

Read Jonah 2:1-10

Well now, isn't that a pleasant visual just before lunch?! Everybody knows about Jonah and the Big Fish most commonly referred to as a Whale. People who have never cracked open a Bible in their lifetime know the story. It's a part of our cultural folklore. Jonah and the whale made it into the great American novel Moby Dick. In this story, Father Mapple is a former whaler who became a preacher in the Whaleman's Chapel. In part of his sermon he leads in this whaling hymn: “The ribs and terrors in the whale arched over me a dismal gloom, while all God's sun-lit waves rolled by, and lift me deepening down to doom. In black distress, I called my God, when I could scarce believe him mine, He bowed His ear to my complaints, no more the whale did me confine. With speed he flew to my relief as on a radiant dolphin borne; awful, yet bright, as lightening shone the face of my deliverer God.”

Jonah is in the story of Pinocchio. Did your parents ever tell you your nose would grow if you told a lie? My mother freaked me out when I was young. I would stand in front of the mirror and feel my nose and then look sideways convinced it grew a foot just for lying about stealing a cookie! Pinocchio and his father Gippetto find themselves trapped inside the belly of a large whale. Pinocchio remembers the story of Jonah and uses that as a way to escape the whale by causing it to sneeze them out onto land. Jesus speaks of Jonah in the gospels in that Jonah was a sign of his resurrection.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a big fish story is read in synagogues. As worshipers fast, confess their sins, and reflect on the words of Moses and Isaiah, they listen once again to the account of a catch and release. Only this catch and release is the Whale catching and releasing a man, Jonah. Of all the readings that could have been chosen for this high holy day of the year, someone started the tradition of reading Jonah. But why? Why read about the reluctant prophet who ran from God, was caught by a whale, and then was miraculously released to complete a dangerous mission in what is now the nation of Iraq? Rabbis have different explanations for reading Jonah on the Day of Atonement. One teacher says the story of Jonah is more about repentance than it is about the fish. Some explain that Jonah is evidence that no one can escape the presence of God, even while trying to run from the Almighty. Others believe Jonah is read on Yom Kippur with the hope that listeners will learn from Jonah's mistakes. One rabbi says, “God cares for everyone. Jonah only cares about himself. God wins.” I think all these rabbis hit the nail right on the head without hitting their thumb.

So here's a question to ponder: What is God willing to do to bring us back to Himself? Maybe you left God because you carelessly drifted from Him or you disobeyed Him.

Regardless, what is God willing to do now? Those that desire to see God move in the church must grasp this truth: God is willing to do whatever it takes to bring us back to Him. And as we look closer at Jonah we begin to see ourselves. If your spiritual fire has gone out or you have chosen a life of rebellion, then you should know God has many ways to get our attention. Hopefully it won't involve being in the belly of a big fish again, but I wouldn't put it past him!

So, before I go into the belly of the fish, let's backtrack for a moment to the first part of Jonah when God gives him three commands: Arise! Go! Cry out! It's not an "only if you want to Jonah". It's an "**I COMMAND YOU!**" God tells Jonah to go one direction, to engage in cross-cultural ministry, and Jonah goes completely in the opposite direction. Now it may be easy for us to point a finger at Jonah and say, "dude, you're blowing it for not obeying God." But who are these Assyrians? A cruel, ruthless, and powerful people. They were a major threat to Jonah's country at this time. And less than 50 years after the time of Jonah, this same Assyria will come and destroy the Kingdom of Israel. Most of us will live well past 50, and in the Old Testament, some lived an exceptionally long time. So, that means that a lot of the people of Israel that had seen the goodness take place and the repentance of the people in Assyria also saw their own nation destroyed by them. That would be hard to swallow, wouldn't it?

So think about this: What group of people do you dislike the most? What people frighten you, annoy you? An unpleasant or even scary task? An unresolved situation? An internal change or bad habit you need to face? What people would you least like to go stay with for several weeks? You know, like that annoying loved one (bless their heart), that just won't shut up? Kind of like a gnat in your ear. Oh, and they always bring the yippin' little dog that will bark at its own shadow! Well, they are YOUR Ninevites.

Facing our Ninevahs helps us find that spiritual treasure to mature us to new places. It's also important to think about not only what our Ninevah is, but also what our Tarshish is. In other words, where do you go to escape from responsibilities? What's our Tarshish? Numbing tactics like shopping, eating, drinking? For me, I'll take reruns of "Little House on the Prairie" over paying bills any day. We prefer Tarshish over Ninevah 10 times out of 10. Those exotic, mysterious, remote places. The romantic place where we don't have to face real life and face our real selves.

So when God said, "Jonah, get up and go at once to Ninevah," Jonah was like "Ninevah? Funny God. Let me give you a foreign relations brush up. Ninevah is the capital of Assyria, our arch-enemy. They're the evil empire. It would be foolish to even talk to them. Plus, they're mean and smell weird. Not gonna happen. Can't God see just how bad these people are and that they just aren't worth my time and effort." Now this is a smart dude. You think he would have been smart enough to realize that if God spoke directly to him, he would know that he also can't run and hide from Him. I mean, he's a prophet. Surely he knows about "In the beginning" and how Adam and Eve

couldn't hide from God either. But he was only thinking about himself. Now Jonah loves his country. He doesn't prophesy doom, but prosperity. In his prophecy he assures his king that the Northern Kingdom's borders will increase, and they will prosper. Jonah is the perfect candidate to demonstrate that our Sovereign God's concerns go way beyond the borders of Israel. God loves everyone and desires to show mercy, not to just Israel, but also to their enemies.

Jonah's been dubbed the reluctant prophet and could have even been called the rebellious prophet. Ironically though, he was the most effective of all the prophets with the whole city repenting! But we need to keep it real. Jonah was a real sour puss. He loves to pout and complain. He's going to do whatever it takes to get away from God. He wasn't ignoring or arguing with God. Jonah was going the complete opposite direction. Willful, deliberate, flagrant, rebellion against God. Jonah expects God to do things on Jonah's terms. Oh, Jonah IS generous, but with judgment. He is stingy on grace. But the great news is that God still accomplished His purposes through Jonah, and through us, and despite us! God's mercy prevails. So Jonah heads to Joppa and hops on a ship to "flee" from the presence of the Lord.

Has God asked something of you, and you went in the opposite direction? It happened to me in 2010. I mean I didn't actually hear God's voice or have a great vision; however I knew without a doubt what he wanted of me. I had been in Colorado for some time. I was the only one working three jobs, wearing myself out. My marriage had failed, and I only stayed on for one reason, my 43 year old horse. Hey, I'm an animal lover, what can I say?! One day on the way home from work the message was clear what I needed to do. Move. I did the "but God, I just paid the place off" thing. Then I was like "Okay, where? OHIO! Who? Me? Say what? Mountains for flat land again?" Well, to make a long story short, I did move. But I did the rebel move to Texas and Idaho. I always shared my favorite verse with people, Jeremiah 29:11 – "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Apparently I briefly let my verse go through one ear and out the other. After three years of it not working out no matter what I did, I finally gave in and moved back to Ohio. And God has blessed me ever since. I was able to spend some good quality time with my Daddy before his death. We have loving church families that welcomed us with open arms. And most of all, the wonderful Christian man that God placed in my life. Of course we miss our son, daughter-in-law and grandson in Texas. But we put our faith and trust in God.

Now Tarshish was so much more glamorous than Ninevah. It was like the holiday destination of the day. Tarshish was on the southern coast of Spain. It was remote and exotic. Excitement and adventure awaited Jonah there. Just as I thought it did me when I rebelled and went to Idaho and Texas. It was a distant paradise, an escape. What happens in Tarshish stays in Tarshish. It's where you get away from it all and Jonah had hoped to do just that when he thought he was fleeing from God's presence.

There is a lot of Jonah in us. We think we can make ourselves disappear from our problems. We want to choose and decide on our own life itinerary. And our feeble attempts must make God chuckle. Well, God hurled up a great wind that threatened to break the ship apart. The mariners tried to lighten their load, but it didn't work. The storm just seemed to get worse. The sailors knew that a calamity fell upon them and they decided it had something to do with Jonah. They knew that Jonah was running away from God and that made them even more afraid. But Jonah said the way to stop the storm was to just throw him overboard and the sea will quiet down, because he knew it was because of him that the storm came. This is the only time Jonah was unselfish in the whole story. Jonah wants God to be merciful to him and to his people, he just doesn't want God to be merciful to others. He fails to see God's heart for ALL nations. God will one day bring those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation to Himself.

God gives us the privilege of being His agents in this great task. He chooses to work through us. Whatever our weaknesses, whatever our failings, God will break down all oppositions and will bring the nations to Himself. But God is just as intent upon bringing his stubborn, bullheaded ambassadors to Himself too. Jonah had no love for the Ninevites, had no desire to see God glorified through the praises of the Ninevites. So Jonah's heart was not united with God's heart.

What about you? Is your heart united with God's? We were not meant to be separate but unified. United in Christ. As we continue building unified churches, are you a reluctant ambassador? If you're not reluctant now, get ready, because at some point in your life you will be! There is no question: Cross-cultural ministry is hard. It is challenging. It is difficult. It is frustrating. Whoever your Ninevites might be, most likely God will put them in your path at some point as He grows our churches.

There is no question that God will lovingly persist in His calling of the lost, and in His empowering and molding of His ambassadors. So are you ready to be the ambassador God intends? Are you ready to love those whom God loves, regardless of the cultural distance? Are you ready to love even those who are your Ninevites? Are you ready for God to stretch you and shape you and mold you into His own perfect image? Are you ready to love your neighbor as yourself, regardless of the dress, or smell, or language, or age of that neighbor – because you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength? Are you ready to say, “Here I am, Lord – send me”?

God will build His church. He is giving up the privilege of playing key roles in that process. As part of New Hope Church, you will play a role. What kind of ambassador will you be? Don't be a reluctant one. Accept your role with eagerness, even as you accept it with fear and trembling. And then watch, as God works through you and in you for your great joy and His great glory. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.