

JONAH: GOD CHANGES ALL

SERMON



1/3/2010

Part 1 – Jonah, the Reluctant

Like us, the prophet Jonah faced significant obstacles in his obedience to God, perhaps the greatest being himself! Why are we often so reluctant to follow God? How can we overcome our reluctance to live in greater submission to his will? In this message, Pastor Kevin addresses these questions in the light of God's Word.

Sermon Notes

JONAH: THE RELUCTANT

JONAH IS NOT A “FISH TALE”

We all know the difference between the truth and a “fish tale,” the latter being a story filled with exaggeration and downright misinformation about the “one that got away.” Failed fishermen are notorious liars.

Scholars critical of the Bible more or less argue that Jonah is a “fish tale” due to its shocking claims (i.e. a man swallowed and preserved within a fish for three days; a large plant that grows overnight; etc.); some linguistic features arguably not characteristic of Jonah’s time (8th century BC); references to the City of Nineveh allegedly describing the city more as legend than real; and more.

Now, those denying the historicity of the Book of Jonah don’t fully disregard it; they reduce it to an allegory or a parable. Some argue that Jonah’s experience in the belly of the whale is an allegory mirroring the Babylonian captivity – a dreadful place to which the unfaithful Jews would suffer; in which they would come to repentance; and from which God would deliver them. Others suggest that Jonah is a simple parable teaching the lesson and blessings of obedience.

This morning, you might be tempted to reduce Jonah as well. If you have a hard time with its supernatural claims, let’s remember a few important things:

- **The details of this book are of an unmistakably historical nature.** For instance, Jonah, son of Amittai, is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. He lived in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II. Secondly, Nineveh was a historical city, referenced in archaeological data and numerous extra-biblical writings. Finally, Jonah’s account – in its specificity - presents itself as a historical writing.
- **The Book of Jonah begins as all other prophecies: “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...” (Jonah 1:1).**
- **The New Testament in general, and Jesus in particular, affirms the historicity of Jonah’s account (Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32).** One could strongly argue that denying the historicity of Jonah’s account is tantamount to denying the divinity of Christ – his impeccable and omniscient nature.

All of this is to say that the weight of church history and the consensus of conservative scholars across the theological spectrum (Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Evangelical Christian) testify to what we believe here at Murrysville Community Church – Jonah is a historical book about a real man with some admittedly amazing and maybe even hard-though-not-impossible-to-believe experiences.

THE TEXT: JONAH 1:1-17

With that conviction in mind, let's read this morning's passage:

¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

⁴ Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶ The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸ So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

⁹ He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried to the LORD, "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." ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

¹⁷ But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Most merciful and wonderful Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace. You did not leave us in darkness, but instead shined the light of your truth into our hearts and minds. Humbly, we pray that you might so bless us again this morning. We seek your Spirit's enablement to not only to hear your Word read and preached, but to truly listen; to truly understand; and to truly submit. We are nothing apart from you. However, in you, we find everything. *Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

The longer I live, the more that I'm convinced of this incontrovertible truth: that every town in America has what I will call a "walker" and a "runner". The walker is usually a guy that seems to walk almost endlessly around the town. You go to the grocery store, and he's walking through the parking lot. You go to the gas station, and he's there. You go back home, and – moments later – he walks on the sidewalk right in front of your house. He's not homeless; perhaps inexplicably, he just likes walking.

In my experience, the runner is usually a woman. She's in her 30's or 40's; about 95lbs drenched; wears her hair in a pony tail; dons marathon runner clothes for whatever nature throws her way; and can be seen running either early in the morning or late afternoon. I often see one of these as I drive to church throughout the week.

However, apart from a few gluttons for asphalt, few of us actually enjoy endless trekking. For us, it's time-consuming, exhausting, painful – a downright miserable experience. Sure, we walk, but to a chair. Incidentally, have you ever noticed that most of our walking is just from one chair to another?

Physically, we humans might not typically be much for running, except with very compelling motivations (perhaps outrunning a grizzly bear, a psychopath with a chainsaw, or down the boardwalk to a just-departing cruise ship with an all-you-can-eat buffet for which you would gladly die). However, when it comes to sinning, we're like Olympian marathoners – endlessly running and running and running from God.

That's why you should like reluctant and running Jonah. He's just like us. *For Jonah and for us, fleeing from God often comes more easily and enjoyably than following Him.*

“For Jonah and for us, fleeing from God often comes much more easily and more enjoyably than following Him.”

What we'll see this morning is that our reluctance to follow God shows that we do not fully understand, trust, or love Him. Thankfully, God can gradually transform us. And by changing reluctant sinners like us, shows his power to transform all things. This is what we'll see over the course of this amazing book.

WHY DID JONAH FLEE FROM GOD?

On the face of it, reluctant Jonah had some very good reasons to flee God:

God called Jonah to go where he did not want to go. Nineveh was the chief city of the Assyrian Empire, an increasingly dreaded enemy of God's people. It was a huge city, idolatrous and "unclean" to any faithful Jew.

God called Jonah to do what he did not want to do. Shockingly, Yahweh commands Jonah to preach forgiveness by grace through repentance to his enemies! This seems like divine betrayal, aid and comfort to the enemy. "If God is for them, how can he also be for

us?” “Are we not God’s covenant people alone, the sole recipients of his grace?” Jonah could have understandably sought answers to these and other questions.

In these dilemmas, we see some of Jonah’s otherwise hidden idols. Things like:

Nationalism – he seeks national interests over God’s interests

Hedonism – he seeks selfish pleasure over God’s pleasure

WE OFTEN FLEE FOR SIMILAR REASONS

God calls us to go where we do not want to go.

The breadth of the world. Christ commands us to go into the entire world, into places as wicked and potentially hostile as Nineveh. It’s the Great Commission, but how “great” is it in our minds? Right now, our church and denomination has missionaries around the world, some in very dangerous places. However, relatively speaking, we have precious few missionaries. And we have precious little funding for the ones we do have. Why? Because we’re often a lot like Jonah; we find it easier to hoard God’s blessings for ourselves, not invest them for the glory of God and blessing of others.

The depth of the world. Sometimes, God doesn’t lead us abroad; he commands us to go deeper, right where we are. He desires that we initiate and build relationships with those around us who might appear foreign, scary, at odds with our priorities, or not worth the hassle. Maybe with our neighbors; maybe with our co-workers; maybe even with our own spouse or children. It’s only through the application of the Gospel *relationally* that we see its power to transform families, institutions, and cultures. Maybe this is one reason why places rife with church buildings are often also rife with the most severe manifestations of sin. As it was for Jonah, it’s easy for us to flee those areas, preferring lives of comfort to consequence.

The unsearchable depth of God. Maybe God is leading you to delve more deeply into your relationship with Him, to follow him more closely. Perhaps you want to know enough of God to gain entry into heaven, but not enough to get messy down here on earth. What is the minimal commitment? What is the least that I can do and still please God? We’re foolishly seeking the most compensation for the least amount of work. Jonah evidences a life of grudging, half-hearted commitment. It’s miserable, but all too often just like our own.

God calls us to do what we don’t want to do.

When God’s plans and purposes are our own, we’re all on board. When they diverge, we’re on the first boat to Tarshish. When church and spirituality is therapeutic, comfortable, and maybe even entertaining, we all want a ticket. When church and spirituality is convicting, cutting, and difficult (even though ultimately healing), we all want to book on another carrier.

In each of these, we see some of our hidden idols as well:

Nationalism – For instance, do we lack compassion for the lost Muslim because of our nation’s fight against terrorism here and abroad, his perceived status as *the enemy*? Do we lack compassion for the Mexican immigrant because the presence of those like her

seems to erode our national identity and sovereignty? What is the governing ethic in our politics, our identity in Christ or our identity as Americans? The two need not stand opposed. We should fight aggression; we should secure our nation's borders. However, as those whose ultimate citizenship is in heaven, our motivations and methods for doing so should find their ultimate root in a desire for the glory of God (Philippians 3:20). Sadly, Jonah, often like us, valued his *earthly* and *national* identity more than his *heavenly* and *spiritual* identity.

Hedonism – Does the “American Dream” of material comforts through intellectual and economic achievement preclude us from living and sharing the Gospel and its implications? Does the desire for an easy spirituality drive us toward pastors, churches, and ministries where the perceived benefits grossly outweigh the cost of discipleship? Weighing what we might lose so that God might gain, do we conclude that some sacrifices are just too great? Jonah, like us, valued his comforts over God's commands.

SO, WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

What is the solution? How can we overcome our reluctance to follow God, and our propensity to flee from Him? How can we put down our idols, exalting Christ in our hearts and minds? Thankfully, the Book of Jonah not only shows us the problem of *reluctance* (Chapter 1). He shows us the means to *repentance* (Chapter 2) out of which *revival* (Chapter 3) and *renewal* (Chapter 4) flows.

However, first, let's identify the problem.

WE'RE RELUCTANT BECAUSE WE DON'T UNDERSTAND

I enjoyed this story from Reader's Digest: “A Catholic priest I once knew went to the hospital to visit patients. Stopping at the nurses' station, he carefully looked over the patient roster and jotted down the room number of everyone who had "Cath" written boldly next to his name. That, he told me, was a big mistake. When I asked why, he replied, ‘It was only after I had made the rounds that I learned they were all patients with catheters.’” Misunderstandings can lead to all sorts of errors, right?

By fleeing to Tarshish (an ancient city in Spain – i.e. about as far as Jonah could go in the known world, during a time when the Israelites hardly ever made these kinds of voyages), Jonah proves both his impulsivity and ignorance. Impulsively, he has a hyper-emotional reaction, rather than a coolheaded response. Ignorantly, he assumes that he can flee the call of God in his life by changing addresses. But God is everywhere – from Israel to Spain, and even into the belly of a great fish. You cannot outrun God.

Isn't it true that we often react to God impulsively and ignorantly as well? We sense the call of God to go where we don't want to go, to do what we don't want to do, and we react immediately with all the reasons to drown his voice? Who knows to where or what God is calling you this morning:

- Maybe God is calling you to delve more deeply into the means of his grace – the Word, fellowship of his people, and prayer?

- Maybe God is calling you out of a lesser or all-consuming addiction to drugs, alcohol, pornography, sex, eating, or something else?
- Maybe God is calling you to get out of debt, to trust God and his ways for your finances? Maybe it's time to cut up the credit cards, live below your means so that you can invest in his work more sacrificially.
- Maybe God is calling you to switch gears or careers? Maybe God is opening up doors for you to shine his light more brightly where you are, or in another place altogether?
- Maybe God is calling you to a greater enjoyment of the assurance of his love, peace of conscience; and joy in the Holy Spirit that are yours in Christ? Maybe God wants you to put off cynicism, negativity, a satanic self-image, depression, a defeatist mentality, or a host of other stumbling blocks of the mind and heart?
- Maybe God is calling you to the mission field – helping us plant new congregations throughout the eastern suburbs, in under-reached portions of North America, or even around the world?

Who knows! Whatever the case (and these are by no means exhaustive), if you're like Jonah (and we all are), you're probably going to have to fight through impulsive emotions toward God born of ignorant ideas about Him. In our sinful natures, we are all deathly reluctant to God's plans and purposes. In Christ, however, we can become vibrantly receptive to them.

How? To overcome ignorance and impulsivity, we must learn to:

- **Enlighten our minds** – *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* (2 Timothy 3:14-17). Only through a renewing of the mind through diligent study are we thoroughly equipped for every good work, to put off foolish and childish things and grow into spiritual maturity.
- **Engage and expel evil** - *“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”* (2 Corinthians 10:5). Do not entertain any thought contrary to the mind of Christ. Engage it with the truth of God's Word and forcibly expel it from your mind and heart. The Greek words for “demolish” and “captive” imply a violent struggle. It's not easy, but it is possible by the Spirit's power. Of course, to engage and expel evil we must exert great effort to know the good. True discipleship is not easy; it is difficult.
- **Encourage excellence** - *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”* (Philippians 4:8-9). Renewing a reluctant mind is not merely a process of removing bad thoughts; it's the implanting of good. If your immediate

reaction to God's call is doubt, stubbornness, or any form of negativity, learn to meditate on and trust in the truths that contradict it.

- **Enjoy the Spirit's strength** - *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."* (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). Finally, we ultimately need to recognize that the ultimate power over sinful attitudes and actions is *not us but God* – specifically, His Spirit. We trust that God protects, prospers, and preserves us by his grace, through our faithful striving.

Jonah did not engage and expel his wicked inclination to flee; he did not reflect on the excellence of the One calling him to a great mission; he did not seek divine aid to accept and fulfill God's plan. Unless we are careful, we can show the same reluctance.

WE'RE RELUCTANT BECAUSE WE DON'T TRUST

I know of a church that for years maintained around 200 members. However, in God's grace, the church began to grow – almost exponentially. Soon, it was at around 700 and then more. Most rejoiced, but many felt threatened. They left, fearing that God's grace poured into the lives of many others through their church would mean less of God's grace for them. They attended other fellowships, some hopping from one church to the next for years.

Eventually tired, some later returned. Quickly, they realized that their initial fears were misplaced. The church, while certainly different, was – even in their own minds – somehow better. What once seemed like loss to them was now gain. God grew his church in healthy, albeit initially upsetting ways.

That brings me to Jonah's second problem, born of his misunderstanding: a lack of trust. He believed that God's gracious purposes for Nineveh would only come at the expense of his plans for Israel – i.e. that God was working against him, not for him.

He should have known better. For one, God long pledged himself to the nation of Israel, to be their covenant God – to never leave them, nor forsake them. In Deuteronomy 7:6, we read these words of Moses: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." All of redemptive history from Abraham through Moses and up to the life of Jonah evidenced God's HESED (loving kindness) for his chosen people. Certainly, Jonah had every reason to know that while God's grace to those apart *from* him will never undermine his unshakeable commitment to those *in* him.

Nevertheless, Jonah shows a lack of trust. But who among us can blame him? Aren't we often the same way?

- For instance, when God grows a church, it's common for those there from its beginning to lament the loss of what once was. The addition of new faces might appear as an ironic loss of fellowship. We're tempted to think that God's grace to care for new faces will preclude his grace to care for those more familiar.
- Similarly, when God diversifies his grace, inviting all sorts of new people (even those that might be our enemies or who are otherwise foreign to us), we often respond by

retreating to cliques of familiar faces or isolating ourselves in a personal Tarshish.

In both cases, we need to trust in what we've come to know about God, by his grace. He loves us and will never cease to love us. His grace to others will never undermine his HESED (loving kindness) toward us. In God's eyes, we are his treasured possession. He will not forget about or forget to care for us.

If Jonah had every reason to trust in this during the 8th century B.C., we have so much more. We have not only the prophets and the writings, but the Gospels and the Apostles – a complete canon of Scripture to underscore what Paul wrote to the Romans: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

WE'RE RELUCTANT BECAUSE WE DON'T FULLY LOVE

Ultimately, however, the greatest problem that we see in Jonah isn't his lack of understanding or trust but of love. Jonah is reluctant to seek understanding; trust; and ultimately follow because he is withholding in his love of God – just like us.

According to the Scriptures, where obedience is lacking so too is love. Where love abounds, so does obedience. Jesus identifies this relationship of love to obedience in John 14:15, 22-24: “If you love me, you will obey my commandments...If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”

This correlation flows throughout Scripture as well. Joshua identified it in his closing address to God's people: But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.” (Joshua 22:5). David identified it in Psalm 119. Daniel identified it in Daniel 9:4. Nehemiah identified it in Nehemiah 1:5. We could go on and on.

THE SOLUTION: CHRIST, OUR TRUE JONAH

Obviously, this exposes a problem: Jonah's reluctance to love (like our own) points us to the hopelessness of trusting in ourselves for our redemption and restoration to God! We will not come to God; we will not honor him. By nature, we run *from* God, not *to* him.

So, what is the solution? Frankly, we need a better Jonah: one willing to leave his heavenly home for a foreign and earthly place, filled with contemptible enemies, and offering them the hope of divine forgiveness by grace through faithful repentance. Not only that, we need one exceeding Jonah, one not only willing to *offer* redemption to the reluctant, but to *accomplish* redemption for them, in their place. In short, we need Jesus.

Without hesitation, Christ the Son of God obeyed the Father's will in love, leaving heaven above for this spoiled earth beneath; to offer us God's forgiveness; and to set us free from the fear of God's impending wrath through his atoning sacrifice for our sin, in our place. Thankfully, for our sake, Christ was not as reluctant as we are to obey the loving will of the Father (see Philippians 2:6-11).

CONCLUSION

And what is the only response to such a love as this? Love!

Increasingly captivated by the love of God in Christ, we're drawn to him more and more (1 John 4:19). He becomes the object of our deepest affections. And in loving more, we flee less.

Are you running from God this morning? Stop. You're running from the only love that truly satisfies, the love of God.

Let us pray.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Our perspective (ideas) about God shapes our priorities and therefore practices. As mentioned in this message, bad ideas about God result in misplaced values and mistaken actions. In what ways can you expand your understanding and/or refine your ideas about God this year? What are your areas of admitted weakness in understanding the Scriptures wherein God reveals himself? What questions do you have about God and his purposes in your life? What resources might be of help to you? What siblings in Christ might play a special role in helping you move forward?
2. Like Jonah, we all have idols of the mind and heart, values that we often hold dearer than God. These commitments errantly shape our priorities and practices. Reflect on your idols. What are they—trust in power, material wealth and security, prestige, image before others? Others? When you find yourself reluctant to follow God's leading, what values take preeminence away from Christ in your mind and heart?
3. Finally, to what specific goals is God calling you this year? What are the perceived roadblocks to your success? What truths from God's Word can encourage you in the face of these challenges?

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