

July 2nd: Man Overboard

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past two weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

We've spent two weeks taking a closer look at the first half of Jonah chapter 1, and now we turn to the second half of the chapter. Let's take a few moments to pray together and take a few deep breaths.

O Prince of Peace,

When our lives are messy and chaotic, we look to you for answers. We search for solutions to our problems and brokenness, we turn to you for assurance that we are still worthy of love and worthy of your grace. We thank you for the times in our lives when you have rushed to our aid and calmed our inner storms, we are grateful that you continue to show mercy and compassion to us even in our

darkest moments. Remind us that we find our true wholeness and rest in your presence, comfort our anxious hearts, we pray. Amen.

Where did we leave off? We kind of left it on a cliffhanger, didn't we?

Last week we finished our scripture reading at chapter 1 verse 10, and that passage ended with this: "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.)"

You might remember that our main character Jonah was on the run from God and in the middle of a huge storm. Jonah had been called to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, but he refused, choosing instead to board a boat bound for Tarshish, a far away city in the opposite direction. Jonah's decision seems to have angered God, and so our story is at a crucial point of conflict: all of Jonah's traveling companions have decided that he's the reason that their ship is about to sink, so they have to come up with a solution, and fast.

Unfortunately, when our scene opens in verse 11, there's not good news for our characters. Our biblical author tells us the sea is getting rougher and rougher, there seems to be no end in sight to the wind and the waves. You can tell the sailors are getting pretty desperate, because they ask Jonah, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

It might seem a little strange to us that they are asking Jonah, the problem in this situation, to come up with a solution to the mess he created, but we have to remember that Jonah previously confessed to be a Hebrew, a citizen of the land of Israel, and a person who worships the God of that land. He told his companions that his God was the one "who made the sea and the dry land" so it makes sense that they would turn to him for an answer. They probably reasoned to themselves that Jonah, as the one with the connection to the Creator, might have some idea about how to relate to or control creation.

They might have thought that Jonah's special relationship with the God of the Sea gives him some undiscovered insight into how the whole thing operates. Or maybe they're just really really really out of ideas. And surprisingly, it sounds like Jonah does have an answer—although it's a strange one. Verse 12 says, "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."

Apparently Jonah's solution to this mess is to simply throw him overboard.

I'm not sure how I would have reacted if I had been one of the sailors on this ship. They had previously made the decision to throw off a lot of the ship's cargo and supplies to lighten their load, and that didn't really do anything to fix their situation, so how is throwing Jonah overboard supposed to help? How is tossing him into the waves helpful if Jonah is the one with the direct connection to God—doesn't he seem to have the best chance of saving them from this nightmare scenario?

At first, the men don't take Jonah's crazy advice. And can you blame them? It doesn't sound like a good plan. It doesn't sound like the right thing to do, even if Jonah is the reason that they're all in this pickle. Verse 13 records, "Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before." They come up with an alternate plan—and they try to navigate the ship back to safety. This isn't a bad idea, but it doesn't seem to work—the waters are still pretty treacherous and don't seem to be calming down anytime soon.

But why are they so afraid of doing as Jonah asked? Why do they have a hard time following his instructions?

Well, I think we have to understand that what Jonah is advising is literally human sacrifice. Tossing someone into the sea, far away from land, in the middle of a storm was basically murder without actually having to kill someone, because the elements of nature would take care of the killing for you. In their minds, this was not going to be a magical scenario out of Homer's

epic poem *The Odyssey*, and Jonah would not miraculously end up washing ashore on a deserted tropical island, nor would he be rescued by a compassionate demigod like in other ancient myths. In their minds, Jonah was definitely not going to end up pulling a Tom Hanks in *Castaway*—using a handy dandy liferaft to make it to a secluded beach, befriending a volleyball while he waits to be found and reunited with his long lost love.

Simply put, casting Jonah into the sea would only end one way: certain death.

In some areas of the world at this time, human sacrifice was not out of the question. In some ancient cultures, this kind of sacrifice was a normal and expected part of their social or religious practice—an action taken to curry favor with certain gods, or as a protective measure during wartime, or as a form of capital punishment. We might see this practice as primitive or barbaric but I'm not so sure that all of our spiritual ancestors felt the same way.

I say that because in terms of Israelite beliefs and Old Testament practices, the Torah is pretty clear that sacrifice is an integral part of humanity's relationship with God. But weirdly, we get some mixed messages about the exact nature of the kinds of sacrifice that God expects from his people. Let me explain.

Early in the book of Genesis, we have a story involving the great patriarch Abraham, in which he is instructed to sacrifice his only son Isaac to God on top of a mountain. Abraham and Isaac travel for three days to the intended site of this sacrifice, and Abraham even prepares for this act by binding Isaac with rope and laying him on the altar. At the last moment, God intervenes and provides a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead, but God doesn't seem all that concerned that he asked Abraham to do something so brutal. But then, in the book of Leviticus, we read that our biblical authors expressly forbid the Israelites from performing human sacrifices to the god Molech, but there isn't a similar command against performing those same sacrifices to Yahweh. The Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai is clear that murder is not allowed for God's people, and Deuteronomy chapter 12 goes even further,

prohibiting the specific sacrifice of first born sons and heirs, but in Judges chapter 11, we have a story about a man named Jephthah who makes this vow: "Then whoever comes of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." He ends up offering his teenage daughter as a fulfillment of this promise. And two kings of the southern Kingdom of Judah, King Ahaz and King Manassah are both recorded as sacrificing their sons during their reigns. These stories are recorded in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 33, and would have been relatively contemporary to Jonah's own life and story.

So you can see why there might be a little confusion here about what God is asking for in this situation. Jonah seems to think that it's okay for him to sacrifice himself, but his traveling companions don't seem to agree. Despite their unfamiliarity with Hebrew traditions, they don't seem to be in favor of murder. In verse 14, our text records, "Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased."

However, the storm is still raging, and soon they have no choice but to obey. They're all out of options, so at the end of Jonah chapter 1 they do listen to Jonah's idea, and it turns out to be the answer to their desperate situation. And so the first chapter of our story ends on this seemingly positive note: "Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him."

The good news is that the storm has passed and they are no longer in danger of perishing at sea. And this rapid change in their circumstances prompts all of these sailors to have a change of heart—these men from all different cultures and nations and backgrounds are convicted to forget their other gods and now profess their allegiance to the God of Israel. They have seen firsthand what Jonah's God is capable of, so they offer another sacrifice to him and make official vows.

We might think to ourselves—all's well that ends well, right? But I say, maybe not.

Despite this resolution, I had a few questions that kept running through my mind this week as I tried to process this text and come up with something to share with you all. If the story ended here, and I knew nothing about what was going to happen to Jonah in the next three chapters, I would be deeply disturbed by the conclusion of this narrative. Perhaps you've picked up on some problematic aspects of this story too.

For example:

What's the deal with correlating normal weather events with divine anger or cosmic displeasure?

Why would God endanger dozens of other human beings for the sake of punishing only one for disobedience?

How is literal human sacrifice the best answer for appeasing God's wrath?

What kind of God would allow his beloved creation to die a frightening death because of one mistake?

Aren't we supposed to be following a loving, compassionate, merciful God?

So you see—I might have some pretty major issues with the story of Jonah.

There's a lot of things that I don't quite understand about this text. There's a lot of questions that I have for God about how we, as modern day disciples, are supposed to engage with such a confusing narrative. And we are almost out of time for today, so unfortunately I don't yet have any satisfying solutions to my spiritual curiosity.

However, next week we'll recap this passage and look at some of the practical applications of this story—so if you're like me and are walking away from this text with more questions than answers, we'll see you again next week so we can continue to meditate together. I hope that together we'll find some creative responses to this text and be able to respond to scripture in a way that makes sense for our contemporary lives.

In the meantime, I'll end with this: we do know that this is not in fact the end of the story.

This plunge into the water is not the ultimate outcome for Jonah, and so I have faith that even in the midst of confusion and probably death, it is not the end for any of us either. We may not know what the future holds, we may not understand the path we're on, we may not have all the answers about how things are supposed to turn out, but because God is still writing our story, I have to hold out hope that there is something more meaningful and more gracious for us than our current situations might expect. And these good and beautiful things are just waiting for us to turn the page and discover them together.

Amen.