

July 31, 2016 sermon: “Jonah and Salvation” by Pastor Chris Myers-Tegeder

So as you can see from the decorations and props, this is not a normal week at First Pres. It is VBS week, vacation Bible school, and this year the children will be looking at the story of Jonah, which is why we have the underwater theme up here. The account of Jonah has a ton of theology in it. There are so many lessons we can take from it, such as how useless it is to try to hide from God, how God gives people second chances, God’s mercy, God’s sovereignty, and the list goes on. And many people are familiar with the first two chapters of Jonah, where he is told to go to Nineveh, and rather he runs in the other direction, literally the other direction; Nineveh is one way and Tarshish is the opposite way, and he ends up in the belly of a whale or big fish, depending on how you want to read the original Hebrew. And we will enjoy looking at that with the children this week. We will sing about how Jonah was told to “go go” to Nineveh and how he instead went “no no” in the wrong direction. But in general, for adults, people are less familiar with Jonah chapters 3 and 4; the part *after* the big fish episode. And there is a ton of theology in those chapters as well. So I thought we would look at those this morning.

To recap to this point, Jonah the prophet has been tasked by God to go and preach repentance to the city of Nineveh. After running in the other direction on a boat, getting thrown overboard and saved in the belly of a fish, Jonah finally goes and preaches to Nineveh. And the most surprising thing happens...Nineveh responds positively. They repent of their sin. And this is where we pick it up in chapter 3 of the book of Jonah. Starting at verse 10.

Jonah 3:10 through 4:11

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” 9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10 Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

This is God’s Word for us this morning, and this is how the book of Jonah ends. What we just read is the end of the book of Jonah. The next thing is Micah chapter 1. So the book of Jonah ends with two questions from God. Not the usual ending to a book of the Bible. In fact there are only two books of the Bible that end with a question; this one and the book of Lamentations. However, Lamentations ends with a question from the people of Israel. Not a question from God. Here in the book of Jonah, God ends this book with two rhetorical questions. They are “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?...for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about

Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left...?”

Before we get into these two questions in some detail let's look at what comes before this. Jonah begrudgingly goes to preach to Nineveh to repent of their sins. And then when they do, Jonah is not happy about it. Nineveh has been spared, they have changed their ways. This is a reason to celebrate. But Jonah is mad. Why is Jonah upset at this good news? Here is a cartoonist's rendition of why Jonah is upset. Perhaps he thinks God made him look like an idiot?



Why is Jonah so upset in this passage? Listen to his response. He says; “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah knows that God is gracious, merciful, loving, and ready to forgive. Jonah is basically saying; God, I know you are the kind of God that gives second chances and I wish you were not giving one to Nineveh. Now let's keep in mind that Jonah has himself been given a big second chance. Jonah could have drowned when tossed off the boat, but God saves him by way of a big fish for the preaching purpose that God planned for him. Jonah got a second chance to obey and go to Nineveh, which he did. Now he is upset that Nineveh is getting a second chance.

As we read this we can easily see how double-standard Jonah is being. We can state this obvious fact. He is fickle. He is borderline hypocrite. But are we really much better than this? I want you and I to think right now, is there anyone in your life or in this world that you can think of that you would not want to see get a second chance? I can. There are people that have done evil, people such as terrorists, that I would not be thrilled to see God give a second chance. My human sense of right and wrong would be bothered by that. People who have inflicted violence on others in France and Turkey and the Middle East and in this country, I want “justice” on an earthly level. I am not inclined to want them to have a second chance. And this is where Jonah was. He was not a terrible person. He was human. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians. The Assyrians spread the Israelite population all over the Middle East, moving key leaders as far apart as possible and then the Assyrians took up residence in Israel themselves. The Assyrian influence caused the loss of ten tribes of Israel and the diaspora soon took up the worship of Assyrian gods. Nineveh, historically speaking, was quite possibly the acting capitol of Assyria or second to the capitol. Meanwhile Jonah is a Jewish prophet. Jonah is not supposed to like Nineveh. Saving Nineveh probably grates against all sense of right and wrong for him. Yet he knows God is gracious, merciful, loving, and relenting. And this is why he gets so upset in this passage.

But this is exactly the point that God is trying to get across to Jonah and to us. Our earthly sense of justice is not how God works, and there is no reason for God to work the way we want God to work. God's grace and mercy and love are God's to give or take, not ours to control. So these two questions at the end of Jonah that I mentioned before, I want to look more closely at each of them. They are important because they both have to do with Jonah's and our understanding of salvation. God is extending an understanding of God's salvation to us, and both Jonah and we still struggle with it. And since salvation is one of if not the most important message we are supposed to get from the Bible, let's look at these two questions.

The first question is about the withered bush. God provides a plant which springs up for shelter for Jonah which he very much enjoys, it says, but when it withers Jonah complains. Now we should note that God does all of the doing in this passage. Jonah is completely passive. If you look at the passage starting at verse 6 "The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort..." verse 7 "But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered..." verse 8 "God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah." God does everything in this passage, both the parts Jonah likes and does not like. And when Jonah gets upset that the bush withers and he is hot, God asks in verse 9 "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush... You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow." In other words, you are angry about something you had nothing to do with. You are outside of your authority. You didn't create the plant or the plan to grow it, therefore you have no right to complain if it is not there. It was only by God's grace that it was there. Jonah did nothing.

This is our first lesson on salvation. We do not bring about our salvation. We do not have the power to enable our salvation. God does all the doing. It is all by the power and authority of God. God saves us, we do not. Yet we are often quick to ask about who is going to heaven and who is not. We can even get indignant or angry if it seems like God would keep someone out of heaven. Well wait a minute, is this for us to even question? If we can't bring about our own salvation and it is all by the grace of God, then do we have a right to question it? I think the more appropriate response to God's grace is to thank God for it, not question it. Be grateful and accepting. Because if the power to save is all God's that means God is also the one that conquers sin. That is not a battle we have to or even can fight. God fights that battle for us and God wins for us. This is something that God tried to teach Israel a long time ago. Back in 2 Chronicles 20 when King Jehoshaphat and Israel face destruction God says to them "Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's." The battle to defeat your sin is God's. You don't have the power to do it. And the grace of salvation only comes from God as well.

So the first question from God reminds Jonah that the power to do all the saving that can be done is God's and God's alone. Jonah cannot save himself and he does not have the right to question God's actions. The first question gives us the facts about salvation. That it is all by the power of God, not humanity. Then the second question reminds us about the nature and character of the God with this saving power. Starting in verse 11 God asks Jonah "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" In other words, Jonah why should I not care about all those people I created? Jonah knows, he even said earlier in verse 2 "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Jonah knows the character of God. God is gracious, merciful, loving, and forgiving. That is what that passage says. So God asks Jonah, if you know my nature, if you know what kind of God I am, why would you question why I care about that whole city that is lost? Friends, God *wants* to save his people. The first question only makes sense in light of the second question.

Yes, God has all the power. God is the only one that can save. But God is not a God that sits far away in heaven sadistically saving one person and not the next. Rather, God is compassionate. God is merciful and loving. God wants to save. God saves Jonah and God wants to save Nineveh. And this is the part that Jonah struggles with the most. Because Jonah is not compassionate or merciful.

These two questions at the end of the book of Jonah, the only book to end with questions from God, these two questions call on our understanding of God's salvation. What should our concerns be about salvation? Since the first question addresses God's power to save, we need ask ourselves; are we receiving God's grace? Are we open to *God's* power in our lives or are we obsessed with trying to be in power ourselves and questioning God's? Are we asking the right questions? Rather than question who God might or might not save, do we give God the power and authority to save? And then, knowing it is God's power alone, do we trust God's character? Do we recognize from scripture that God is in character, as Jonah listed, that God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, loving, and forgiving?

We also can't ignore the irony in the account of the prophet Jonah. The irony is impossible to miss and I think God is telling us something here. The irony is of course that God goes to great lengths to save Jonah, despite his disobedience, and turn him around to go in the direction that God planned for him. Yet, when God is merciful to Nineveh, Nineveh that actually repents of their sin, Jonah is indignant. This is quite a statement about human character. This final passage of Jonah not only teaches us about God's power and God's character, but it also makes a statement on our character as humans. We are drawn into this irony. It is much like that passage in 2 Samuel where Nathan goes to king David, knowing that David has taken the wife of someone under his authority, and Nathan tells David the story of a rich man who takes the one sheep of a poor man. David gets drawn into the story and gets angry about the rich man's actions and then Nathan says, "you are that man."

I think the irony of the Jonah story draws us in and God is asking, are we like Jonah? Are we indignant? Do we think salvation is just for us? Something that is just for this gathering of Christians? Something God does just for us and not for those we would label not worthy? Or do we, knowing about the character of God, care about the whole world? Can we let God's grace change us? The great theologian Karl Barth wrote that "Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace." What he is saying is that grace is not just a concept or a wonderful idea. Grace is something that is lived out. God acts with grace towards us and God expects the same of us. God acts with grace, not just through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also in our individual lives here. God *wants* to save. The God of the book of Jonah is a missionary God. God pursues Jonah with grace and Nineveh with grace. And I believe God ends this book of the Bible differently than any other for a reason. These hanging questions are meant for us. The historical account type ending that you find in other prophetic books is not important here. What happens to Jonah or the Assyrians is not the point. The point is understanding the God who saves and responding as recipients of grace. So remember those two questions at the end of Jonah. The first question God asked was "do you have a right to be angry about the bush?" In other words, do you have a right to question the authority of God? And the second question God asks "Should I not be concerned about that great city with all those people that are lost?" In other words, should God not have grace, compassion and mercy for others as God has had grace, compassion and mercy on us? And should God not be able to expect the same from us? Good questions to remember. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.