

“Jonah: A Prophet on the Run; 1:1-16”

First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White

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This morning, we begin a sermon series on the book of Jonah. Now, I would wager that nearly all of you have some familiarity with the story of Jonah. But I would also bet that when you think of the story of Jonah you think of one very specific thing that happens, one particular character. And what’s that? Yes, a whale (or what scripture calls a HUGE fish). And so right out of the gate, we’ve got a problem. This is a story everyone *thinks* they know already... but they really don’t. Because this is a story that is, for whatever reason, taught to children and characterized in kids’ books and bibles like this: **(Show Kid’s books.)** The story has also been drafted in many kids cartoon movies, but none did it better than Veggie Tales! **(Show Veggie Tales Slide).** So, it makes sense that we assume that we know what Jonah is all about. But I assure you, Jonah is not a story for children at all, it has some very adult themes. There is much to learn from this odd, little prophetic book. So, we’re going to spend several weeks doing a deep dive—pun intended—in Jonah.

As we prepare to read most of the first chapter this morning, I need to first explain what kind of literature we’re reading. Though Jonah is part of the “Minor Prophets” collection of scripture, Jonah is actually a book of prophetic satire. It’s not about a prophet’s mission speaking for God, like all the other prophets are. No, it’s a ridiculous narrative about a terrible prophet. It is satire. And what is satire? **The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.** Satire is Saturday Night Live. It’s when comedians take a well-known celebrity or politician and put them in exaggerated situations, moments that are over the top, to make fun of what they’re doing or expose who they are. And when done well, satire is hilarious.

But satire is also sneaky. Because in using exaggeration and humor, we find ourselves laughing along and agreeing with whatever the comedians are doing. In using satire, comedians sneak past our defenses; we find we’ve dropped our guards. And then before we know it, we realize that this is a joke about us. I mean think of SNL, each week they are blatantly making fun of American culture—that’s us!—but they do it so well that we find ourselves laughing and agreeing with how true it all is. Jonah is just like this... a piece of truly masterful satire written to sneak past your defenses and hit you right where it hurts. Because as you’re nodding along at how foolish Jonah is, as you’re laughing at Jonah’s attempt to run from God, as you’re mocking Jonah... suddenly you realize this isn’t just a story about Jonah... it’s a story about you too. And that is the real gift and power of Jonah.

But satire only works if you’ve got some backstory. In the same way that a SNL sketch is only funny if you know the celebrity they’re making fun of or if you know what happened that week that the sketch is mocking. Jonah will only play if you know a few things.

First, who the heck is Jonah? Why is this story making fun of this guy? First, Jonah was a real person, a historical prophet that had lived during the reign of one of Israel’s most evil kings. What you’ll

want to know is that over Israel's history there are good, righteous kings and then there are bad, unjust kings. Jeroboam II is truly bad. He's a power monger, interested in wealth and conquering foreign nations, doesn't take seriously the Torah or worship of God. He's terrible. And we know Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II because of a single reference to him in the book of 2 Kings (14:25) where we're told that Jonah prophesied in favor of this evil king, promising Jeroboam II that God would bless all his military conquests and extend the borders of Israel, making him even richer and extending this period of wealth and power. Jonah basically tells the king, God's on your side.

Now, what is odd here is that while Jonah is promising this evil king that all his plans will come to fruition, there is another prophet around who's saying the exact opposite, Amos. The book of Amos in your bible is all about Jeroboam II and Amos telling him, "You've lost the plot and are more concerned with power and money than you are with faithfulness to God. And because of your unjust practices and obsession with greed, God's going to allow a foreign power to take your land." And that is what happens actually; you can read all about it in the book of Amos. So, Jonah is the prophet kissing the ring of Jeroboam II and Amos is the prophet brave enough to tell the truth.

As you might imagine, the real, historical Jonah ends up being remembered by Israel as the prophet-non-grata; no one likes this guy, no one trusts him. So, then, it makes sense that several hundred years later when Jonah is written, those early readers are immediately ready to mock him... in the exact same way that the SNL cold open sketches open with whichever celebrity or politician makes the most sense to mock that week. "Oh, here we go, we're talking about THAT prophet, this is a story about THAT guy." The author of Jonah cleverly uses this historical "bad guy prophet" on purpose... because it makes for very good satire.

Even the meaning of Jonah's name adds to the irony. In fact, you get your first laugh in verse 1: **"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai."** In Hebrew, Jonah's name means dove... and all throughout the Bible doves represent God's peace and God's message. Even more, Amittai means truth and faithfulness. So, Jonah, son of Amittai, really means, Jonah, the dove, son of faithfulness. Jonah, son of truth. But the reader knows that Jonah never lived up to his name. So, from the very first verse, the audience is chuckling and thinking, "Ha! Jonah, isn't this rich?!"

Okay, with that little intro; hear the Word of the Lord from Jonah 1:1-16 (NRSVUE): **"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.' ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so, he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. ⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.' ⁷ The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose**

account this calamity has come upon us." So, they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹ "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. ¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." ¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Right off the bat, I want to draw your attention to two rhetorical, literary devices that will be used over and over to help engage us, to make this satirical story more interesting and dramatic. The first is the use hyperbole or exaggeration for effect. You will notice that everything in Jonah is described as HUGE or GREAT. The Hebrew word for huge, *gadol*, and is used 14 times in Jonah's short 48 verses. In Jonah, everything is HUGE: Nineveh, the wind, the storm, the sea, the fish, the plants. Even the emotions are HUGE: the sailor's fear, the repentance of Ninevites, the joy Jonah feels sitting in the shade of a plant, Jonah's anger at God. It's all massive. Nothing just 'happens' in Jonah, everything HAPPENS in some massive, great, huge way. You're meant to feel like this is larger than life, that it's epic.

The second literary device is personification, or attributing human-like characteristics to non-human things. It's very common in fairy tales... think of when the fairy godmother turns Cinderella's pumpkin to a carriage. In Jonah the author uses the Hebrew language to personify non-human elements. So, the boat comes alive and, like a person, thinks or considers breaking apart. After Jonah is thrown overboard the sea is finally able to calm down it's anxious and angry feelings. Later, the huge fish will save Jonah's life. In chapter 3, the animals will repent of their sins. In Jonah, everything is alive and animated... all thinking, working, feeling in personified ways to add emphasis to this story. So, if you find yourself giggling along with how outrageous it all is... that is the very point!

Okay, so Jonah, our dove/son of faithfulness (lol) is told by God to go to Nineveh to preach God's justice. God basically says, "I can no longer allow all the terrible things happening in Nineveh, the cruelty, greed, and violence. People are suffering. Jonah, I'm sending you to go to them." And as we saw, Jonah's response is "absolutely not."

Now, here's what you need to know about Nineveh so we can understand why Jonah runs. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, who was for much of Israelite history, their biggest sworn enemy. And for good reason. The Assyrians were a military might, an empire to be feared. Like Rome would do

later, Assyria was known for its domination through violence. Archeological evidence shows us what the Assyrians did to those they conquered. They skinned the captured leaders alive as examples to keep the masses under control. They sacrificed children. They even buried people alive up to their necks and let them rot from ground up, dying a slow and painful death. They were cruel. And like you might have guessed, a few hundred years before Jonah was written, Amos' prophecy comes true, and the Assyrian's end up conquering the Israelites. So, this is why Jonah bolts... he hates the Assyrians. He doesn't want God to save them... and he's afraid that if they repent, that's exactly what God will do. Which, spoiler alert, is what happens.

In chapter 4, we read... **“Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, “God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That’s why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness! “So, God, if you won’t kill them, kill me! I’m better off dead!” -4:1-3 (The Message)** So, Jonah bolts from God because of his prejudice and hatred. Whew.

And where does he go? **(SHOW MAP)** We're told he heads down to Joppa and hires a ship to Tarshish. Again, this is one more satirical device. Because Tarshish is our equivalent to Timbuctoo. It might have at one point been a real place (you can see where historians think it used to be), but by the time Jonah is written, Tarshish just means, as far away as you can possibly go. Again, we find ourselves chuckling here.

In this story, no one does what you expect them to. It's just wild. The prophet of God, who you expect to do what God says, doesn't just ignore God's command, but does the exact opposite of what God tells him to do. God tells him to go east, he runs as far west as he can go. The pagan sailors in our story... who we're supposed to expect to live up to the reputation of sailors or pirates...to be rough and tumble, drunken, heathen brutes... they end up being the good guys. When the storm hits, who do we find praying?! The prophet's asleep—and the sailors are praying. And when they all finally get to the bottom of what's caused the storm, it gets even crazier. Jonah would rather die than do what God wants and tells them to throw him overboard, “Just kill me.” But the sailors? They end up converting to faith, making vows and worshipping God. Everything is backwards here.

Our comedian author has done their job so very well. As Jonah tells the sailors, “I’m a Hebrew, I worship the God who made this raging sea”... we as the reader can see how foolish it was to try and run from God by sailing on the very water this God has made. The sailors get it immediately and ask, “what on earth have you done?!” To anyone even kind of paying attention, it's insane and so obvious. Jonah, what on earth are you doing?

But it's right here, while we're mocking Jonah's foolishness, that we're suddenly confronted with our own foolishness for any and all of the times that we too, try to run from God. As the author intended, we walk right into it and the truth stings. Because we've all tried to run from God too.

We got a puppy a couple years ago. Mila named him Romeo (**SHOW Romeo**), because she “fell in love.” Romeo has not exactly been trained very well. He is the sweetest dog on the planet (yes, I’m biased), but we have failed to teach him to ‘come’ or to ‘stay.’ His favorite thing to do is to sit by the window and bark playfully at other dogs who are out on a walk... he just wants to go out and play so badly. I swear he has no idea that he’s only 18 lbs... he thinks he’s a big dog. Now, when on a few occasions he’s accidentally gotten out, Romeo bolts; he’s run for his life! He wants to go play, to bark, to smell all the things... but of course, he’s not thinking about his safety, he’s just running for what he thinks is the good life... he’s running for his life. We, however, are very aware of what would happen if he was hit by a car or snacked on by a bigger, hungrier dog. So, as we chase him down to keep him on leash and safe from actual danger... we know the truth of it. He not running for his life, he’s running from his life.

Jonah thinks he’s running for his life... but the tragedy is that he’s actually running from his life. When we choose to run from God, to disobey the way of Jesus, in the many ways that we all do, we too, are misguidedly running from our life. Jesus invites us to follow him, and part of that call is hearing from God, “you know, there’s a bunch of things you are doing that you think are life... but they’re actually not life at all. Follow me. I’ll lead you to real life.” And we all know—we know—that there are things in our lives that God has asked us to submit, areas that we know we’ve been called to walk away from, places we know we need to grow. But so much of the time, we just compartmentalize that stuff and ignore it because we don’t really want to change. We flee for Tarshish. We even convince ourselves that we’re running for our lives... but the real tragedy is that we’re running from our lives.

Friends, the challenge and invitation from Jonah for us today is this: what might it look like to identify the places in your life that have you fleeing for Tarshish? Are there things that you know you need to stop, or patterns of thinking or ways of being that you know don’t lead you to life, but you’re scared to let them go, because it’s all you know, it’s the only life you know. The way of Jesus is always going to involve an invitation to let that stuff die so that you can create room for God to lead you to a new and different life. Are there things you know that God has been calling you to do, places or people you know that God is calling you to love, that frankly, you don’t want to. Maybe because you’re afraid, or maybe because it just feels way too good to keep some folks as enemies. Where are you fleeing from God? Because, as Jonah so beautifully illustrates, running from God will never get you where you really want to go. You’ll end up running from your life. So may we all take some space today and this week to get honest about the ways we’ve been running... and instead, surrender it all to God, trusting that he is indeed filled with sheer grace and mercy, abounding in love for us, and ready to bring us to a life better than anything we can imagine. Amen.