

## A God Too Big for Jonah - *Jonah 1:1-12, John 10:22-33*

*Preached by Casey Clark on June 22, 2014 at Triangle Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC*

One of the first nightmares I can remember as a child was one in which I was swimming in some murky, green waters. Out of the darkness a fish or a shark or something comes up, grabs me in its mouth and begins to eat me alive. Then I wake up. You know what caused me to have this nightmare? The illustrations for the book of Jonah from my parents' big family Bible. Strangely it's my wife, not me, who's afraid of the ocean.

Jonah is a pretty familiar book, perhaps due to its short length and action packed story. Given how familiar many are with it, I was pleasantly surprised in the newness of the book the last time I read it. Something about it struck me differently.

I'll share that with you this morning as we look at Jonah's call, his attitude, and how God challenged the way he saw the world.

So what is Jonah called to do? This is straightforward, as is much in this book, it being so short. What does God say? "Get up and go to Nineveh—this great city, big capital, and go tell them about their evil. Tell them I know what they are doing."

Jonah is a prophet, but rather than the usual call of going to his own people, he's being sent to another. He's like a missionary. Well, a really bad missionary because what does he do? We are in chapter one verse three and *already* we're hearing that Jonah gets up to flee. He rejects this call. Finds the first ship out of town and goes to the opposite end of the Mediterranean.

Why is he so opposed to this? What about the call or what about *Nineveh* makes Jonah run away?

Well it wasn't just any old city. It was the Assyrian capital, and Assyria wasn't just any old people. There were a constant enemy to Israel. Enemy *and* threat to their very existence. Good fortunes for Assyria often meant bad news for Israel, and bad news for Assyria was good news to Jonah.

That's why the idea of going to Nineveh is appalling. Not only is it his enemy and he wants nothing to do with them, he also knows the sort of God he serves. He knows God is slow to anger and abounding in mercy. If he does obey and goes to this city, what will happen if they listen? What if they repent? Jonah doesn't want that. *What he wants is their destruction. He wants God to judge them.*

So to recap Jonah, he's called to go. He flees. He's on a ship and storms rage around them and the whole crew seems to be in great danger. They cast lots to see who is to blame and it falls on Jonah. And he owns up to it. Yeah, this is on me. There is a God who made the land and the sea and I've disobeyed him.

The crew wonders what they should do.

Does Jonah reply, "Turn around, drop me off at the nearest port and I'll hop a boat to Nineveh?" Nothing like that. Here's what is so shocking: He says kill me. Throw me overboard. He's not anticipating getting swallowed and saved, he's not anticipating swimming to shore. And the crew understand it because they fear having his blood on their hands. Jonah says "kill me."

Why? Why would he say this? It seems it is because Jonah *would rather die* than go to Nineveh. He'd rather die than give *those* people a chance to repent.

I really think this is his view. It is implied that he'd rather die when he's on the boat, but he's pretty explicit later in the book.

His worst fears come true. Jonah is saved, via fish, and delivered to Nineveh. There he preached what seemed like a very short sermon and what happens next? Perhaps in spite of Jonah, they believed in God! Nineveh repents and God spares them! Jonah then goes off to pout and says to God, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Jonah is outraged that his enemy is spared. Jonah doesn't think they *deserve* this. He wants Nineveh destroyed.

And here he boldly says to God, "Please take from me my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." God, I'd rather die than live in a world where your judgment is held back from Nineveh. I'd rather die than see my enemy saved.

That's two times now that he'd rather die, but there's one more for good measure.

Jonah leaves the city to continue to mourn over God's mercy. God sends him shade by means of a plant, and then the plant is taken away. What's the appropriate response? We read in chapter four that Jonah says, "'It is better for me to *die* than to live'" and let's then read on, "But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Jonah doesn't seem to think so. Instead Jonah is mad. Really mad. Again we must look at this text and ask, why is he so against this call? And why would he rather die than go to his enemy?

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I think much of it comes down to the way that Jonah sees the world and how he sees God. To Jonah, God is for Israel and therefore must be fixedly against all others. To Jonah, the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh do not have any value. And I think to Jonah, God is pretty predictable.

In this view it is almost a patriotic duty to sacrifice himself if it means that Nineveh perishes. Jonah must think, "If I die, so will they."

That's the way he sees the world. That's his perspective or worldview. To borrow a phrase from pastor Tim Keller, it was his "interpretive grid."

Here's what I mean by that. We've all got this grid, this worldview, that influences how we see things. It organizes our thoughts and it also helps us make sense of all the data we come across. There are things that we expect and assume will always happen; there are laws that govern this world. Our interpretive grid, our perspective, is why we can go to a magic show, enjoy the night, and then leave without *actually* thinking we've witnessed any magic. We see the amazing acts of a magician, we take in the sights and sounds, and what does our experience tell us? Wow—those were great *illusions* or tricks. If our perspective allowed for true magic, there may be very different reactions to a magic show. Can you imagine if the audience thought they were witnessing sorcery? How did that person cut that woman in half?! She must be a witch!

But we don't think that because we all have grids that govern how we see the world. And it is hard when something comes our way that doesn't fit; when we're challenged in how we see things. For Jonah, God, in his mercy, calling him to go to Nineveh, just didn't fit. That wasn't how God worked. God shouldn't do that. That's what Jonah thought.

But our God is too big for Jonah. He's too big for the narrow view Jonah has of him.

But to Jonah's credit, it is really hard to change the way you see the world. It is hard to undergo such a shift. It may just take extreme action on God's part, you know, something like getting swallowed by a fish.

And you know, we make our God small sometimes, too. We think we see things as they are, and God comes along and challenges us—but we can't accept it. It doesn't fit into our grid and so we ignore him. At times we're even hostile to the messenger.

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There have been many examples of when someone has something to say that doesn't fit within their world. They see things differently and face hostility.

Think about Galileo.

New data came along that did not fit into the way people saw the world—and the *worlds*. Building upon the work of Copernicus, it seemed that the data said the sun stayed put while we revolved around it. But that couldn't be. That did not fit their grid. To maintain that view people came up with all sorts of extremely complicated systems to account for all the bizarre movements in the sky, rather than do what? Rather than see the data as proof that their system was wrong, they just rejected the data. And not only the data, but the people who supported it.

Galileo was put on trial two times since there was no place for his views in their system and the church in the 17th century declared “heliocentric” understandings officially heretical. His ideas were different, he was singled out, put on trial, and he lived out the rest of his life under house arrest.

Change is hard, right?

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Years before Galileo, there was another whose teachings were different, who was singled out, and put on trial. There was another whose very existence completely challenged the way others saw the world. There was another whose presence on earth, if we were to believe him, was impossible according to the views of his day.

In *Jesus'* day people had their world views, too.

In that day they knew *where* God was. The one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Exodus, dwelled among Israel in the temple. You wanted to be near God, you go to Jerusalem, and you go to the temple, and you work through the priestly class. That's how it was, it's how it had been, and to them that was how it was going to be. It was predictable, and as some felt, it was in *their* control. If anything came along that didn't fit that system it was discounted, it was wrong, it was heretical.

Into that world and worldview an angel came to Mary. An unwed mother is given a message that she'd have a son who'd be the savior. And that was Jesus. And

when he came to this world he challenged it. His birth was momentous and he was called, Immanuel, God with us.

The way he lived and taught and acted and saw himself didn't make sense to the people in power. In fact, they feared he'd take their power away. Jesus spoke of God as father, preached about the kingdom, and when he spoke he did so with authority that didn't suit a carpenter from Nazareth. And if that wasn't enough, Jesus made claims that people thought were blasphemous. What Jesus did would only be acceptable and would only make sense if Jesus himself were God. *But that could not be.*

Think back to what we read from John 10. People are wondering if Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. The person they thought would come to save Israel. If you're the one, just say so. Jesus says that he *has* told them and that his works are the evidence. But they just don't believe. They don't believe because they're not part of his flock, and then Jesus says the most amazing thing about God and himself, "My Father, who has given them[–the flock–]to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

I and the Father are one?!

The Jews hear this and pick up stones. Jesus does not fit in their worldview so he must be taken out of this world. They are going to kill him, and why? Because, they say, "because you, being a man, make yourself God."

They wanted a Messiah to come, but they never thought that the Messiah would be God himself. Surely God would send someone to do his work. He wouldn't come himself. But God knew the only one who could save, the only one fit for the job, was himself. God was bigger than their expectations. But they couldn't understand or accept it, so they wouldn't accept Jesus and they want him dead.

All Jesus had to do was recant. Jesus could've saved his neck if he denied the claims. If he were to say, "No, I'm not king. No-no-no, I'm not claiming that I and the Father are one. No, you misunderstand, I'm not THE judge who has the

authority to forgive sins. You've got it all wrong." But he didn't. He didn't come to avoid suffering, Jesus came *in order to* die for us.

We see just how beautiful this is when we compare the calls of both Jonah and Jesus. What is Jesus' call? He *also* is to go to his enemy. He's to preach the kingdom of God. As with Jonah, to some this was unthinkable—that God would come to us. And how much greater is Jesus than Jonah because in response to *his* call, Jesus doesn't run. Jesus doesn't rebel. Jesus comes to us. Jesus enters our world forever changing its landscape. It seemed impossible that God could strap on leather sandals and walk the dusty street. This was a God who could not be with the unclean in the temple and now in Jesus Christ we see him eating with sinners and interacting with lepers.

Whereas Jonah was willing to die to avoid his call and he was willing to die if it meant doom for his enemy, Jesus came and *did* die in fulfillment of his calling.

Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh repent. Jesus would rather die than see us remain in sin.

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Because of that sin, there are times that we struggle to understand God—his ways are so much higher than our own. God challenges our worldview, our perception, our interpretive grid. And God also challenges us and our understanding with what he calls us to do—just like with Jonah. His calling doesn't always fit the way we see things. There may even be times that you are called to do something and you want to say, "I'd rather die than do that."

We may be very much like Jonah, approached by a God bigger than we expect with bigger challenges. God could be calling us into enemy territory. He may be sending us to do something that is the opposite of our desire. Jonah didn't want Nineveh saved, he wanted them destroyed. And the same could happen for us. God may be sending us away from comfort and into danger. God could send you *from* friends and to enemies to love them.

And the *only* reason we now could walk into enemy territory and preach about God's kingdom is because there is one who entered enemy territory for us. Jesus came to our home and died for us so that we could die for him.

So what is God calling you to do, or what is he demanding of you, to which you'd want to say, "I'd rather die"? Is there something that you'd "rather die" than *stop* doing? If that *is* your response, know that Jesus, with great compassion come to tell you "no." He won't allow that. In fact that is why he died. Christ died so we don't have to. And now he has given us his life, and we now *can* live as he did.

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Let me close with this: When called to go to an enemy, there are a couple ways to do it. Let's call them the way Jonah *wanted*, and the way Jesus *did*.

If Jonah absolutely had to design a trip to visit Nineveh, what would he do? He would probably go behind enemies lines to hurry along their destruction. He'd want nothing to do with them and only want God to judge them. As in most wars, if you can infiltrate enemy camps, you use it to your advantage.

Think of the story from the Trojan War where the Greeks sneak into the enemy city of Troy. To destroy their enemy the Greeks construct a massive wooden horse, designed as a sort of parting gift, but inside a force of men were hiding. The Trojans bring the horse, and its men, inside the gates, and once night falls the men spring into action and Troy is destroyed.

If that was Jonah's task, he'd be happy. He was willing to die to harm Nineveh. But this is not how he is sent nor is it how Jesus Christ comes to us.

Jesus came in the flesh, walking among the enemies of God. He made his way among the people, going through most of his life hardly noticed. He shows up in the synagogues, goes to temple, earns his keep as a carpenter. Jesus was made like us in every way—all except sin. He would be the perfect spy, the perfect one to sneak into an enemy camp.



But rather than unleash the judgment of God upon a people who stood against him—fully deserving judgment, Jesus came and served. He healed, he fed, he loved the unlovable. In the middle of the night, rather than spring into action with rebellion, he welcomes Judas in the garden, ready to be handed over.

Jesus did not come to his enemy like some vengeful army concealed in the trojan horse, intent to fight. Jesus came in human flesh to save humanity by taking the judgment upon himself.

Jonah could not understand a God who would be *for* his enemy, and so he fled. He'd rather die than go to Nineveh. He'd rather die than announce God's judgment to his enemy. He'd rather die than see them spared.

This call of God did not fit into Jonah's world. *His* God, or rather his understanding of God, was too small.

When Jesus, the Messiah, the one who would save, came to earth, he revealed to people that he was God in the flesh, and that didn't make sense for so many in Jesus' day. This could not be. But again, their God was too small. Their idea of the salvation that the messiah would bring was too narrow. God came to earth in Jesus Christ to save us all. Christ was the missionary that Jonah never was. Jonah would rather die than see his his enemy live.

*Jesus* would rather die than have it any other way. Jesus would rather die than to leave us in our sin. **Jesus would rather die than live without you.** And Jesus did die so we *could* live.

The story doesn't end there and as Jesus told his followers—look for the sign of Jonah. Three days in the belly of the whale and Jonah was spit out. Three days Jesus was dead, and on the third day he not only conquered sin but he conquered death, too.

That's how big our God is. He is one who'd willingly seek out his enemy, who'd willingly die for us, and who has now put to death death itself.

Only in seeing his love for us, his enemies, can we ever even think about going to *our* enemies. Only his love can make us love those who hate us. Only his love can transform us from a people who would say "I'd rather die than do that," to a people who say "Here I am Lord, use me."