

Small Books Big Truths: Jonah

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Jonah 1:1-17

So today we are exploring our third “small book” as we walk our way through some of the shortest and most powerful books of the Bible. Two weeks ago we explored the book of Ruth and saw God’s powerful, enduring, steadfast love pouring out in the deep love and commitment between two poor and destitute widows, and we were reminded that in those times when we may be overwhelmed by the big, massive, sweeping events of the world, God is present in the little things – in the lives and the stories and the everyday choices of the people who history would ordinarily forget.

And last week we heard the story of Obadiah – that little-known, obscure prophet who only gets 21 verses in the Old Testament – but they were powerful words. Angry words. Words of judgment against an opportunistic people who had betrayed Judah, and then kicked her while she was down. Where in Ruth we see God’s love and mercy and compassion and commitment pouring out, in Obadiah we see God’s justice and power, as God shows up as a champion for the underdog.

Today we are shifting gears again, and turning to another crowd favorite. I thought I’d give you a little break after last week – when I threw a new hymn at you *and* a book of the Bible that almost nobody was familiar with. So today our story is a fun one that any kid who grows up going to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School gets exposed to at some point – often many, many times. Mostly, because it is just so much fun. It’s filled with action, and adventure. And that, is the book of Jonah.

Jonah is about twice as long as last week’s story. It’s made up of four chapters, but they are four short chapters. About 2 pages long in my Bible, so easy to skip over, or miss entirely, if we didn’t know what we were looking for.

Like last week’s story, the book of Jonah is one of the minor prophets, but it was written quite a few years before Obadiah was written. During Jonah, political tensions are really just starting to heat up in the area. Israel has just recently split into two kingdoms. But neither of those kingdoms has been conquered yet. The kingdom of Assyria – the kingdom who will later conquer and obliterate the northern kingdom of Israel – is starting to grow in power and pose a threat, and *their* biggest, most powerful, most threatening city is Nineveh.

So here’s how the story goes. One day, God tells the prophet Jonah to get up, go to Nineveh, and prophesy to the people there. So Jonah gets up, boards a boat, and sails in the opposite direction, not toward Nineveh but toward Tarshish. It is really anybody’s guess *why* Jonah made this decision, but it could’ve been for a whole host of reasons.

Maybe he was scared of the Ninevites. They were the big, bad bullies on the playground after all, and he may have been worried that if he set foot in Nineveh and started preaching God's judgment against them, they would hang him upside-down by his ankles. Prophets weren't always treated especially well, after all, because they would rarely speak words that the people wanted to hear. Doom and gloom and destruction, most of it. And Jonah knew that the Ninevites were especially violent.

Or maybe, Jonah was worried less about what the people in Nineveh would do, and more about what God was doing. Why did God want Jonah to go to Nineveh in the first place? Why was God sending these scum of the earth a messenger? God usually only sent prophets to his own people. To Israel and Judah. And again, usually God sent the prophets to preach bad news, but still, for God to speak to the people through a prophet, usually meant that God loved those people and wanted them to repent and turn around for their own good as well as for the good of others. So if God is sending a prophet to Nineveh – to Israel's enemies – does that mean God loves the Ninevites too? Does that mean God will give them a second chance if they repent? Does this mean that maybe – perhaps – God doesn't *want* to rain hellfire and damnation on our enemies?

So Jonah didn't like that. And he thinks, "God can't use me, if God can't reach me." So he pretends not to have gotten the message, he concocts an elaborate excuse about an unavoidable business trip in Tarshish, he turns off his cell phone, and he sets sail for as far from Nineveh as he can get. Passive aggressiveness at its finest.

So, the story of course goes that God sent a violent storm upon the sea – so violent that the sailors were terrified. The boat was splitting apart. They tried throwing their cargo overboard so that the boat would be lighter, but that did nothing. They were in deep, deep trouble. When they had exhausted every option, they tried praying to their gods, and that, too, did nothing. Astonishingly, though, while all of this is going down, Jonah is asleep. He's taking a nap. He is completely oblivious to the crisis that is surrounding him. It's almost like when he decided to run away from God, he stuck his head so deep in the sand that not even a tsunami could reach him. Jonah is checked out. Finally the captain comes down and wakes him up, yelling at him – "how can you be sleeping at a time like this?!?! Get up and start praying to your God, and maybe he will save us!"

So when they've tried literally everything else to save the ship – they've tried to steer around the storm, they've thrown their rations overboard, they've tried praying to the sea gods, and nothing has worked, the sailors do the only thing left to do. The thing that we all do when we get scared and tired and nothing we are doing is working. They start pointing fingers. Whose fault is this? Who made the gods angry? We can't control the storm, so who can we blame for it? C'mon. Let's play rock-paper-scissors. And the one who loses – he's the one to blame.

So, that's what they do. Minus the rock-paper-scissors. They cast lots. Which is basically like rolling dice. A game of chance. Like rock-paper-scissors. And lo-and-behold, the lot falls on Jonah.

Who knew, that maybe God would use a simple, silly, trivial little game of chance to uncover the truth?

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!?! The sailors scream to him and finally, Jonah fesses up and tells them to throw him into the sea. That's what they do, and immediately the storm stops. God sends a big fish to swallow Jonah up, and that's where Jonah stays, for three days and three nights – long enough for that fish to swim to the shores of Nineveh, where Jonah should've been the entire time. And then, the fish yaks Jonah up onto the beach.

So we know the rest of the story, right? Jonah finally sees the error of his ways. He passionately prophesies to the people of Nineveh, the Ninevites hear Jonah's words and repent, God forgives Jonah, God forgives Nineveh, and everyone lives happily ever after. The end.

Right?

Yeah...not exactly. That's about how most children's bibles end the book of Jonah, and that may be how we remember the story.

[Examples]

But that's actually not the way the story ends. Here's what really happens. The fish yaks Jonah up onto the shore. Jonah looks around, grumbles, sighs, rolls his eyes. And mutters under his breath, "Fine. I'll do it. But I'm not going to be happy about it." And then, Jonah preaches the shortest and least heart-felt sermon ever known to humankind. Just 8 words long, in English. 5 words, in Hebrew. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

That's it. No word about who will be doing the overthrowing, no words about *why* they are being overthrown, or what they can do about it; no call to repentance. No fun stories or engaging illustrations. Not even the slightest mention of God. Basically just, "dudes, you're toast."

And then he says to God, "there. I did it. Happy now?" and he huffs off to the outskirts of town, where there is a hill that overlooks the city. He climbs up to the top of that hill, then turns around, has a seat, and figures "If I have to be here, then at least I can get a front row seat to their total annihilation." And he sits eagerly, waiting for God to rain fire down on Nineveh and wipe those enemies off the map.

But that's not what happened. As it turns out, the Ninevites listened to Jonah's words "Dudes, you're toast" but what they actually *heard* was everything Jonah didn't say. The king called for a national day of lament. Every Ninevite was ordered to dress in scratchy clothes and fast from eating and drinking, and to cry out to God for mercy. They looked inward at their sin, and the violence that they had brought upon the world, and they repented. And God listened to them and changed his mind about the disaster he had planned for them.

Meanwhile, Jonah is sitting there on that hill, waiting for the hellfire and brimstone that wasn't coming, and he gets mad. Like, seriously, furious with God. He starts whining to God, "God, why'd you have to save them? This is why I didn't want to come here in the first place! I KNEW you'd listen to them, and forgive them! Why'd you have to do it?"

So then God's wrath does start to burn a little bit. But not at Nineveh. At Jonah. God grows a bush to cover Jonah and provide him with shade – and then he sends a worm to eat the bush. And then he sends a scorching wind to beat down on Jonah and Jonah sounds like a dramatic 11-year-old: "I'm so mad I could die!"

And God's response is basically, "Get over it. The Ninevites are people I created, just like you. And you do not get to tell me who I should and should not be concerned with."

And that's where the book of Jonah ends. With Jonah pouting on that mountainside and God telling him, "suck it up, buttercup."

Jonah has to be one of my all-time favorite Bible stories, because it is so. Dadgum. Real. I mean, aside from the whole living in the belly of a fish thing. That's like something out of Aesop's Fables. But everything else – reading the book of Jonah feels a little bit like looking in the mirror. And not in a good way.

How many times do we hear God calling out to us to go somewhere, or do something, or talk to someone, or have a certain conversation – that is the absolute last thing we want to do? And so what do we do? We avoid it. We may get busy doing something else in an effort to muffle out God's voice. Or maybe we overthink it, and justify our way out of it. Or we just dismiss God's voice outright.

And then when we find ourselves on the shores of Nineveh anyway, our efforts – whether conscious or subconscious – to sabotage what we are doing. "Okay, I'll try. But I really don't think this is going to work." Or "I'll show up, but I'm not putting my heart into this." Or "I'll say that I'm on board, but I'm going to complain about it later." And then we start gearing up for a great big "Told ya so."

And then, the ending. As much as we say that we love happy endings, and that Nineveh turning around and repenting is the best thing that could have happened...if we were to be honest about it, how many of us would really just like to see our enemies burn? How

many of us would take some sort of sinister pleasure in watching people get what's coming to them? In watching the bully trip and fall flat on his face? Or in watching Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters get banished from the kingdom? In watching God take out Sodom and Gomorrah? Or last week, in listening to God's words of divine judgment against Edom?

We like it when the righteous get their reward and the enemies get their punishment.

But the book of Jonah is here to tell us that maybe it's not so simple. Maybe God knows something about our enemies that we don't. Maybe God cares for people who we don't care for. And maybe God sees potential in those who we are quickest to write off. When we are tempted to think that we are all good and the people on the other side of (...pick your dividing line) are all bad – when we assume the worst in others and assume that God shares our perspective, that's when we run the risk of being the ones sitting alone on the mountainside under a shriveled-up bush while everybody else is experiencing transformation.

[Wrap it up!]