

Why Would You Ever Name Your Kid Jonah?

Jonah 1:1-3

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ June 25, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹Now 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.” ³But 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. (Jonah 1:1-3, NRSV)



I like the name Jonah. So do lots of other people. For several decades now, Jonah has ranked in the top 200 boy names in America. I know lots of Jonahs. Some parents choose the name because it comes with a ready-made nursery-decorating motif. What little boy wouldn't want an enormous whale painted on his wall? Though as we'll see later in the story, it's technically a fish.

When you think about it, however, it's an interesting choice for a namesake. Usually people name their children after admirable figures, men and women who have gone before and set a good example. How many parents named their sons Jordan in the 90's, hoping their little boy would grow up to be the next hoops sensation? And that's the problem with Jonah, because the more you get to know him, the more you realize that there is almost nothing about his life that you would want your son to emulate. If you know his story, you know that he is mostly an example of what not to do, especially when it comes to faithful trust in God. So why Jonah? Who wants their son to grow up to be like him?

Truthfully, I still like the name. And as I hope to show you later, it's actually quite a fitting name, not just for some little boys, but probably for all of us. More on that later.

The story of Jonah, however, isn't primarily about Jonah. Like all stories in the Bible, it's primarily about God. One of our teachers in Kenya this last month helped us to see that the entire Bible is mostly about

God, that Christ is the main character (even when his name isn't mentioned), and that the whole point of the entire book is to bring glory to God. It's helpful to remember this whenever we read the Bible. It's especially helpful in this book of Jonah, which reminds us of this fact right at the outset. Did you notice who is the first person mentioned in the book? It's not Jonah. Jonah 1:1 – **“Now the word of the Lord...”** The book begins with the Lord and, as you'll see if you peek ahead, it closes with the Lord. In fact, the Lord is mentioned 39 times in the book which only has 44 verses, that's almost once every verse. Please keep this in mind this summer as we work our way through this book, that it is a story mostly about God.

Jonah is a parable. The very first word in the original Hebrew is the word *vayehi*, which is literally translated, “And it happened...”¹ The equivalent in our day might be, “Once upon a time...” This is quite unusual, by the way, for a biblical account of a prophet. Most prophetic books in the Old Testament, books like Isaiah and Micah, contain the words or message of the prophet, because that's what prophets did, they conveyed a message from God to the people. Jonah is the only prophetic book in the Bible which instead tells the prophet's story. Jonah's message, in fact, is only eight words. The reason for this, I have come to believe, is that this book is a parable in the same way that Jesus' stories were parables.

We think primarily of Jesus when we think of parables, but they exist in the Old Testament as well. As a reminder, “parable” is a Greek word that literally means “to throw alongside”. Think of the world parallel and you get a sense of it. When you use a parable, you simply takes one thing and place it beside a second thing to help somebody else understand that second thing.² If you're trying to describe to your friends your blind date from last night, you might choose an image to “throw alongside” your blind date which helps your friends get a picture of what he was like. If, for instance, you tell your friends that your date was a stallion, a clear picture comes into the minds of your friends. If, however, you say your date was a pig, quite

¹ James Limburg, *Interpretation Commentary Series: Hosea-Micah* (Westminster John Knox, 1998), 137.

² A classic definition of a parable was once given by scholar C.H. Dodd: “Parables arrest the hearer with vividness and strangeness and leave the

mind in sufficient doubt about the precise application so as to tease and promote active thought.”

a different picture comes to mind. And that, simply, is how parables work.

What the Bible does is it uses parables to teach us about what God is like, and, by implication, what our relationship to him should be like. That's what we have here with the book of Jonah. In this story of this very imperfect man we are given a unique opportunity to learn more about the heart of God, and about how we should respond to him. Having said that, I do not mean to suggest that the story of Jonah isn't historical. As you might know, there is much debate around this question. In fact, in a culture like ours, I think you might have a hard time finding many people who think the story of Jonah is anything more than a fable. Who actually believes that a man could be swallowed by a great fish for three days and live to tell about it? Who believes such a thing actually happened?

Well, the church for one, I hope. As commentator Tim Keller puts it, "If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally."³ And so is this parable also history? We have to be at least open to the possibility that it is. And yet, let's not be too distracted by the question. Whether the parable is taken from real life or from the imagination of God, either way it serves the same purpose, which is, once again, to teach us something vitally important about the heart and character of God.

Turning now to the story itself, once upon a time **"the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai..."** Before we look at what the word of the Lord actually said to Jonah, let's be reminded that what is true here is always true, mainly that the word of the Lord always comes first. In life, God always, always initiates. Remember how life itself begins? The scriptures open in Genesis telling us that there was a time when all that existed was God. And how then did creation begin? God spoke. Genesis 1:3: **"Then God said, 'Let there be light!; and there was light.'"**⁴ God's word initiates; creation responds. We see the same thing in the beginning of the New Testament account. John 1:1 – **"In the beginning was the Word...And the Word became flesh and lived among us."**⁵ When God comes into the world to redeem the world in the person of Jesus Christ, he comes as the Word. And creation responds and receives salvation. God is always, always the one who initiates.

This is a great reminder to us that anything significant or lasting in life, all that is eternal and a part of God's Kingdom, is initiated by God. We would not know a thing about God apart from his choosing to reveal himself to us. We are not saved because of something we did, but only because of what he has first done. Our very lives are a gift. It was with this very idea in mind that C.S. Lewis once wrote, "If Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare's doing. Hamlet could initiate nothing."⁶ Neither can we. Our entire lives, one way or another, are lived as a response to what the Lord in his initiative has already done.

God's Word, however, not only initiates, but then demands a response. Isaiah 55:11 declares,

**So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.**

Jesus at one point declared in one of his most famous parables about two men each building a house, that there are two possible responses to the word of the Lord. If you respond to the Word with obedience you are like a wise man who builds his house on a firm foundation of rock. But if you reject or neglect the Word, you are like a foolish man who builds his house on a foundation of sand, only to see it one day collapse in destruction. Don't miss the point. Only a fool ignores the word of the Lord. You are worse than a fool if you directly disobey it. Which, of course, ought to make us pay careful attention to how we respond to the initiating word of God in our lives, even this morning as we examine it together. God's word to you this morning will demand from you a response. You realize that, don't you?

Well, when God speaks to Jonah, this is what he says: **"Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."** It's not a complicated message. Nobody has to wonder here about God's intentions. God has seen the wickedness and evil of the people of this city and has seen enough. He now wants Jonah to go and tell them that enough is enough.

The original readers of this account would have been absolutely shocked on two accounts by the Lord's word to Jonah. Once you better understand the message, you

³ Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah: The Secret to God's Mercy* (Penguin Books, 2018), 4. This commentary has been especially instructive in my study for this sermon series. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

⁴ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁵ John 1:1,14

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Harcourt, Brace, 1956), 223-224.

might be shocked as well. First, it would have been outrageous to the ancient Israelites that God would waste his breath on Nineveh. In those days, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, one of the most cruel and violent empires in the ancient world.

Assyrian emperors were famous for the brutality of their military campaigns, torturing, dismembering and decapitating their enemies. They would often cut both legs and arm off an enemy soldier, leaving the one arm and hand intact so that they could shake hands in mockery as the soldier was dying. They regularly forced family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones on elevated poles. They burned young adolescents and children alive.

Essentially, they were a terrorist state, a constant threat to Israel and all other surrounding nations.⁷ The prophet Nahum called Nineveh the “City of bloodshed” and prophesied that God would one day bring them to destruction, and declared that at that time everybody who heard the news of their downfall would clap their hands in celebration.⁸

And so why would the Lord send a warning to such people? The idea would have been appalling to anyone in Israel. Why not just blast them out of existence? In fact, isn’t a warning a betrayal of God’s promise through Nahum? Because a warning, after all, is a sign of hope, a gracious opportunity to turn around before it’s too late. There is no reason for God to send a warning to the people of Nineveh unless God actually hopes that they will change their ways and avoid judgment. And why in the world would God do this, give such a gracious opportunity to such wicked and undeserving people? Yet this is what God does. Shocking as it is, what are we already learning here about the heart of God in this story which, again, is mostly about God?

The second shocking thing here about God’s message, is that God chooses Jonah for this errand of mercy. This is not the only time Jonah shows up in the Bible. He’s given no introduction here in this book because he doesn’t need one. In 2 Kings 14 we read that Jonah was already well known to Israel because he prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II, a king who started out fairly well, but eventually plunged the entire nation into sin. Other prophets of that day, faithful men like Amos and Hosea, harshly criticized the king for his injustice and unfaithfulness. Jonah, however, supported the king’s aggressive military policies which were aimed at extending the nations power and influence. And so by the estimation of everybody else, such an intensely patriotic and highly partisan nationalist like Jonah would have been God’s last choice for this

mission to Nineveh. Jonah would have absolutely hated these people, and wanted nothing more than to see their immediate and total destruction. And yet, God chooses this man for this mission. Shocking as it is, what does this further teach us about the heart of God?

Because of all this, the original readers of this story would not have been shocked by Jonah’s response to the word of the Lord. We shouldn’t be shocked either.

Verse 3 reads, **“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.”** God tells Jonah to go east to Nineveh. Jonah instead goes west, towards Tarshish. In fact, Tarsish, on the edge of modern-day Spain, was for the Jew the jumping-off place of the world, as far as somebody like Jonah could imagine. God tells Jonah to go by land. He goes by sea. God tells Jonah to deliver a message of grace to those who likely will kill him on sight. Imagine a Jewish rabbi sent to deliver a message of warning in the streets of Berlin in 1941. That was similar to the task Jonah was given. Jonah wants nothing to do with offering up his life as a martyr for such a seemingly hopeless cause.

So instead of Nineveh, Jonah goes to a place, Tarshish, where he would likely be greeted with open arms, because everybody in Tarshish was greeted with open arms. King Solomon used to send his ships to Tarshish and they would return loaded down with **“gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.”**⁹ Tarshish was exotic, an adventure with great appeal, an idealized place where one could pursue the delights of one’s own heart. I think of modern day destinations like Las Vegas, or New York City, or Rio, or Amsterdam, places where you can go and be told, “You do you.”

We are not told yet the reason for Jonah’s disobedient response to the word of the Lord. We don’t need to be told. We know the reason. And if we doubted it, Jonah himself will tell us later on in the book when he reveals that he does not want to go and warn the Ninevehites because he is afraid they will repent. If that happens, he knows what God will surely do. God will show them his mercy, and nothing would displease Jonah more than seeing his enemies receive mercy.

And so he flees from God’s presence. The word translated “presence” here from the Hebrew literally means “face.”¹⁰ That puts a different light on it, doesn’t it? Jonah runs away from the face of God. Those who study such things tell us that from our very first moments in this world, we are wired to seek the face of

⁷ Keller, 10-11

⁸ Nahum 3:1, 19

⁹ 1 Kings 10:22

¹⁰ <https://studybible.info/strongs/H6440>

the one who brought us into this world. Think about a newborn infant. What does that child see as she lays there helpless in this new world? Ideally it's the face of her mom or dad looking down on her, the ones who not only brought her into the world but who love her more than anybody in the world and are there to take care of all her needs. Very quickly, that helpless child learns to grow towards that face, the source and sustainer of her life, the one by which she will eventually realize that she is, as one writer put it, "intimately conceived and beneficently illuminated."¹¹

Ultimately, of course, we are meant to look past the face of our human parents, beyond to the face of our Father in Heaven, who is the true source of every good thing we possess, life itself. In that Face we are to find ultimate identity, security and meaning in life. In that Face we find blessing and delight, love beyond what we might ever imagine. In that Face we can learn how to turn from focusing on ourselves, that we might focus on the One who has his focus on us, and who only wants what is best for us. Why would anybody run away from the face of God?

And yet we do. Right? And all at once we see why we all might rightly be named after Jonah, fitting namesakes each one of us. His response to the word of the Lord has been our response as well, all the way back to the beginning. Not necessarily because we don't want mercy shown to our enemies, though if we're honest we probably do share that attitude with Jonah. No, it goes deeper than that. God shows us his ways, his heart, his plans, his design for life, and our reflexive response has been to instead desire life on our terms rather than his. He shows us Nineveh, and we rush off to Tarshish.

Again, this goes back to the beginning. In the garden Adam and Eve were in the very presence of God, face to face with the source of all goodness, all blessing, all life. Everything that they might ever need or desire was there for them, gifts from a generous and gracious God. But their response has been the human response ever since. Once they got a taste of God, they immediately wanted to become gods themselves, to live life on their terms rather than his. As writer Eugene Peterson puts it, "A taste for God is debased into a greed to be God...I get a glimpse of a world in which God is in charge and think maybe I have a chance at it."¹² All at once the face of God becomes a threat to our self-made plans, and we run the other way as fast as we can. We are Jonah. He is us.

It would be a hard but healthy exercise for you to honestly ask yourself, "How am I running away from God's face in my life right now? How have I rejected or ignored the word of the Lord which has come to me?" Perhaps the Lord has been calling you to some specific task in life, but his agenda for your life does not fit in all that well with your agenda for your life, and so to this point you have rejected his call? Or maybe God's message to you has been to extend the good news of God's love and grace to a certain person, or to a certain people, but like Jonah you have thus far refused to do so because you are afraid they might actually receive the message and then be welcomed into a family you think is better off without them. Maybe the Lord has been calling you to stick it out in a difficult or tedious place instead of bailing for somewhere far more exotic, to keep at it with trivial tasks in an imperfect job or an imperfect church, to keep loving an imperfect spouse, to stay faithful to imperfect friends. But instead of running to the Face of God, in trust and obedience, you are actually running away in the opposite direction.

But here's the thing, can we ever actually escape the presence of God? People have been asking that questions forever, and always coming up with the same answer. I can't help but think of those famous words in Psalm 139:

**Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
[even as far as Tarshish!]
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.¹³**

Where can you ever go to hide from the Face of a God who is everywhere you might go, and has been there long before you showed up? Do you think God isn't in Tarshish, whatever Tarshish is for you? Jonah is about to learn this lesson the hard way. Some of us have to learn it the hard way as well. It would be better, of course, if we didn't have to flee to Tarshish to learn it. It's true, God's plans for our lives often make no sense to us. That was true for Jonah; it's probably true for you as well.

What this means is that it always comes down to a matter of trust. Do you trust the Lord, and then in turn trust the word that comes to you from him, whatever that word might be? Do we trust in his goodness and

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 12.

¹² Peterson, 12.

¹³ Psalm 139:7-10

wisdom, in his undying love for us and for others in this world, in the righteousness and justice of his plans, in his faithfulness to eventually keep every promise he has ever made and set all things right? Does God really know what is best for us, desire to give it to us, and have the power to succeed in the end?

Our answer to these questions should be most informed by how God has to this point most clearly shown us his face, which is in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, who came chasing after us all the way from heaven to the pit of hell, where we could not escape his love for us. In the face of Christ we see what God is truly like, what God has always been like. Jonah's main problem with God is God's mercy. He can't stand the fact that God would show mercy to the undeserving. The problem, of course, is that he doesn't really see his own undeservedness, his own desperate need for that same mercy.

He will. God will show it to him, and to us through this parable. Again, it's a parable mostly about God, a story which reveals God's true heart, his true intentions, his true goodness and love. This is the word of the Lord which will come to us through the story of this reluctant prophet after whom we all could be named. It is a word which will demand from us a response. My prayer is that our response, today and in the days to come, will be one of trust and one of obedience.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jonah 1:1-3 again. Though this is only the very first part of this story, what do you notice here that hints about what will come in the rest of the story?
2. The story of Jonah begins with God speaking. Jeff insisted that this is a reminder to us that it is God who always initiates. God initiates; we respond. Do you agree? Why does it matter?
3. What does God's shocking decision to warn (rather than destroy) the people of Nineveh reveal to us about God's heart?
4. Who would be the last people to whom you would want God to send you with a message of grace?

5. What does God's shocking decision to send Jonah as his messenger of grace to a people Jonah hates reveal to us about God's heart and God's ways?
6. How have you been running from God's face (presence, word) in your life right now? Why are you running?
7. What is your Tarshish?
8. What is the word that God has to you from this message? How will you respond?



Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.

Why is it that people often do exactly the opposite of what God tells us to do? Why don't we trust God?