

# *Sleeping Through the Desperation*

## Jonah 1:1-6

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 9, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.” (Jonah 1:1-6, NRSV)



What do you do when you come to the end of your rope? Have you ever been in that place? Some of you are there now. If some time has passed since you've been there, can you remember what it was like to be desperate. Maybe external circumstances and the extreme pressure you were facing made you feel as if your life was going to implode. Sometimes grief, the suffering we experience after a painful loss, can push us to the brink. Other times it's an illness or painful physical condition, or an addiction that has enslaved us, or some external threat we are facing. Whatever the cause, the result is the same. You become despairing, not sure if and how you can find a way through. Do you know that place?

This is a very hard place to be. It is also, however, a place full of great potential. When Jesus sat down and gave his most essential teaching on what it looks like to trust and follow him as his disciple, the very first thing he said was, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**”<sup>1</sup> I've always liked how

Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse in *The Message*. “You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.” I think that gets at the heart of it. As C.S. Lewis once observed from his own desperate place in life, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience. But shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>2</sup>

These sailors we meet here in this story were at the end of their rope. This was no ordinary storm they were facing. In verse 4 we are told that this was a “great wind” that caused a “mighty storm”, so great that the ship was on the verge of breaking apart. If you read on in the story you'll see that the storm only gets worse. The fact that these men were terrified even though they were seasoned sailors, tells us this must have been a particularly ferocious storm.

At the end of their rope, these sailors respond in the two ways that most people respond when life becomes desperate, only they respond in reverse order from what we might normally expect. Usually, desperate people first try and do everything they can to save themselves. Our warped human nature convinces us that we can exert control over circumstances which threaten us, use science, medicine, technology, ingenuity, knowledge, and plain old hard work to dig ourselves out of any hole in which we find ourselves. It's only after every other resource is exhausted that people then resort to the other option, which is to pray. When all else fails, turn to God. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, “All is lost! To prayer, to prayer! All lost!”

Curiously, these sailors do the opposite. First they pray. It reminds me of the old nautical proverb, “Let him who knows not how to pray go to sea.” Just like there are no atheists in foxholes, there are no atheists at sea in the middle of a raging storm. So these desperate sailors begin to pray, and not just to one god, but to every last god they can think of. These men, of course, were polytheists. Like most people in that day, they believed in the existence of many gods. In the ancient world people had personal gods to whom they brought individual concerns, family gods which were worshiped by the whole clan, and national gods who were

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:3. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (McMillian Publishing, 1962).

worshiped as the guardians and motivators of the entire nation.<sup>3</sup> My guess is that these desperate men left no stone unturned, calling on every deity they could remember. It's not all that different from what we see in many people today. We've all known people whose desperate journey for hope in life has led them on a quest through a multitude of various religions and philosophies and spiritual practices, some mainstream and others strange and unconventional.

On one hand, we have to give these sailors credit. They are a pious bunch, convinced that there is somebody out there greater than them who has the ability to help them. They are also not too proud to ask for help. The problem, of course, is that they are praying to gods who do not exist. And what happens when you pray to a god isn't there?

I can't help but think of that section of Psalm 135, which happened to be one of our psalms this last week.

**The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
they have eyes, but they do not see;  
they have ears, but they do not hear,  
a nose, but there is no breath in their mouths.<sup>4</sup>**

In 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, a person wanting to overcome an addiction must first admit that they are at the end of their rope and powerless over whatever has enslaved them as an addict. That's step #1, and it's the crucial beginning towards recovery. The second step is the next obvious step: "Come to believe that a Power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity." If you're at the end of your rope and have exhausted all other means of saving yourself, your only remaining option is to look for help from something or someone who has more power than you do.

But what if you turn to a "greater power" that isn't actually powerful, perhaps because it doesn't even exist in the first place? Nothing happens. You're still stuck, as helpless and hopeless as you were before. I know we are always being told these days that it's sincerity that matters most when it comes to faith, but if you put your sincere faith in a false god, I'm not sure your sincerity will do you much good. Not all religion is the answer to the desperation we face in this life. Agreed?

Not surprisingly, the sincere prayers of these sailors are not answered. So they take matters into their own hands. Since desperate times require desperate

measures, they decide to toss the entire cargo into the sea in hopes that the lighter load will enable the ship to bear the brunt of the storm. Sometimes this strategy works, at least in the short term. You're desperate, but then you find the right doctor or medication, the right therapist, the right strategy, the right YouTube video, or you simply just put all your effort into grinding through the problem until it's solved, and you eventually come out on the other side.

But I say sometimes and temporarily, but it's only sometimes and always temporary. All of us will eventually come to a place where the barrier we face cannot be overcome by human effort or human solutions alone. Specifically, the two greatest barriers we all face are human sin and death, both of which have never been overcome by anybody on their own. As Psalm 127:1 declares, "**Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.**" I hope you have learned this lesson by now, that ultimately every one of us is in desperate need of God.

These sailors are about to learn this lesson. If you read further in the chapter you'll see that their efforts to save themselves are in vain. The storm gets worse and the now-empty ship continues to sink beneath the waves. All the while, the one person who is not only the reason for all this trouble, but also knows the one place to turn where help can actually be found, is asleep in the hold of the ship. And not just napping, but dead-to-the-world asleep! The text does not tell us why Jonah has decided to go to bed while the ship struggles to stay afloat, but we can safely assume it is because, one way or another, he is totally self-consumed.

On the one hand, maybe his self consumption is a result of great despair; he's worn out from emotions of anger, guilt, anxiety and grief. Many people in despair find sleep to be the only escape, even if it's just temporary. Jonah had good reason to despair because his life would never again be the same. He had left everything he knew – his home, his people, his calling as a prophet, even his God. On the other hand, maybe Jonah had become so self-consumed because he had finally found peace, at least temporary peace, ironically for the same reason, because his life would never be the same. No longer did he have to kowtow to the Lord who was always trying to get him to show mercy and kindness to people he knew deserved no such favorable treatment. Now he could simply escape to Tarshish and live an unbothered life on his own terms.

Whatever the reason, Jonah's total self-consumption has left him totally unconcerned with the fate of the

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah* (Word Publishers, 1987), 459.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 135:15-17

desperate people around him, even though he's literally in the same boat as them! If the ship goes down, Jonah's going down with it! What does it say about us that at times we can become so self-consumed that we care very little about threats to others around us, even threats that will also eventually become threats to us. Every day self-serving nations make political decisions which negatively impact others nations full of less fortunate people, and they do so without any consideration, or even realization, that the negative impact they are causing will eventually find its way back home. Individuals with the luxury to do so can bury their heads in the sand when it comes to problems around them in society, totally oblivious to the fact that at some point those problems will impact all of us. We're all in the same boat, humanity far more connected to one another than we sometimes imagine! If we're honest, is there some degree to which we respond to the desperation of the world around us just as Jonah responds to the desperation around him? It's a question I'm afraid we have to face today.

Turning back to the story, I think what happens next is that the sailors, while they are going down below to haul up the cargo to throw it overboard, discover this sleeping prophet hidden in amongst the jars and bales, and they go report their discovery to the captain. Immediately he comes to shake Jonah awake. He's not happy. **“How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”**

His stern urgency must have startled Jonah, and not only because he was rudely shaken out of a deep sleep. When the captain demands that Jonah, “Get up, call...”, or as it as it says in some translations, “Arise, call...”, he is using the very same words from verse 2 that God used when he called Jonah to go and call Nineveh to repentance. If sleep had temporarily allowed Jonah to escape God's call on his life, that respite was over. That same call was still there, unavoidable and now coming through the most unlikely source. Don't miss the irony? Jonah is running away from God because he wants nothing to do with pointing pagans towards God. Now this pagan is the one pointing Jonah back towards God.<sup>5</sup>

The captain's complaint is legitimate, and one that Jonah needs to hear. It's a complaint that we in the church may need to hear as well. Though as Christians we no longer belong to this world, we still live in this world. And our world is in the midst of a terrible and age-old storm that has long threatened to sink it. Everywhere around us there are desperate people, made

all the more desperate as they come to realize that their own efforts cannot save them, and that their prayers to false gods of every variety continue to go unanswered. And here we are, like Jonah, knowing not only the source of salvation, but knowing his very name. We know, or ought to know, that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is at least as compassionate and merciful towards all people as Jonah feared that he might be. Whatever love and grace and goodness we have experienced from Jesus ourselves, is exactly what Jesus wants to share with all people.

And the thing is, most people, at least people in our part of the world, know this about Jesus. Even those people who might think that he never really existed, they at least know enough about what they would call the “idea of Jesus” to know what it ought to stand for in the lives of those who swear to follow him. They know that Jesus was not self-consumed. They know that Jesus didn't keep to himself. They know that Jesus cared about the needs of others around him, and not just the needs of the deserving, but the needs of the outcast, the worst of the worst, the absolutely undeserving. They know that Jesus was *for* those people, that he died to save those people. This is why most people outside the church who want nothing to do with Christianity still have a favorable view of Jesus, or at least this aspect of Jesus. They may not want to submit control of their lives to him, but they at least admire his compassion.

Even people who never once set foot in a Sunday school or cracked open a Bible know about the Good Samaritan parable that Jesus told.<sup>6</sup> When a man asked Jesus one day who his neighbors were so that he could know who he should love and who he didn't have to love, Jesus responded by telling a story that made the unavoidable point that even your worst enemy – a Samaritan in this guy's case – was a neighbor who should be loved. So again, when the church is asleep below deck while others in the same boat as us are about to drown, it's no wonder the even unbelievers come to us and rightly ask what in the world it is that we really stand for. When people in the church who represent Jesus fail to share his concern for those in trouble in this world, the world has a legitimate complaint against the church.

Let's be honest, it's very easy to become self-consumed, and then in turn become calloused towards the pain and plight of others, especially others who are not like us, or others we don't much like. Perhaps we are asleep because we have a confidence in our own ultimate salvation - what threatens others no longer threatens us. Perhaps we are asleep because the needs of the

<sup>5</sup> I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2020), 34.

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 10:25-37

world seem far too overwhelming, and even if we did venture out we wouldn't know where to start. Perhaps we are asleep because we have come to believe that those who have rejected God are justly receiving what they deserve to receive. That was likely at least part of the reason why Jonah went to bed as this ship full of pagans was going down. It was certainly the reason he was on the ship in the first place.

This would be a good time in the message for some self-assessment, not only each of us for ourselves, but all of us collectively as a congregation. All around us, near and far, there are people at the end of their rope who have no idea that there is one who is standing ready to bring hope to the hopeless, belonging to the forgotten, grace to the undeserving, love to the outcast, even life to the dead and dying.

We know the name of this Savior. Many of us would say we know him personally and that we have experienced his salvation in our own lives. So what has been our response to others who are now where we once were? Has the love of Jesus for those drowning in our world captivated our own hearts and sent us out to help, or at least driven us to our knees in prayer? Is your life significantly invested in doing what you can to help the hurting world around you? How about our collective life here at Faith? Are we self-absorbed, or are we other-centered? It's a fair question, because Jesus himself in his own story pointed out that it was the unlikely Samaritan who stopped to help the dying man by the side of the road while the two very religious people passed quickly by on the other side.

Jonah's own private faith, whatever may be left of it, is serving no public good. This is never how God has intended it, even as far back as the time he first started calling people to place their faith in him. All the way back to Abraham, the one through whom God launched his mission to save the world, the Lord made clear that he would bless Abraham and his people *so that they would in turn be a blessing to the whole world.*<sup>7</sup> Our faith cannot only be private, but it must drive us out after Jesus into this world to love and serve those who are at the end of their rope, especially those who realize it, because they are the ones most open to receiving what it is we have to offer them. Jesus loves and values all people, enough to die for them, because all people are made in the very image of God, which means even the most wicked among us has intrinsic worth and is deserving of being shown dignity and compassion. If we love Jesus, how can we not love what Jesus loves?

During my time in Kenya this last month as a part of the Angaza Torchbearers Bible School, we didn't only take time to gather and study God's Word together. We did that, of course. But we also took time to go out into the world and put what we were learning as disciples into practice. Twice a week teams of us went out to various ministry sites in and around Embu, the city in Northern Kenya where our school was located. One of the groups served in a ministry called Embu Rescue Center. For the last 20 years a faithful team of servants, some Christians and some not, prepare a giant pot of beans every day at lunch to feed a large group of street children who come from the neighboring slums of Embu. Most of these kids sleep amongst rubbish, and this is the only meal they receive each day. Many of these children are addicted to sniffing glue or jet fuel, the only escape they have found from the hunger and desperation of their lives. Two afternoons a week, some of our team joined this ministry, learned the names and stories of some of these young kids, and tried to share with them the love of Jesus.

One of our staff, a young British guy named Felix, led the team of students which served at Embu Rescue Mission. Felix has a remarkable story of redemption. He was a street kid himself at one point, homeless and addicted on the streets of London. To hear him tell his story, he shouldn't be alive today. But by the grace of God, he is alive, and not just alive in his body, but full of a spirit brimming with the vibrant life of Christ. Felix's heart was so broken by the plight of these desperate young boys that I believe he will give himself in the days to come to doing whatever he can to see their situation improved. I just received a message from him this past week that he has convinced a few others to jump out of a plane – parachute attached, thankfully! – to raise funds for this ministry. Some of us here are running half-marathons to help feed the hungry, Felix and his mates back in England are jumping out of planes for the same cause.

I came home from Kenya so inspired by faithful disciples like Felix and many others I met there, ordinary followers of Jesus through whom Jesus is doing extraordinary things. The need in Kenya is absolutely overwhelming, just like the need here in America, though the nature of the needs is different. It's true, many desperate people, both here and there, are in need as a result of their own poor choices. Their suffering is self-inflicted. Others, like the sailors in Jonah's boat, are suffering the consequences of somebody else's sin. I have been re-inspired by those like Felix who are not willing to hide and go to sleep, but are instead willing to venture into the storm to see

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<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 12:1-3

how God might use them to bring hope to desperate people regardless of the causes of their desperation.

In our American context, I do realize that the challenge we face is different than it was in Jonah's context. In some ways, Jonah had it easy. These sailors, though pagans, are at least pious and peaceful men. They are open to the possibility that Jonah's God may have something to offer, and actually ask him what he has to offer. As you'll see later in the story, they are so open to Jonah's God that when they see the Lord act they are more than ready to repent and turn to him. Though pagans, they are actually far more admirable than the man of faith asleep amongst the cargo. This is, however, not generally what we encounter in our part of the world at our time in history. Lots of people around us are actually very glad if Christians keep their faith to themselves. An increasing number of desperate people around us actually flat-out refuse to ever resort to prayer, resolving instead to try to work things out on their own, or learn to find some way to numb the desperation.

This doesn't mean that we are excused from going out. Our approach must certainly be different than it was for Jonah, and even different than it has been for other Christians at other times and places who were much more well-received when they came with a message of hope. We may have to lead with acts of love before we earn the right to speak our message of love. We certainly have to lead with prayer, waiting on God to show us who has become desperate enough to seek a higher power. But we must also be willing to go boldly and face ridicule if it comes. Jesus faced his share of scorn, so should those who follow after him expect to be exempt from the same? I think not.

Let me say this. It's something I have said many times before. I am grateful to be a part of a congregation like Faith which is full of people I believe have had their hearts broken by the things in this world which break the heart of God himself. Many of you, I know, are far from asleep below deck. Instead you are committed to going out to find ways to share the love of Christ in word and deed with those who are at the end of their rope. As I was humbled by my friend Felix, I have been humbled by many of you.

With that in mind, it would seem irresponsible if I failed to mention that I believe that Christ has now put before us what might be a golden opportunity for many of us here at Faith to come alongside people who are desperate. This opportunity I told you about earlier at Bethany Presbyterian Church, was not an opportunity we went looking for. That's important for you to know. Instead, it came out of the blue, much like Jonah's call

came out of the blue. But ever since the idea came to us, things continue to happen that seem far more providential than coincidental, each seeming to be confirmation that in addition to all the other ways we are individually and collectively serving, this is also something the Lord is calling Faith Church to do at this time. To mention just one confirmation, when we chose this date to announce to you this project, we didn't even consider the already-determined portion of Jonah's story which was to be preached today, this portion about not falling asleep to the desperation around us in the world. To me that seems to be too convenient to be coincidental.

I know that this is only one potential application to this message, and that the Lord is likely asking us to respond in as many other ways as there people here today. Whatever our eventual response, my prayer is that we will continue to be willing to have the captain's question to Jonah either shake us awake to the needs of the world around us, or at least keep those of us who are awake from going to sleep. The saving faith we have been given through the grace of God in Jesus Christ cannot be merely a private faith, but must be extended for a public good, however the Lord may choose to use it.

Amen.

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## **The Next Step**

### ***A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application***

1. Read Jonah 1:1-6 again. What stands out to you, especially from what happens in verses 5-6?
2. These sailors are at the end of their rope. In the past, how have you responded when you have come to the end of your rope?
3. What do we learn about the sailors here from their response to the threat they were facing? In contrast, what do we learn about Jonah?
4. Consider Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:25-37. How does it speak to this part of the story of Jonah?
5. Does the world have the right to criticize the church these days for how we may be asleep while others around us are "drowning"?

6. It's been said that sometimes the church has a private faith that is no public good. If that's true, what is it that leads the church to be so self-consumed and disengaged?
7. Jeff shared some specific examples of how followers of Jesus are being called to share the love of Christ with people at the end of their rope. Though the needs around us certainly are overwhelming, and we can't address them all, where or who do you sense that Jesus is calling you to love and serve?
8. What message have you heard from Jesus here? What response do you believe is expected?

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



*Why do people who know how much Jesus loves the world sometimes choose not to love the world?*