

Go! Sermon Series

God Calls Jonah to go to Nineveh - Jonah 1:1-17, 3:1-5

Oct. 28, 2018

Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

Ah, Jonah! My very first sermon that I ever preached, 21 years ago, was on the book of Jonah. I had just started seminary and my home pastor asked me if I would like to preach one Sunday. I said, “No.” He said, “You know, if you’re going to be a pastor, you might want to rethink that decision.” So in January 1997, I stood in the pulpit of First Christian Church in Jeffersonville, sharing one thing in common with the prophet Jonah – I also wanted to run the other way!

I was also sharing with Jonah the wrestling with my call. The idea that God calls people is fairly common and we see it play out a lot in the Bible. This whole sermon series is based on calls that God makes to people to go and do something in God’s name. But calls don’t have to be laden with special effects like burning bushes or booming voices from mountaintops. Calls can also be quiet nudges or consistent reminders of God’s presence. You know that thing we do each Sunday when the liturgist says something and then you say something? That’s a Call to Worship that’s meant to help us move from our worldly way of thinking that we brought with us into this sacred space to a mindset that is focused on praising and thanking God.

Jonah was also being called from his worldly way of thinking about the Ninevites. The book of Jonah is not your usual book about a prophet. Most prophetic books contain the actual prophecy of the person being called, but the entirety of Jonah’s prophecy is one sentence. “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” Instead, the book is a narrative about the prophet Jonah and how God works through him to address the Ninevites.

So, God calls Jonah, and I love the Message’s version of the call: ““Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.” Ever felt that way about your kids? “Maybe if I hide in the closet with a glass of wine the kids will behave themselves.” Jonah hears God’s call and...runs in the completely opposite direction. It’s like God said, “Go to New York City” and Jonah hopped the first bus to L.A.

What’s the problem with Nineveh? Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, an empire that was a constant threat to the Israelites. They were the merciless and violent enemy. And here was God asking Jonah to go the heart of their territory and tell them they needed to shape up. But Jonah wants nothing to do with that. Being a prophet is hard enough. Being a prophet to your enemies? No thanks.

So Jonah tries to run from God, forgetting that God has a pretty good tracking system. While on the boat, the Lord sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship, and the pagan sailors do everything in their power to keep afloat, including praying to their various gods. Finally, they wake up Jonah, who had fallen asleep, telling him to start praying and bailing, and not necessarily in that order. The sailors discover that Jonah is actually the cause of the storm, and Jonah tells them to throw him overboard so that their lives may be saved. The sailors balk at first, but when they realize that is their only hope, Jonah walks the plank, the sea immediately calms down and all the sailors do what Jonah doesn’t – they worship Jonah’s God. That’s a cool reminder that God can work through our obedience and our disobedience, isn’t it? “I’ll show God, I’ll run the other way,” and God’s like, “Yeah, I’m there, too.”

So Jonah goes deep-sea diving and gets a wake-up call. He is swallowed by the fish and spends three days and nights in there, during which he says a prayer of deliverance and rethinks his original plan to disobey God's command. The fish spews Jonah onto dry land and God comes to Jonah and says, "OK, let's try that again." Jonah goes to Nineveh, makes his prophecy, and lo and behold, the whole city of Nineveh believed in God and repented. Yay, new church members! That's good, right?

Not for Jonah. For him, something's fishy. After Nineveh repents, he throws a world-class temper tantrum, raging at God because God was too merciful on them. Now we're getting at why Jonah ran away. He wasn't insecure. He wasn't afraid. He knew that God was true to God's word, he knew that God was a God of mercy and forgiveness, and Jonah didn't believe the Ninevites were worthy of receiving God's grace. How ironic, isn't it, that Jonah wasn't worried God was going to be too hard, but that God was going to be too soft!

Why was Jonah so upset? Surely, he believed that everyone was a child of God and deserved God's grace, because that's what we believe, isn't it? Isn't it? Do we believe that's true of everyone? Puppy kickers? Parking space stealers? Child molesters? People who swindle the elderly? I have yet to meet a person, no matter how loving and kind and compassionate, whose grace wasn't conditional. And in this current political climate, that line-drawing is exacerbated. "I love everyone – to this point." Are we really that different from Jonah? It's not a question of IF we have our Ninevites; it's a question of who they are.

I try not to watch a lot of TV during election time, but when the World Series is on, I reluctantly make an exception. Last night, a negative ad came on against a candidate, and the tag line at the end was, "This person is not one of us. This person is one of them." And to be fair, that message is being sent from candidates of both major parties. We don't have to go to Assyria to find our Ninevites. They are living among us, and people will go so far as to mail bombs or shoot up grocery stores or kill innocent Jews to get rid of them. Could there be a correlation between politicians that talk about "us vs. them" and the violence we see all around us?

And yet, God says to Jonah, "Go to Nineveh." Go to the enemy and speak grace. That may still bother us. We may think that the prodigal son doesn't deserve a welcome-home party or the thief on the cross doesn't deserve a place in heaven or the death-row inmate doesn't deserve a last-minute conversion. And when those things do happen, because we worship a God who welcomes those kinds of things, we may want to respond like Jonah and a lot of older siblings we know: "That's not fair!" We talk about love and grace in worship, and yet do you experience times when you feel like God is too soft? It's hard to do our faithful best and show up every Sunday and give some of our money to God when God doesn't share our prejudices. Following God can be hard, especially when God is too soft on people who don't deserve it. We want God to be on our side.

Here's the fundamental difference between Jonah's view of the Ninevites and God's view of the Ninevites. For Jonah, these people who live in a far-away land are not individuals or spiritual brothers and sisters or even human beings. They are the capital-T "Them." And as long as they remain the "Them," it's easy for Jonah to hate them and wish destruction upon them. The Ninevites are not God-fearers; they don't believe what Jonah believes; they don't deserve the blessings he's enjoyed. So, when they repent and turn to God, Jonah's whole rationale for hating them is turned on its head because there's no more "Them" to hate.

Unlike Jonah, for God, the Ninevites were never a "Them." While they don't figure prominently in the biblical narrative, we can assume each one of them was loved and valued by God. Why else would God send Jonah to them? But Jonah is so quick to cry "Not fair!" Jonah

wanted the Ninevites destroyed. Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” Sometimes it’s really hard to acknowledge that those who we think are so different from us have a lot more in common with us than we want to admit, and they are no more outside of God’s reach of grace than we are.

But that’s a hard pill to swallow and it makes us want to run away. Sometimes it’s easier to stay asleep in the bottom of the boat than to enter into the storm of conflict to speak a word of grace. It’s more comfortable down there. No one is making me rethink my views or interact with people I don’t like. I know a lot of people who use their voice to complain about how bad the storm is “out there,” but they won’t get out of the bottom of the boat to do something about it. The only way this world is going to change is if we change it, with the help of God. And that only happens if we speak grace and peace to the storms around us, that only happens if we stop using the divisive language of “us” and “them.” We start the healing process with our enemies when we acknowledge that God doesn’t take sides.

This past weekend I was at my high school reunion in the Washington, D.C. area. There were a lot of people I was looking forward to seeing, but Mike was not necessarily one of them. Mike and I hung around a bit in high school and reconnected much later on Facebook. As it turns out, in between our times of connection, Mike had become one of “them,” and he wasn’t afraid of showing it. He posted things I disagreed with and commenting on my posts that he disagreed with. We got into a few heated exchanges online about issues that were passionate to both of us. I would see his name pop up on my screen and my blood would boil. Not him again.

At the football game last Friday, I was already there when Mike arrived. He started hugging everyone and then got to me. We looked each other in the eye for about three seconds, then threw open our arms and gave each other big bear hugs. We spent a good deal of that night and the next night at the reunion talking, not about the issues we disagreed about, but about our families, our jobs, our mutual concerns for our country, and our respect for each other. Now, I still believe Mike is dead wrong about some things, and he feels the same way about me. But he’s not a “Them” to me. I’m not a “Them” to him.

Before we give into the temptation to label someone else as “Them,” on the other side of the aisle, on the opposing ends of an issue, from a different place, speaking a different language, living a different way than us, we’d do well to remember that we are someone else’s Ninevite, we are someone else’s “Them,” and yet God gave his only son for us. For us! If we are willing to buy into God’s radical inclusion and to see everyone as worthy of God’s grace, it’s amazing how the label of “Them” is no longer useful, and the hate and animosity and resentment that comes with that label dissipates. In fact, I’ve instituted a new rule for myself: I’m not going to disagree with anyone on social media unless I have a personal relationship with them first. Because otherwise, it’s too easy to cultivate hate, and that’s not who we’re called to be.

Jonah didn’t want the Ninevites saved. He wanted them judged because, in his narrow perspective, that’s what they deserved. Thank God – and I mean thank God! – we don’t get what we deserve. Instead, we are recipients of God’s grace, called to take what we receive and share it with others in God’s name. One more quote from Abe Lincoln, who knew a thing or two about healing divisions: “My concern is not whether God is on our side. My great concern is to be on God’s side.”