

Even Then, There Is Hope

Jonah 1:11-17

Jacob Zvolanek ~ July 23, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Romans 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:11-17, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been to IKEA? Ordered furniture online? It's always exciting when you see the finished product on display, or on the webpage in a nice virtual setting. But then, when you open the boxes at home and a tidal wave of parts and instructions pour out, it's quite another feeling. This is not my strong suit. Keanan is much better at that – she's smarter! I remember when we moved into our first apartment and I was putting together a bookshelf, I started out with the instructions... almost like an inspirational quote. I took a look and was like, “Awesome, I got this... no problem.”

As you might guess, somewhere along the process I began doing my own thing and the directions were a thing of the past. I was almost done and noticed that one of the main pieces of wood was installed backwards. What this meant was that not only would I have to drill my own holes in it to finish it, but the face of this piece of furniture would not be presentable; it would be

obvious that its wood finish was different from the rest of the unit.

Has this happened to anyone else? The decision I had to make was to live with a new piece of furniture that didn't look right, might not function correctly, and possibly encounter an angry wife... or remove the parts, fix the problem, and follow the directions regardless of the wasted time and patience it would take. So, if anyone wants to buy a unique-looking bookshelf on Facebook marketplace – I will give you a great deal! Just kidding... I went back and fixed it!

I think we see a similar lesson presented to us today. Jonah and the sailors are in the middle of a storm and are desperately looking for a solution. Jonah is deliberately disregarding God's call and instructions. Things come to a chaotic halt, and they are presented with the decision to deal with Jonah directly or persist living in the storm rowing harder and harder to mitigate the problem. Just trying to survive.

RECAP

As we have seen and discussed so far, the story of Jonah is so different and unique because we're looking at Jonah, observing his story... whereas with other prophets we typically see God's message delivered through them to kings, nations, and people as the focus. But in Jonah, we have a mean prophet who is running from God... angry that God would even consider extending an opportunity for mercy for such a wicked people.

As Tim Keller explains, “Jonah wants a god of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people... and blesses the good people.” However, the story of Jonah illustrates God's grace and mercy; it tells us that there is no situation or person too far gone – even the Ninevites in all their wickedness, could be redeemed, could repent, and change. Even Jonah, in his stubbornness, idolatry, and deliberate disobedience to God... is not too far gone – God is patient with us and relentless in his loving plan for redemption. **Even in this tumultuous storm appointed by God, threatening to destroy this ship carrying Jonah and**

these sailors... we see God's faithfulness. We see his desire that no one should perish. Even then, there is hope!

In our passage today, we come to the close of Chapter 1, the end of the storm, and find our big fish! I'm sure we've all been waiting for that moment. ***What we will see is that the chaos of the storm, and specifically how it is resolved, is ultimately a proclamation of God's grace; it is a picture pointing to the saving grace of Jesus.*** Even in the midst of the storm... there is hope. Hope for Jonah, hope the pagan sailors, and hope for us... wherever we find ourselves today. God is at work.

It can be hard to trust this though, right – trusting that God is, in fact, at somehow at work when things around us are raging and chaotic? Typically, when we find ourselves in the middle of a storm, we are distraught with questions. We ask why... why is this happening? What is going on? Who is responsible for this? What did I do? And, in our passage today - *what should we do about it?* Our passage begins with this question:

WHAT SHALL WE DO TO YOU, THAT THE SEA MIGHT QUIET DOWN FOR US?

How do we respond to storms and how should we? We know that God appointed this storm because of Jonah's sin and disobedience. And, as we discussed already – not all storms in our lives are appointed by God... or an indication of our sin. Sometimes life presents painful challenges and situations that test us, all people, and we are left questioning why?

STORMS

- Why is this happening?
- Why am I sick or injured?
- Why haven't I got a promotion yet? Why haven't I found a job yet?
- Why did that friend or loved one pass away so abruptly?
- Why am I being treated unfairly, unjustly, when all I have tried to give is my best?
- God why do you allow such suffering?
- God why is there such brokenness in my family, how can we overcome the years of conflict and heartbreak?
- How am I supposed to navigate through this?

It is likely that many, if not all of us, have experienced situations and asked questions similar to these. Sometimes, like Jonah, a storm may be a direct result of sin and disobedience. It could be that we are inadvertently sinning, unaware of the path we are heading down... consumed by worry and the need for control. It could be a result of someone else's sin – like

the sailors because of Jonah. But storms can also just happen with no apparent rhyme or reason. Perhaps we're doing our best, seeking to put God first in all things, and life takes a turn for the worst.

STORMS TEST OUR SECURITY

Regardless of why, storms have a way of shaking our foundations. Exposing the ground our lives are built on; the roots of our ultimate identity, purpose, and security. Last week we saw that Jonah's first response to the sailor's questions was that he was a Hebrew – his identity, nationality, and pride conflicted with God's call and message to the Ninevites. This storm has exposed and tested Jonah's foundation, where his security lied! Pastor Bill Johnson once said, ***"insecurity is just wrong security exposed."*** In other words, when we find ourselves emotionally and spiritually reactive, feeling triggered, and threatened, it means that something we hold dearly in our lives is being threatened... we experience fear and despair at the sheer thought of losing something we find security in, something that brings us ultimate assurance, hope or confidence. So, an important question we must answer today is what do we do? The sailors asked Jonah "what should we do to you to get rid of the storm, so that things might calm down?"

WHAT DO WE DO?

Looking at the whole of Chapter One, we see just a few examples of how we might respond to storms. Do we:

1. Do we turn to prayer? Do we seek out God?
2. Do we sleep? Do we immerse ourselves in work, media, or social engagements? In other words, do we attempt to ignore or numb ourselves to the realities and problems facing us?
3. Do we attempt to manage the storm? Do we work harder, trying to mitigate the problem, control the damage, and stop the leaking?
4. OR... do we address the cause, directly? Do we take an honest look at the systems we have in place; our heart, soul, and lifestyle?

I think our text today has something significant for us to hear about the latter – Attempting to manage the storm and focus on damage control, juxtaposed to dealing with the issue directly – tossing Jonah in the sea. Like the sailors, even with good intentions – trying to save and preserve Jonah's life – we are also tempted to manage our own storms and just row harder. However, the severity of sin and its consequences are too messy! It is consuming and too much to overcome. Jonah tells the sailors that he must be thrown overboard – we all might respond like the sailors, "yeah... I don't know if we can do that." That is serious.

It's final. Things look pretty dark with this solution... it doesn't appear hopeful.

I think many of us are Jonah and the sailors. When the sailors heard Jonah's answer... the text says "nevertheless, they rowed harder." God might just be trying to get our attention, highlight an area of our lives, and we're like "ooh, I don't know about that." That's going to take some sacrifice. That might require us to think through some lifestyle changes. God might show us what we need to do... at least giving us the first step in the right direction – and we're like, "okay, so row harder??" We're like Dori in finding Nemo – just keep swimming – short term memory loss, nothing to see here... just keep swimming! But seriously, instead of moving forward in faith, we hold on tighter, clinging to control.

What happens is we look forward and imagine the situation playing out. Am I the only one who does this? We imagine how the mess can possibly be cleaned up, how the problem will be solved, and how there might be resolution... *And what happens is we envision the scenario without God. We have no idea how God could redeem this, and we conclude there is none!*

ROWING HARDER – ANXIETY – CLINGING TO CONTROL

This is how anxiety is produced – we meditate upon realities without God intervening. It's a misuse of our imagination and meditation; we play out scenarios where things go wrong, and God does not show up, but leaves us and forsakes us. Now, I'm not saying it's not important to consider realistic scenarios and think through possible outcomes, whether they are good or bad. What I am saying is that it can be problematic when we place our faith in a future reality without God – his purposes and promises to us... and it generates fear and despair. It becomes paralyzing when we let that fear take the driver's seat; we become a prisoner of our own thinking. So, what should we do? Surrender, seek, and wait upon God – trusting, that even then, there is always hope! Trust that God really is good... that his purposes and promises will prevail. In this life and for eternity, He will never leave us nor forsake us.

At this point, we already know as the reader, and so does Jonah, that he must step up and account for his sin. Jonah wants a god of his own making. His idea of how the Ninevites should be dealt with is different than Gods. ***And that must be sacrificed.*** In Jonah, we see a picture of someone who talks about God but does not talk to or with him. In Jonah, we see theological preferences, but not obedience. Does this sound familiar? In modern terms, it is disposition or a posture, inclined to wear a cross rather than carry it... It is reading scripture but not letting it read us, speaking

scripture outwardly, but not letting it speak to our heart. It is judging nonbelievers – judging the sailors' prayer, rather than the fact that they are praying...

In this passage we see men, most likely rugged with rugged pasts, who are not Israelites – turning to prayer and seeking to preserve Jonah's life. Even though Jonah is at fault, they extend grace. In Jonah, we see a proud Israelite consumed with what God should be doing, rather than himself. In Jonah, we might see ourselves. What we have here is a mirror – a caution – that we may be clinging to control... determined that God has got it wrong. "That's not how the Ninevites should be dealt with!" *Tim Keller once said, "If your God never disagrees with you, you might be worshipping an idealized version of yourselves."* Jonah is a prisoner of his own thinking; he has become captive to the idols of his heart. Some of us have had a hard time finding God because we're looking for an idealized version of ourselves. BUT... here's the beauty of our text – in Jonah, we also see the Gospel – we see Jesus

THE HOPE OF OUR TEXT IS JESUS

In Matthew 12, the scribes and pharisees asked Jesus for a sign and He declares,

“...An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matthew 12:39-42)

Jonah is a type of Christ, pointing to the ultimate saving grace found in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The only thing that can be done to calm the storm, brought about by sin, is to confront it directly, remove it, and die for it. The Gospel most definitely convicts and exposes our sin – but it also comforts, provides a solution, and heals. In his commentary on Jonah, Tim Keller says that ***“Jonah's whole problem was the same as ours: a conviction that if we fully surrender our will to God, he will not be committed to our good and joy. But here is the ultimate proof that this deeply rooted belief is a lie. A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust.”***

A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free... is a God you can trust.

Jonah knew the sea would calm once he was off the boat. He tells them, “throw me into the sea, and it will quiet for you. I know it is because of me.”

Commentators disagree around Jonah’s motives behind the decision to throw himself into the sea – was it a posture shift? Was his heart softening toward the call of God? Was he soberly aware of his sin against God, and therefore quick to take responsibility and change? Was it a complete act of selflessness... Or was it selfish – “I would rather die than go to Nineveh.” Even for Jonah, this may not be the case. He could have ended his life before this.

DIVINE GRACE & INTERVENTION

What is more important for us, as readers and listeners, is what this represents: God’s character and purposes are on display – even when we give up on others, and others give up on us – God does not. Even in our sin, stubbornness, and disobedience, there is hope! God shows grace and his purposes prevail:

- Jonah sacrifices his life, so that the sailors might keep theirs.
- The sea calms
- The pagan sailors sacrifice and confess faith in the lord
- And finally, Jonah is swallowed up by God’s mercies. The watery prison of this big fish was also a provision by God to save Jonah’s life.

This is divine intervention. Even in Jonah’s idolatry, sin, and disobedience... even with the sailors who were not Israelites, distraught by the chaos of the storm – God was at work, He in control, and was faithful! God could have let Jonah perish in his stubbornness. The sailors could have carried on with their lives not knowing the Lord, seeing his power, and mercy on display.

Sometimes all we can feel is the unsettling rocking of the boat... we’re getting hit by cold waves, confused by what is going on and why, it can be despairing and disorienting – we have no idea how God will redeem the situation we are in. We might feel stuck and exhausted. All we can see is what is in front of us. Could it be that God wants us to sacrifice control... to trust that there are, in fact, ways he can turn things around. Despite our lack of imagination... ***just because we cannot fathom how a person, place, or situation can be fixed, redeemed, or have an adequate answer – does not mean that there is no way or answer.*** That is an error in thinking – it assumes that we are, in fact, God. When we conclude that there is no alternative, it assumes we have all the information, as in – being omniscient.

Proverbs 3:4-7 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. 7 Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.” Trusting God, fearing God, acknowledging Him in all that we do... is not only a declaration that God is in control... but it is also one of humility – declaring that we are not. Pastor and author John Bevere writes, “The fear of the Lord isn't to be afraid of God—it's to be afraid to be away from Him. It serves as a protection for those who want to guard their intimacy with Him. A person who fears God is one who will OBEY even in rough times when there is no tangible presence of God to encourage.

In other words – our greatest desire is God and depending on Him. We can trust His character and nature, that He is love – even when we’re in a storm and it’s hard to see God... or even 20 yards ahead of us. The best thing we can do is surrender and rest, knowing that it is actually God himself that solves the problem. Sometimes resting and waiting upon God can be the biggest step of faith of all. We can be so tempted to work harder... row harder! And God is saying to us – SURRENDER. Turn the situation over to me. Trust me – I am the resurrection and the life, there is no situation too far gone. Again, Jonah points us to Jesus. He willingly sacrificed his perfect and sinless life, being tossed into the sea of death – taking our place and punishment to calm the storm of sin, so we can live and know God.

CONCLUSION

Let me end by repeating a quote I've already stated, by Tim Keller, but I think it's truly a word for us today: ***“Jonah’s whole problem was the same as ours: a conviction that if we fully surrender our will to God, he will not be committed to our good and joy. But here is the ultimate proof that this deeply rooted belief is a lie. A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust.”***

It is my prayer that, wherever we are all at today, we can surrender and rest in God... abiding in hope, knowing that he is graciously working on our behalf. There is no situation outside of hope.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

“The Next Step”

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Jonah 1:11-17 again. What stands out to you?
2. When Jonah tells the sailors how to calm the storm, why do you think they continued to “row hard” to dry land? Why not just deal with the cause of the storm directly?
3. How do you deal with storms? When confronted with the cause of a storm, would you find yourself more likely to “keep rowing” and manage things, or deal with the root issue, regardless of the sacrifice it may take?
4. How do you stay hopeful when situations and/or storms appear to have no solution?
5. How does this passage point us to the hope and love found in Jesus?
6. In what ways might this passage serve as a mirror for us, the readers and listeners? What characters do you relate to and how can you learn from them?
7. What has Jesus been saying to you through this passage? How are you responding?

Table to Table:

A question for kids and adults to answer together.

What is hope? What does it mean to hope in God?