

Jonah: A Love Story Jonah 1,2,3 (selected verses); John 3:16 1/9/22

Most people are familiar with the biblical story of Jonah, the indigestible Old Testament prophet who was swallowed by a fish. In fact, most of the interest in the story centers around that fish! But I'd like to make the case that the book of Jonah isn't just a fish story; It's really a love story! You'll see what I mean! Let's start in Jonah chapter 1.

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.” 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)

God speaks to Jonah, giving him a clear mission to go and preach to Nineveh which was located near Mosul in present-day Iraq. But, Jonah heads in the opposite direction to get as far away from Nineveh as he can! Why does he do that? Well, Nineveh would soon become the capital of the Assyrian empire, an empire that was known for its cruelty and violence, and it already threatened Israel's northern border. Other biblical writers called it a “city of blood” known for its “endless cruelty.” In a few years it would conquer Israel and deport its 10 tribes, who would never be heard from again! Jonah, a good Jewish boy, may have been afraid of Nineveh. He

may also have thought such a mission was futile. But he wanted nothing to do with Nineveh. So he ran. Here's what happened next. 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 mariners 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.*

(Jonah 1:4-10)

The plot thickens. Jonah can run from God, but God isn't finished with him yet. And unlike the pagan gods of the sailors who are powerless

against the elements, Jonah's God has power over all creation and uses that power to accomplish his will. (You might want to keep that in mind next time you're tempted to run away from a difficult task God is calling you to do!) God is not easily thwarted. Anyway, in those days, everyone believed that calamities were a result of someone displeasing a god. In this case, the sailors discovered that Jonah's God was displeased, putting them all in peril. What would they do?

¹¹Then 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. ¹²He 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." ¹³Nevertheless 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. ¹⁴Then 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." ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. (Jonah 1:11-16)

Unlike Jonah, the pagan sailors show amazing restraint and moral character! They are reluctant to throw Jonah overboard, even to save their

own skins, but eventually, begging for God's mercy, they toss Jonah into the sea. And the sea is calmed. The sailors offer God sacrifices and vows. God has used the disobedience of Jonah to bring about some good. God has a way of doing that, doesn't he?

And now for the fish! ¹⁷*But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* (Jonah 1:17) God still has a plan for Jonah and so he miraculously saves him from drowning in the ocean. Chapter 2 of the book consists mostly of a song of thanksgiving that Jonah sings, thanking God for saving him. We'll skip over that this morning, but you might enjoy reading it. The last verse of chapter 2 reads, (SLIDE #5) *Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.* (Jonah 2:10) It spewed him out! So Jonah was saved.

Let's continue the story. *The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,* ²*“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”* ³*So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across.* ⁴*Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” (Jonah 3:1-9)

Well, that’s unexpected! Once again, God approaches Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeys- not surprising after his previous experience of disobeying God! He delivers God’s message, “*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*” Not a very inviting, hopeful message, is it? And then the unthinkable happens. The people of Nineveh believe him and repent from their sins, symbolized by fasting and wearing sackcloth. The king gets in on the act and orders an even more stringent fast, including the animals! (What are they repenting from, you have to wonder!) And he orders a moral conversion- “*all shall turn from*

their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands,” he says. And, maybe, just maybe, God will spare us.

That is a truly remarkable response. I've been preaching now for about 30 years, and I've certainly never seen anything like it! And I think my sermons are better-crafted than Jonah's was! It's all about God being at work, isn't it? So, what happened next? ¹⁰*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.* (Jonah 3:10)

Remember at the beginning of the story, I said that the book of Jonah was really a love story? Well, here it is. God loves the Assyrian Ninevites in spite of their horrific, violent, aggressive actions. That's right. Jonah couldn't understand that, for he hated the Assyrians, as did most everyone else in Israel. They were their enemies, after all, and they didn't even acknowledge the Lord. But the point of the story is that God loved them anyway, as awful as they were, and God desired to show his mercy to them! A love story! But what does all of this mean to us?

First, it means that no people are excluded from God's love. Therefore, we can't decide to exclude anyone from our love, either. We can't decide to exclude Republicans or Democrats or Antifa or ult-right

groups from our love and care. Or, black or brown people or Asians.

Some people in our nation and even in our community have gotten the idea that it's acceptable to not care about people who are different from them.

One of our members, an Asian-American grandmother, was yelled at in a grocery store last year because of her race. That breaks my heart, and it breaks God's heart! No one is excluded from God's love, because each and every one of us is made in God's image and has value. And because of that, we can't exclude anyone from our responsibility to love.

You may ask: Why should we be concerned with Haitians reeling from natural disasters, gang violence, and political upheaval? With Chinese and North Korean Christians groaning under heavy loads of oppression? With immigrants fleeing from Africa and Asia to Europe, and fleeing from Central America to this country? Or, with desperate people in war-torn Yemen? The answer is clear: "For God so loved the world."

And not only must we include all people in our love, but we are called to reach out in love to all people. That's why we're participating in the effort to resettle Afghan refugee families in our community. Because God loves them, and we should, too! And that's why Sean Walker, who we heard from earlier in the service, has given many years of his life to bring the Good News of God's love to people who have not yet been reached with the gospel. Because God loves them. According to John 3:16, God loves

the whole world! And Jesus commissioned us to tell others around the world that good news. As Jonah reminds us- It's a love story!