy prophet, a fish, and some pretty alright dudes that turn from bad behavior to good behavior, but it is not even remotely that kind of story. The story of Jonah takes the issue of how a good God could allow evil in the world to a whole 'nother level, and here's why: the Ninevites were the inhabitants of the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. They are the chief representatives of who the Assyrians were. And what do we know about the Assyrians? They conquered others nations through cruelty and torture. From our archeological records of the exploits of the Assyrians, we know that they did the following to everybody they conquered: they would take portions of the people and cut off their heads and stick them on the ends of poles outside of the city gates, as a way of saying, "oppose us and this will happen to you." They also liked to take people and skewer them through like you would a pig in olden times. They also liked to take people and skin them alive and then hang up their skins on the city wall. Oh and add raping and pillaging to that and you've got a pretty good picture of who they were. Now these details were not given in the story because they didn't need to be, everybody already knew them. They saw it with their own eyes. Their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and friends were the ones these atrocities were exercised upon. These were the people God was sending Jonah to. A nearly perfect modern day equivalent to the Ninevites, though this example is a bit dated, would be the Nazis. Now, let's plug Jonah into that context and see what you think.

Imagine you're a Jew living in Poland in the early 1940s. The Nazis have already come through your town and carted off a good number of your friends and relatives. You've managed to escape being carted off to a concentration camp by

hiding out in a farmer's barn. Now also imagine that you are a part of the underground resistance. You get intel every once in a while about what is going on at the front lines, and recently you've heard that there is going to be a massive invasion on the Nazis that will wipe them out and they have no idea (it has this strange title: D-Day). You're excited, finally those wicked men are going to get what they so clearly deserve. You go to bed that night in high spirits, hopeful for what is to come. But while you sleep you have a vision. God comes down to talk with you. He explains to you that He wants to save the Nazis from the coming peril, and that He wants you to go warn them about the coming invasion. You then wake up in a cold sweat, realize that you've had a vision, and now have to make a decision about what you are going to do about it. What would you do? Any ancient Israelite of Jonah's day, or any red-blooded American of our day, would say, "Don't do it! Let them get what's coming to them! They deserve it!"

(Now you know how the original audience felt about the story of Jonah. This is a crazy, radical book that spells out what it means to love your enemies to the ultimate degree. And, by the way, that's what makes the Veggie Tales version of this book so disturbing. They depict the Ninevites as people who slap each other with fish. That's like getting together with some friends, deciding that you're going to turn the Holocaust story into a children's book, and instead of the Jews being starved to death and forced into gas chambers, you depict the Nazis forcing overweight people to diet and take really hot baths. That's just messed up).

So, what does Jonah, as a good Israelite decide to do? He decides to high tail it to Spain, or in our modern day equivalent, some obscure, uncharted island in the South Pacific. Maybe a tribe of cannibals lives there, but that's a risk he's willing to take. Better that than helping out the Ninevites, or in our case, the Nazis.

Now, to bring us up to speed in our portion of the story. Jonah's on a boat, sailing to the edge of the earth so that the demise of his enemies is insured, but while he's fleeing God chucks a hurricane at him. The boat starts to bend and break and take on water. It's going to sink, there's no way around it. The sailors are peeing their pants, they've recognized their imminent doom, and start praying to their individual gods. That doesn't work, the boat's still sinking. So they get more practical and start chucking all the cargo overboard. Maybe if the ship is light enough it will survive the storm. Nope, that doesn't work either. Now they've gone from desperate, to frantic, to nearly hopeless. They start looking around at each other and find that one of the passengers is missing, Jonah. They find Jonah, in the middle of a hurricane, on a sinking ship, below deck and fast asleep. They wake him up and tell him to start praying. Maybe Jonah's God is the kind of god (in their minds) that will help them out.

Text: “And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account *this evil* has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account *this evil* has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of **heaven**, who **made** *the sea and the dry land*.” Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men *knew* that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because *he had told them*” (ESV).

Sermon:

Main point: God will be exalted among the nations: “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” (Psalm 46:10)

1. God will not allow our disobedience to remain a secret (v. 7)
 2. God uses even our disobedience to make Himself known (v.8-9)
 3. God will be exalted over and above other gods (v. 10)
1. God will not allow our disobedience to remain a secret (v. 7)
 - “*And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.*
 - a. Jonah’s awake, he’s on deck, and the men are at the end of their rope. They are all out of options. They have tried everything they could think of and nothing has worked. So, as the waves are crashing in on them, as the very boat they are on is breaking up, they finally resort to casting lots to find out who’s responsible for all of this.
 - i. From our modern view point this would be like being at the point of death and deciding to roll dice over the matter to understand why it is happening. That’s crazy! Your life is on the line so you decide to roll dice?! That’s ridiculous! I’ll explain why this is less crazy for these men than it would be for us, but its ridiculousness does fit the tone of the narrative at this point. These men are desperate. They are willing to try anything.
 - ii. The act of casting lots itself appears trivial and strange to us, but this was actually a pretty normal means of figuring out God’s will at the time, or in the case of the sailors, the wills of the various gods they worshipped. In fact, we even see Jesus’ disciples in Acts 1 using this

same exact practice to determine who out of the early church should fill the vacancy that Judas Iscariot left among the apostles.

- iii. So, they cast lots and the lot falls on Jonah. And so Jonah stands there, defeated, demoralized, and thinks to himself...
 - 1. “The jig is up, the news is out, they finally found me. The renegade, who had it made, Retrieved for a bounty. Nevermore to go astray, This'll be the end today, of the wanted man.
- b. He had been found out. He could not hide anymore. And so it is with us in our disobedience. To Jonah we would say, “Where will you go, Jonah, to hide from God almighty? Is there any place on earth to which you can go and God’s not there already?”
 - i. Psalm 139, says, “Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?”
 - 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
 - If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
 - 9 If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 - 10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
 - 11 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,”
 - 12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.
 - This poem was written by King David, hundreds of years before Jonah. Jonah knew this psalm, and yet in his anger toward the Lord he decided to try and run away anyway.
- c. We’re all thinking, well duh Jonah, that’s stupid. But Jesus said something in the Gospel of Luke that applies to us in exactly the same way. Luke 12:2-3 says, “2 Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 3 Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.” As residents in a small town this is especially pertinent. Do you think when you speak in your private and trusted circles that God does not hear you there? Jesus also said in Matthew 12:36, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak...” Don’t be so hasty to excuse yourself of the sins of characters like Jonah. You can’t hide from God, Jonah. And you can’t get

away with anything, Christian. The only proper response is to daily throw yourself at the mercy of God.

2. God reveals Himself to us in the most desperate of circumstances (v. 8-9)

- *Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

- a. To summarize their questions, "Who are you really, what have you done, and why is this happening to us?"
 - i. So, finally, Jonah gives in. He can see their desperation, and now that they know it's him (he wasn't going to tell them if he didn't have to, which tells you he was fully prepared for the ship to sink and for him and the whole crew to drown), he decides to tell them.
 - ii. But still, Jonah gives the simplest answer possible. You can almost hear the sigh issuing from his lips as he opens his mouth to tell them. This simple response to the pagan sailors actually mirrors Jonah's "sermon" to the Ninevites in Chapter 3. Both are extremely short and don't give much detail. Jonah's not going to use any more words than he absolutely has to, but God still uses Jonah's neglectfulness to bring about radical change.
 - iii. Jonah explains to them who the LORD (proper name Yahweh) really is. Jonah's God is not just a household god, or even a territorial god. He is God, who reigns in heaven above. He's the one who made everything. He's not like Baal the rain god who was supposed to help you out with your crops. He was not some fertility god, or god of warfare. No, this is capital G God.
 - iv. The sailors would have had a very different creation narrative, either of fickle gods that made the earth out of a place of vanity and self worship, and then subsequently corrupted it by their infighting and feuds. Or a creation narrative where all things came into being through some cosmic battle between gods, in which the gods themselves made up the physical reality of the world around us.
 - v. A single acting God of the cosmos who by His own express will created the land and the sea was totally unheard of, and far more fearsome. Other gods could be manipulated into doing certain things by giving them what they want. But how do you appease the God who made everything to begin with? What do you have to offer Him

that He does not already possess? This God was wholly unique, far more sophisticated, and way harder to figure out.

- b. God, seemingly more often than not, uses our most desperate moments as humans to reveal Himself to us, and it makes sense why.
 - i. We so often have these conditions that have to be met in order for us to even give God the time of day.
 - ii. And even when we don't have major objections to the existence of God or His will for our lives, we still more often than not live by the adage "out of sight, out of mind."
 - iii. And so people wonder why life always has to throw these tragedies at us in order for God to show up, meanwhile that's exactly what it takes for us to first of all be mindful of Him, and then secondly come to a point where we're no longer trying to bargain with God but actually want to know and understand Him better.
- c. The sailors got the answer they needed because they started to ask the right questions. The lot fell on Jonah and so their questions were directed toward him and his personage.
 - i. So often when we try to discern God's will for our lives our questions are directed toward us and our wills. More often than not our confusion with God's will comes less from a misunderstanding of God's will as shown in the Scriptures and more from our working assumption that God's will will usually line up with our own, and so when it doesn't we feel as if God has wronged us somehow.
 - ii. The sailors considered the storm that had come upon them as evil, as having come from the Lord, but instead of feeling self justified, they were simply concerned with seeking His mercy. There is something spiritually sobering about the practicality of life and death situations. I think it is for this same reason that so many people when on their deathbed, even if they were lifelong atheists, are moved to pray and ask God for mercy.

3. God will be exalted over and above all other gods (v. 10)

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

- a. The reality of their situation immediately dawns on the sailors. In an instant their whole framework for reality and truth is upended. They are pagans, they each have their but what are they going to do, have a philosophical discussion of the likelihood of Jonah's God being the one true God over against their pantheon of gods? They didn't need to have Jonah spend the

next few hours convincing them this was true, they just cast lots that told them the hurricane they're in is Jonah's fault, and now Jonah's just told them the God he's running away from made everything.

- i. And so they look at Jonah and say, "What have you done?" "You told us you were running away from Yahweh, but you neatly failed to mention that Yahweh is the chief of all gods, that He was the One who made everything. The dry land, and the sea! That compared to him all other gods are weak and powerless."
 - ii. As the reader you feel for these sailors. They really were in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- b. We are no different than Jonah, and we are also no different than the sailors. It's when our world comes tumbling down around us that we see our gods for what they really are. What has 2020 been but just another reminder that everything we looked to in life before to give us meaning and significance is finite, futile, and insufficient. I've recently spoken with one of the members of this church who brought this view of 2020 to my attention. If your god is sports then 2020 was a sore disappointment. If your god is work then 2020 likely at one point or another ripped that right out of your hands. If your god is your relationships, the place from which you get your significance, those have been strained like never before. The list goes on of all the things we so easily put before God in our lives and how each of them has been shown to be weak and temporary, poor gods of wood and stone, who can neither eat nor drink for themselves.
- c. God will be exalted over all other gods, be it ancient deities or our modern idols. As Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

If this is the word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1. We will give praise to God who works all things together for good, even our outright rebellion and disobedience. What hope would we have if He didn't?
2. We will not act or speak as arrogantly, as if God doesn't hear what we say.
3. We will follow God on His terms, not ours.
4. We will worship God more than anything else in life, even the good things.