

Chapter 26 Jonah 1-4

The Sign of Jonah

“Salvation comes from the Lord.”

Jonah 2:9

Jesus believed in Jonah and introduced this prophet from Galilee as a sign pointing to the cross. “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:39-40). Jonah in the fish was like Isaac on the altar or Job on the ash heap or David in the depths of despair. He was no less a flesh and blood historical character than any of the other prophets. Three dramatic days in the whale made him just as real as Jesus in the tomb.

Jonah, whose name meant “dove,” served Yahweh in the northern kingdom of Israel during Jeroboam’s reign (793-753 B.C.). While Joel was prophesying repentance in Judah, Jonah was preaching success in Israel. Even though Jeroboam II “did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” God announced blessing through Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher, a place near Nazareth in Galilee (2 Ki 14:25). Life in Israel had grown so unbearable that in spite of Jeroboam’s evil, the Lord used him as an instrument of blessing. “Since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash” (2 Ki 14:29). It was Jonah’s responsibility to declare that Jeroboam’s military achievements and the restoration of Israel’s boundaries to King David’s glory days was from the hand of God.

However, God gave Jonah a very different assignment when he commanded, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). Up until then Jonah’s career had been dedicated to publicizing Israel’s success at the expense of her enemies, but now Jonah was being called to preach a message of judgment against Nineveh the capital city of Assyria, a nation that neither bordered Israel nor posed an immediate threat. Jonah had never preached this kind of message before and had no interest in having anything to do with Assyrians. Crossing five hundred miles of desert and facing pagan foreigners with a message of judgment was not Jonah’s idea of meaningful service. Since he had not preached a message of judgment in Samaria why should he do so in Nineveh? Besides, what did Jonah have to do with Assyria? Jonah had reached a level of comfort and satisfaction with his role as Jeroboam’s encourager, that he did not want to jeopardize by obeying God’s call to Nineveh.

Fugitive Prophet

Jonah used the command of God to distance himself from God; a strategy familiar to those who profess faith, but assert their own will. He turned God’s will into an order to be resisted and into an excuse to be rebellious. Surely the command to go to Nineveh came to him unexpectedly, and

the clarity of the command only added to his aggravation. There was no ambiguity in God's directive, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it..." God's will provoked a restlessness within Jonah's soul that he could not ignore. He matched the definiteness of God's command with his own deliberate disobedience. Jonah found it easier to fantasize about Tarshish than face Nineveh. He could no longer go about his work in Israel as if nothing had happened. His disobedient heart rendered him useless. The positive message that he had delivered for years, was replaced by a new assignment and Jonah wanted to run in the opposite direction. He went down to the port city of Joppa, paid his fare, and boarded a ship for Tarshish "to flee from the Lord" (1:3).

Jonah's actions betrayed his biblical theology. He worshiped the Lord, "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land," but somehow he felt he could flee the presence of the Lord (1:9). He had forgotten the Lord's promise to Abraham, to make of him a great nation that would be a blessing to "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3). Had he forgotten that the Lord's purpose for Israel was to bear witness to the nations that there is only one God? Judging from his prayer from inside the fish, Jonah knew the Psalms well. He knew that the Lord "foils the plans of the nations" (Ps 33:10) and that God is sovereign over all the nations. He knew that "all nations will be blessed through him and they will call him blessed" (72:17), but practically speaking, Jonah preferred to think of God as Israel's tribal deity. We don't picture Jonah joining King David in singing praises to the Lord and proclaiming among the nations what the Lord had done (Ps 9:11). Nineveh wasn't even on his map, but it was definitely on God's!

In the end, Jonah angrily contended that the main reason he fled to Tarshish, was because he knew God was merciful. "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2). Jonah's twisted position is all the more ironic, given the fact that God blessed Jeroboam II and Israel in spite of their evil ways. Out of faithfulness to his covenant, God enlarged Israel's borders and strengthened the nation, lest the name of Israel be blotted out (2 Ki 14:27). Who better than Jonah to bear witness to the mercy of God? He had made a career of announcing God's good news to Israel and her king, even though they had refused to repent and change their evil ways. Yet in the end, he had the audacity to be angry with the Lord God for showing mercy to the people of Nineveh who humbly took God at his word, repented and prayed for mercy.

The Lord God's intervention in Jonah's life is a picture of his unrelenting mercy toward Israel. Yahweh refused to give up on his covenant people, even though they had given up on him. His persistence in using Israel as a witness to his love and mercy is reflected in his unwillingness to give up on his fugitive prophet. The Lord sent a great storm and a great fish to keep Jonah in the story—God's salvation history story. If it had been left to us, we would have cut our losses and moved on, but God's grace prevailed. Although God's resources are unlimited, the expenditure of his power in the story of Jonah is truly remarkable. The effort exerted to get Jonah to "minister" far exceeded anything Jonah ever did! The divine expenditure was huge compared to Jonah's output. And how can we describe it as anything but amazing grace that goes to such lengths to preserve our feeble partnership in the ministry that God has called, equipped and

empowered us to perform?

Jonah's Idolatry

Jonah unwittingly chose a path of self-destruction that endangered the lives of those around him. Sadly, this happens all too often in ministry. People start out with high hopes of how God will use them, but when their life and ministry do not match their expectations they become frustrated. Their typical reaction is either to flee or to fight, invariably causing others to suffer for their disobedience. Jonah chose adventure over anger, escape over engagement. He preferred being a happy tourist bound for Tarshish than a frustrated prophet in Israel.

On board ship he was at peace with himself and the decision he had made. Those who test the validity of their decisions by their feelings ought to consider the example of Jonah. He went below deck and “fell into a deep sleep.” His ability to sleep in the midst of a raging storm implies a perverse form of contentment that belonged to a person who was far more interested in doing as he pleased than in obeying God's will. If Jonah had followed God's command and headed out for Nineveh, probably every step of that 500 mile journey would have been difficult. He would have been provoked and frustrated, turning over in his mind what he was going to say when he got to Nineveh. Instead, he was fast asleep in the storm having deluded himself into thinking that he was in control of his life. There is a difference between the contentment that comes from knowing that God is in control and the contentment that comes from feeling that we are in control. Like Jonah, Jesus fell asleep in the midst of a “furious squall,” but his peace depended on the Father's will, not his own (Mk 4:35-41). When the captain frantically asked Jonah, “How can you sleep?”, Jonah could hardly testify to his faith in God. He had to confess that he was running away from God.

Like all disobedient saints, Jonah was a great liability. His presence on board endangered the lives of everyone. When the truth came out, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land,” it was in the context of his disobedience (1:9). Just what to do with Jonah raised a profound moral dilemma for the pagan sailors. The initiative that Jonah had shown in getting on the boat in the first place was not matched by his willingness to jump into the sea. He knew what should be done, but he couldn't bring himself to commit suicide. Jonah advised, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” but the sailors were unwilling to send Jonah to his death. Having already thrown all the cargo in the sea, they now rowed with all their strength toward land, but to no avail. The sea grew even wilder than before. The only option that remained, outside of losing the whole ship, was to cast Jonah into the sea. The anguish and moral pain that this action caused the sailors was reflected in their prayer to Yahweh. They did not pray to pagan gods but to the Lord God. They cried out, “O Lord, 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” (1:14). As soon as Jonah was thrown overboard the sea grew calm. The sailors were saved, not only physically, but spiritually. One life had been given up for the many and the sailors responded by greatly fearing the Lord and offering a sacrifice to Yahweh (1:16). In what amounted to a highly unusual form of evangelism, Jonah negatively illustrated the principle of the cross, “my life for yours.” He did not set out to be a

blessing, but God overruled the impact of his disobedience and brought about salvation. It was Ignatius who said, “God uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines,” and Jonah was a very crooked stick.

Jonah was prepared to self-destruct, but God in his mercy was intent on saving Jonah. The Lord provided a “great fish” to swallow Jonah. The Hebrew word for “fish” does not make the biological distinction that moderns do between fish and air-breathing mammals like whales and porpoises. “The only place under the raging waves to find a replenishable supply of oxygen is within the pharynx of an air-breathing mammal (a cetacean). Zoologically speaking, a man swallowed by a fish would drown as rapidly as in sea-water” (Michael C. Griffiths, *Jonah*, The New International Bible Commentary, ed. F.F. Bruce, p.923). Clearly the timing was miraculous or otherwise Jonah would have drowned at sea. Jonah was miraculously kept alive inside a sea creature, perhaps a great toothed whale, for several days. Griffiths points out that “there is no scientific reason for insisting that this very rare event could not possibly have taken place. However, we must not be ‘so obsessed by what was going on inside the whale that we miss seeing the drama inside Jonah’ (F. E. Gaebelain, *Four Minor Prophets*, quoted by Griffiths, p.923).

There is no question that Jonah was at his best inside the great fish and it is not by accident that at the heart of his story was a prayer of repentance and thanksgiving. Jonah was finally alone with God, stripped of his wilful arrogance, nationalism, and self-righteousness. Jonah’s prayer begins, “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.” The language comes right out of the psalms (Ps 18:6; 120:1). He was immersed not only in water but in the Word of God. As he described it, he came as close to death as anyone can and still live. “From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry (2:2; Ps 18:4-5). For Jonah this was more than a near drowning, it was God’s judgment. “You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me” (2:3; Ps 42:7). Jonah’s attempt to distance himself from God was nothing compared to the power of God to banish him. “I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple’” (2:4; Ps 5:7). He knew he could not save himself. “The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head” (2:5; Ps 69:2). The extent of his need was beyond measure and the grace of God knew no limit. “To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God” (2:6; Ps 30:3). To say it was a close call would have been a vast understatement. “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple” (2:7; Ps 142:3; 18:6). Every thought of drowning and death now meets with gratitude for God’s deliverance.

“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs,” is perhaps the most telling line in Jonah’s prayer, because he was speaking not of pagan sailors or the people of Nineveh, but of himself. He admits to his own form of idolatry. He had clung to the idol of religious pride and national ambition. He had insisted on a lopsided sermon of success, instead of obeying God’s call to preach a message of judgment in Nineveh. He had made his Tarshish adventure into an idol. These were the idols that Jonah held dear, for which he was willing to

forfeit the grace of God. In the past he had always opposed the idols of pagan deities made of wood and stone, but now he confesses to the idols of the soul that equally sacrifice the grace of God.

Jonah's prayer of repentance was from the heart. "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord" (2:9; Ps 3:8). Like the prodigal son in the far country, Jonah came to his senses in a whale. He declared his repentance with passion and testimony with conviction. "Salvation comes from the Lord," was the bottom line for a man who had experienced God's amazing grace. And with that, the Lord commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land.

The Great City

For a second time Jonah was commissioned: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (3:2). This time he obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. One of the reasons Israel was able to expand its borders during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753) was because Assyria and its capital city of Nineveh had increased in power and subdued Syria, Israel's immediate neighbor to the north. However, if Assyria's ascendancy helped Israel in the short-term, it spelled disaster for the future. If Assyria continued its expansionist policy, Israel was in danger of being subjected by the great city of Nineveh. Undoubtedly, the northern kingdom of Israel kept a wary eye on Assyria and prayed for its destruction, not its deliverance. It was one of the last places on earth that Jonah would have wanted to go to. Jonah must have thought that if God was serious about judging Nineveh he could just do it. Why send a prophet five miles across the desert just to announce the inevitable? As we learn later, Jonah suspected that the Lord God would end up showing mercy and relenting "from sending calamity" (4:2). Jonah had lost all sight of Israel as a witness to the nations that they might know that Yahweh is the one and only God.

The drama of this history is not Nineveh's repentance but Jonah's resistance. He spent three days going through the city and its suburbs dutifully announcing judgment: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (3:4). There was no hint that he even held out hope for deliverance or prescribed a way of repentance. He simply declared God's judgment. A prophet who would have sooner died than go to Nineveh, placed himself in harm's way, perhaps somewhat fatalistically, to deliver a message of condemnation to a people he thought unworthy of compassion.

Surely the reaction of the Ninevites cannot be credited to Jonah but to the mercy of God. "The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth" (3:5). The genuineness of Nineveh's repentance found expression in the king's humble contrition and in his urgent call for repentance. "Who knows?" the king offered. "God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (3:9). As a matter of fact, God's compassion for Nineveh and his rejection of the threatened destruction, was recorded for the record. But as great as Nineveh's repentance and God's mercy proved to be, in the story they are minimized compared to Jonah's inexplicable anger.

Jonah's Anger

The outcome Jonah wanted was the outcome prophesied by Nahum over a century later. In the meantime, the Lord was set to use Assyria as a terribly cruel instrument of judgment against Jerusalem. Isaiah likened Assyria's aggression against Judah to a razor that would strip the people bare and to a flood that would overwhelm them (Isa 7:17-20; 8:4-8). He also prophesied that after God had punished Jerusalem for its idolatry, he would punish Assyria for its cruelty. The Lord God said, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes" (Isa 10:12). Jonah's instincts about Nineveh proved to be correct, their history of idolatry and violence would rule their destiny, but now their genuine repentance and the mercy of God redeemed their present. Jonah's unmitigated anger, born of prejudice and self-righteousness, was inexcusable on at least two counts. First, God had blessed Israel in spite of their evil ways; and second God had shown his mercy to Jonah in spite of his disobedience. What right then did Jonah have to be angry?

Once again we see the heart of Jonah through his prayer and what we see is disturbing:

"O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:2-3).

Jonah had a Bible-based understanding of the character of Yahweh (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8), but his own character was bitter and hardhearted. His theology was orthodox, but his practice was pagan. If the Ninevites who knew so little about Yahweh could respond so well, how could Jonah who knew so much about God respond so poorly? How could anyone with such a solid understanding of the goodness of God be so resentful and angry at God? Jonah appeared to have no comprehension of God's good news to the nations. Ironically, the prophet who pronounced the word of the Lord was deaf and dumb to the sound of the Gospel.

Jonah illustrates the difference between throwing our lives away out of self-pity and giving our lives up out of self-sacrifice for the sake of Christ. From the beginning of the story, when he told the sailors to cast him overboard, Jonah seemed intent on death. When he finally arrived in Nineveh, with a message of judgment and without compassion, he preached God's message boldly, more out of anger than faith. He had all the marks of a man who didn't care whether he survived or not. And now that the message had been received by the Ninevites, "from the greatest to the least" with true humility, repentance and conversion, Jonah no longer wanted to live. "Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:3).

Jonah ignored the Lord's question, "Have you any right to be angry?" (4:4). In defiance he set up a shelter east of the city and waited to see what would happen to Nineveh. Hoping against hope, Jonah wanted the Lord to vindicate his message of judgment, destroy the city, and give him a success story to carry home to Israel. Instead, the Lord caused a vine to grow up over Jonah "to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine" (4:6).

“But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’”(4:7-8).

The situation was both tragic and comedic. Jonah’s reaction could be laughable, if it wasn’t so sad. His anger was inexcusable, embarrassing, and yet sadly all too typical of church members who for some ridiculous reason take out their grief on the household of faith because something doesn’t go their way. Jonah was way too self-absorbed to even think about God’s big picture of redemption. And if Israel’s prophet was so obstinate, think how blind and hard-hearted the people of Israel were!

“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ Incredibly, Jonah answered, “I do. I am angry enough to die.” Jonah was prepared to pay the ultimate price and give himself up to die, but for what? Self-pity, not Salvation! Sadly, the success Jonah dreamed of had nothing to do with God’s salvation history story. Instead, he was driven to his fatalism by futility and frustration. Jonah is a tragic picture of those whose familiarity with the word of the Lord does not change the way they look at the world. Jonah was in the Story, but he didn’t know why and what was worse, he didn’t care!

Yahweh Saves

The book of Jonah ends with an explanation and a question. The Lord compared Jonah’s concern for the plant that didn’t belong to him, to the people whom God cared enough to save. One hundred and twenty thousand lost souls, who, when it came to spiritual understanding and moral discernment could not “tell their right hand from their left” (4:11). The Lord asked Jonah, “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” In spite of the consistently negative message from a faithless, frustrated, and fatalistic prophet, the message of the book of Jonah is positive. Jonah’s story offers sad commentary on how Israel failed to witness to the nations of God’s love and mercy, but God’s story in the book of Jonah is a powerful testimony of his love for the nations and his persistence and patience in working with stubborn people like us to announce his good news.

The great “Amen” truth of the book of Jonah is given by the prophet at the end of his prayer of contrition, “Salvation comes from the Lord” (2:9). God’s amazing grace shines through the Jonah story. Pagan sailors bowed down to Yahweh in reverential fear, offering their sacrifices and pledging themselves to him. The Ninevites, from “the greatest to the least,” turned to Yahweh in repentance and called out for his mercy. People were saved from more than storms and disasters, they were brought near to the living God. When Jesus spoke of the sign of Jonah, he was not commemorating a selfish, reckless prophet who was willing to throw his life away; he was pointing forward to the cross. He was remembering his Father’s great mercy and pointing forward to his own self-sacrifice for the salvation of the world. For the God of Jonah is the same God who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him

shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). What God will give to secure our partnership in this salvation history story is truly amazing.