

Call Waiting1/4 series on *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

Jonah 1

05-31-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

This morning we are starting a new worship series entitled *Jonah: the Reluctant Prophet*. Jonah is a familiar, Old Testament figure. Even people outside the church know the story about Jonah and the whale; although even this factoid isn't exactly accurate. The Bible talks about "a big fish" rather than a sea-going mammal. But to borrow an old line from Paul Harvey, do you know "the rest of the story?" Most of what we "know" about Jonah comes from children's Bible stories and cartoon videos.

During the next weeks, we will go beyond the "G Rated" version of Jonah. In the process, we will discover that the story is much more than a fish tale—it has spiritual application for each of our lives.

Jonah only has four chapters and can be read in one sitting. This week I read three different versions of the book in less than 30 minutes. So I encourage you to read the story in the days to come. Today we begin with the beginning: Jonah 1:1-3

Scripture: Jonah 1: 1-3**I. Jonah**

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai . . ."

Jonah is a relatively obscure book of the Old Testament. Jonah is one of the so called "Twelve Minor Prophets" of Hebrew Scripture. The dozen books are minor not in importance but in length.

In fact, Jonah can be difficult to even find. Its four short chapters are squeezed between Obadiah and Micah. Jonah is also peculiar because the book focuses upon the adventures of the prophet rather than the message he proclaims.

However, there are clear themes that run through the pages of Jonah, including: the Lord's call, human stubbornness, divine persistence, repentance, change, bias, prejudice, judgment, mercy, and most of all, God's grace.

We don't know much about **Jonah** as a person. According to 2 Kings 14: 25, he was an advisor to King Jeroboam during Israel's expansion of the northern kingdom in the 8th century BC. In Hebrew, Jonah's name literally means "Dove." The dove was one of the symbols for the nation of Israel. Perhaps Jonah embodied Israel's attitudes, actions, stubbornness, and sinfulness.

II. Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria located in ancient Mesopotamia on the upper Tigris River. In case your Old Testament geography is rusty, Assyria encompassed parts of modern day Iraq. During Jonah's time, the Assyrians ranked among Israel's most hated enemies. The two nations fought a series of battles that seesawed between victory

and defeat. A few decades after the story of Jonah, Assyria eventually conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722-721 BC.

In addition to the ongoing military conflict, the Assyrians were also Gentiles or non-Jews. The Israelites saw themselves as God's chosen people and believed that all Gentiles were beyond the pale of the Lord's love and favor. Their hatred of Assyria combined patriotism with religion—always a potent mixture.

No doubt Jonah agreed with God's judgment that the people of Nineveh were evil. In fact, the prophet would have applauded the divine destruction of the entire nation. However, God's grace surprisingly extended even to these pagan people. The Lord called Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites so that they might be saved.

Jonah was less than thrilled with his commission. In fact, his response to God was anything but a G-Rated cartoon. Nineveh was east and a bit north of Israel. The reluctant prophet headed due west "*away from the presence of the Lord.*" He traveled to the port city of Joppa and set sail for the Tarshish. His intended destination was located on the far shores of Spain—the most distant place he could sail in the known world of his time.

When the ship left port, Jonah gave a sign of relief. He had escaped God's burdensome call upon his life. Despite the roughening waters, the prophet went below deck to take a long nap. However, God's call is not so easily avoided. Jonah learned the same lesson we learn time and again—you cannot run away from the Lord's presence.

A violent storm arose upon the Mediterranean Sea, and the ship was in danger of capsizing. The crew feared for their lives and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the vessel. The captain found Jonah below deck fast asleep and shook him awake. He cried out, "*What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps he will spare us a thought so that we do not perish!*"

So Jonah joined the sailors on the treacherous deck. They cast lots to determine the cause of the storm, and the lot supernaturally fell on Jonah. When the prophet confessed that he was fleeing God's call, the sailors panicked. They asked Jonah, "*What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?*"

The answer was obvious. What Jonah NEEDED to do was quit running away from the Lord's presence and answer the divine call. However, the reluctant prophet was mule-stubborn to the point of preferring death over obedience. He was so dead-set against God's will that he said, "*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!*"

To give the sailors credit, they resisted Jonah's initial suggestion. Instead, they attempted to row to shore; but the storm grew worse and worse. Finally, they cried to God for forgiveness and threw Jonah into the wild waves. The storm immediately ceased and the waters calmed. In ironic contrast to Jonah's willful defiance, the PAGAN sailors offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving for God's deliverance.

Meanwhile, Jonah floated down into the depths. Although he was about to drown, you cannot help but think that he had a smug smile on his face. He had successfully escaped God's call upon his life. Or so he thought.

Then the Lord appointed a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and the prophet was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. We'll hear more about this part of the

story next week in a sermon entitled “*Prayers from the Belly of the Fish.*” But for now suffice it to say that seldom have God’s judgment and mercy been so artfully combined. On the one hand, the Lord delivered his disobedient servant from drowning. On the other hand, Jonah became indigestible fish food for the next 72 hours.

III. God’s Call

In the book of Jonah, the Lord used a variety of **improbable agents** to accomplish the divine will. In the book’s four short chapters, God employed an unlikely cast, including heathen sailors, a big fish, a fast-growing castor oil bush, a worm, the hot sun, and a sultry east wind. The unlikeliest character was Jonah himself. God called the most reluctant of prophets to preach repentance to a doomed city of his mortal enemies.

One could make a strong case that this central theme runs not only through Jonah but also the entire Bible. In both the Old and New Testament, the Lord habitually calls the most unlikely people to accomplish his purpose and plans.

Today is **Pentecost** Sunday in the church calendar. After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples during a forty day period before ascending back into heaven. He told the disciples to wait for the God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. So they gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem to prayerfully wait.

During the dawn of the Jewish festival of Pentecost ten days later, God fulfilled Christ’s promise. The Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered disciples. Tongues like fire touched their heads. They burst out of the room to proclaim the gospel to the waiting crowds. And the fire spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. And their words still echo in our ears today.

The original disciples were not an overly impressive lot: peasant fishermen, a dishonest tax collector, a violent revolutionary, and a traitor. However, God formed these men and women into the New Testament church. They turned the world upside down so that it was right side up. In one generation, they spread the gospel to all the known world. We are their spiritual descendants today.

When I read the Biblical stories, I often shake my head and wonder, “What WAS God thinking? SURELY he could have found someone more qualified!” Then I look in the mirror and find my opinion confirmed. Yet here is the wonderful, frightening, exciting, and overwhelming truth: God’s work did not end in Old or New Testament times. The Holy Spirit still calls God’s people to ministry and mission. If it happened then and there, it can happen here and now. We are the body of Christ, and the Lord sends us into the world to accomplish his purpose.

How is God’s call sounding in your ear today? What changes does he call forth in your life? What ministries cry for your support? What missions will be left undone unless you participate? Who are “those people” that you refuse to minister to? The question is not if God continues to call; the question is how we will answer God’s call.

IV. Answering God’s Call

During the past two decades, we have witnessed a **telecommunications** revolution. Twenty years ago I had never heard of a cell phone. Fifteen years ago the church I served owned a “bag phone” for emergency use. Ten years ago my wife and I owned cell phones with 30 shared minutes each month. Today everyone seems to have cell phones with voice capability, text messaging, Internet access, calculators, calendars, task lists, GPS, and countless additional applications. The church’s contemporary call to worship has become, “*With every cell phone muted and every PDA on vibrate!*”

Using a **cell phone analogy**, how do we respond when God calls us?!?

Caller ID

Caller ID is one of the great inventions of the modern world. One glance at the screen reveals who is calling. Then one can choose how to respond. If Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jonah, Peter, James, John, and Paul had realized the nature of God’s call, then they might have thought twice before answering.

Sometimes God’s call is quite dramatic and recognizable. Other times it comes as a still, small voice in our hearts. Or the divine summons is heart at the point where our passion intersects with the world’s needs. Believe it or not, it can happen during the announcements before worship when volunteers are needed. In the lyrics of a song, the silence of prayer, the words of a sermon, an altar invitation.

Ignore

Most phones give the recipient the option to ignore the call. One press of a button sends the call into telecommunications limbo. This is a useful feature when you don’t want to talk to a caller. How often do you suppose we simply ignore God’s call on our lives? We OUGHT to act. Someone SHOULD do something. But not us.

Hold or Call Waiting

Two other features used in conjunction with one another are hold and call waiting. The first caller is put on hold in order to talk to a second party. Except for cases of emergency, this practice is extremely rude. What we are saying to the first person is to hold on because the other call might be more interesting! If not, we’ll get back to them. We have so many different commitments that compete for our time, energy, and resources. Where does God rank as a priority in our lives?

Call Forwarding

Another feature is call forwarding in which a call can be sent to another number. People LOVE to use this in church life. When we are looking for volunteers, folk will quickly say, “No, I can’t do that but I know just the person who could!” We move the heat off of us and onto someone else.

Voice Mail

Unanswered calls are shunted into voice mail. Just as an aside—everyone in our modern culture KNOWS how to leave a message. It is not necessary to have a two minute greeting with detailed instructions. I know one person who simply says, “On the tone, you’re on your own!”

If you want to ignore God's call on your life, then one of the best ways is to simply wait. You have the comfort of knowing that you are not saying "No" to the Lord God Almighty, but you also know that with time the urgency of the call will fade.

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Answer

Of course, there is a final possibility: answering God's call. Perhaps we answer with hesitation and fear, not knowing what might follow. But we answer nonetheless. We respond to God's call because we know that God either calls the equipped or equips the called. Either way we go forth with the faith that we do not go alone. The Holy Spirit accompanies us. With a people who are willing to go where sent and do what is necessary, the Lord can accomplish miracles in our midst.

Conclusion

Jonah was written about 2,800 years ago; however, its message is as relevant as the morning paper. God continues to work in, through, and despite his people. No matter how hard and far we go, we can never outrun the Lord's presence. The divine call is heard all about us. And we choose how to respond.

Directed Prayer Time

"The word of the Lord came to"