

The Journey of Jonah
and God's Pursuit of our Hearts
#1 – "The Unwelcome Word"

Psalm 139: 7-12

Jonah 1: 1-3

Mark 1: 14-18

Before it is about fish stories, mass conversions and short-lived shade plants, the Book of Jonah is a bold affirmation of God's holy, relentless pursuit of our hearts and his desire to save and grace his whole creation. This Old Testament story, in a quite amazing way, foreshadows the revelation of the gospel of Christ and God's kingdom purpose to redeem, reconcile and renew. Indeed, one of the tragedies of how we often tend to treat scripture is that we spend more effort and argument over whether the book is history or parable, over whether and how a man could really be swallowed by a fish, or how big Nineveh really was or how hungry was that plant-destroying worm, rather than paying attention to what the Word of God wants to say to, command from and accomplish through unwilling prophets and yet summoned people such as us.

The book of Jonah is, in truth, a bit of a miracle story. When I say miracle story, I am not referring to any of the miraculous elements of the story *per se*; rather, the miracle is that Jonah ever made it into the canon of the Old Testament, let alone as part of the prophetic collection. It simply doesn't fit.

The book is completely inconsistent with the form of prophetic literature. First of all, the norm for prophetic literature is a collection of pronouncements voiced into the collective spiritual life and national experience of the people of God. Jonah, however, is essentially a narrative about the experience of one individual. Secondly, we can find many examples of pious moralistic teaching stories, similar to the superficial Jonah

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narrative, within the vast collection of rabbinic literature known as the Haggadah – a sort of ancient equivalent to *Chicken Soup for the Soul* – yet none of those stories was afforded the honour and respect of being part of the canon of scripture.

Thirdly, while the narrative of Jonah does have parallel with the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, those accounts were recorded in the first book of Kings, part of the historical books of the Old Testament. Further, the message God gave Jonah to proclaim was specifically directed to the people of Nineveh, whereas the rest of the prophetic books were directed solely to Judah or to Israel. While there might be proclamations about the fate of other nations, the word was not actually directed to them – only Jonah is physically sent to a foreign land to give God's word to the declared enemies of his covenant people.

More to the point, the deeper themes of the book of Jonah are such a profound challenge to Israel's traditional theological self-absorption. To a people convinced of God's exclusive love for them, and in contrast even to the message of such prophets as Haggai and Zechariah who promised the shattering of pagan empires as a condition for Israel's restoration, this story of the Lord's concern, patience and compassion for those same foreign enemies would have been as inconceivable and outrageous to the Jewish mind in its day as was Jesus' teaching about God's inclusiveness of the Gentiles was to the Pharisees and Jewish leaders in his day.

Yet despite all that, Jonah made it into the collection of scripture and within the prophetic books – as one writer put it, evidencing the unquestioned work of the Holy Spirit to ensure its inclusion because of its challenging reminder to God's people of their highest calling to be the means by which all peoples and all nations would receive blessing. The Holy Spirit ensured the inclusion of this book in the Old Testament with its powerful

hinting of the gospel hope that the messiah would bring for all the earth, fulfilled in and by Jesus Christ.

So over the coming weeks I invite you to share with me in exploring the journey of Jonah and God's pursuit of our hearts, which begins with the account of Jonah receiving a most unwelcome word!

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, "Go to the city of Nineveh, and preach against it." But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

Whatever else we may discover from within the story of Jonah, we begin with this key element. God is God, and his word sounds with power and purpose. The book of Jonah reveals in the most dramatic way that, to paraphrase another prophet, Isaiah, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways. God is free to bless those whom he chooses to bless and save those whom he chooses to save, and to confound us with the mystery and majesty of his grace that is so much bigger and more holy than our puny hearts can grasp. But that God would choose to be gracious toward Nineveh was simply more than our unwilling prophet could stomach.

Because grace is what the story is all about, right from the moment that the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Jonah admits his unhappiness with God in chapter 4, where, after the whole city of Nineveh repents and turns their hearts to God, he complains to God, "is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

You see, the whole prophetic tradition was rooted in this understanding that God sent his word into the centre of the life of his people so that they would recognize their sin, repent and reorient their life back into agreement with God's purpose and law. Prophets were always commissioned and sent so that a people who were hell-bent for destruction could instead be

redeemed, reconciled to the Lord and find blessing. So when the word of the Lord came to Jonah calling him to go and preach against Nineveh, it meant only one thing: God wanted to spare, and bless, Israel's most hated enemy.

Now we really need to understand the outrageousness of the situation. This is way more difficult a commission than that given to any other prophet. Certainly, being a prophet was never an easy task. Isaiah was sent to his very own nation, yet a people who, God said, because of their *calloused hearts and dull ears,...* they would be ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving (Isaiah 6:9-10). That is, they would outwardly listen but refuse to hear the truth in their hearts, and, would see the evidence of God's outworking of his purpose in their history but never really let the reality of their self-caused suffering sink into their consciousness. When the Book of Hebrews, in chapter 11, lists the suffering and martyrdom of the saints of the Old Testament, it says some were sawn in half – tradition suggests that is how Isaiah met his end, murdered by king Manasseh. Jeremiah was ridiculed, beaten, put in the public stocks and thrown down a well because his words were so hated. Amos, a simple shepherd from Tekoa in the southern nation of Judah was sent as unwelcome prophet to the northern nation of Israel, where he was threatened and rebuffed by the civil and religious leaders alike.

All of that was still nothing to Jonah's assignment. It would be equivalent to an American being sent to preach to all the assembled terrorists of the Taliban or Al Qaeda – and not any American preacher, but a rabid, anti-Islam preacher at that. Remember, a common attitude for the Jews was that the Gentiles and heathen of the world were regarded as being of no greater value than as kindling wood for the fires of hell. They were not just disregarded, they were despised. And none were hated, feared and reviled more than the powerful nation of Assyria, centered in the capital of Nineveh. Yet it is to Nineveh

that the word of the Lord directs Jonah to go. And it is in the exact opposite direction that Jonah flees.

The first reality that this book of Jonah affirms is that the word of the Lord is powerful, active, summoning, startling, commanding in ways beyond our normal imagining. Yet very often, we do not welcome God's word at all in our lives, and do everything we can to ignore it, refuse it, disobey it, or flee from it. But as David noted in that amazing psalm of praise, even if he grew wings and flew to the most distant and remote place on the farthest part of the sea, surprise, God would be there waiting for him, with arms stretched wide and with command and intent still waiting. Or for that matter, should our disobedience result in our finding ourselves even in such a pit of hopelessness as in the belly of a big fish – that is, in the depths of the depths of seeming destruction and abandonment, even in such terrible circumstance, God's word and purposeful grace remain active and determined to reach his end. The word of God goes out and does not return with his purpose unfulfilled.

It's been said that like Job, that tragedy-embraced character who wrestles with the unanswerable why of his suffering, Jonah is another classic Everyman in Jewish literature. That is, he not only represents all of Israel in its summons to be light and blessing to the world, he represents every single man, woman and child who are being stalked by this pursuing grace of God. Because it is not a chosen few for whom Christ died; it was for the world which God so loved that his beloved Son endured the cross. God's purpose from all eternity has been to draw us into relationship with himself, and the good news of Jonah is just this – that God has chosen to pursue us so relentlessly. It is not that the inviting and challenging word of God is voiced into our lives once, the offer of grace is made once, and if not accepted, then welcome is forever withdrawn. That is not to say that God's word of mercy and love can be callously despised without consequence. That is not to say that

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God's grace, God himself, can be conveniently ignored like a dusty Bible on a bookcase until such time as we decide we need to activate the spiritual life preserver. As one of my favourite writers (Frederick Buechner) put it, we are free to make fools of ourselves in this life and damned fools of ourselves forever.

But praise be to God that God's graciousness is so much bigger and richer and deeper and stronger – that God's grace is more gracious – than our stupidity and stubbornness, our rebelliousness and sinful resistance to that same grace. Our heavenly Father knows what we need. Our God so intimately beholds the God-shaped hole in our hearts that can be filled with nothing other than himself, and in grace, the Lord never stops haunting and hunting after us to whatever the depths of our wretchedness may be in order to get us at last to hear and heed his word of compassion, claim and command to our hearts. God's word never negates our human freedom to receive and obey him or refuse and deny him; but neither does our human freedom to turn our back on the Lord constrain God in his determined pursuit of us.

And the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. It was an unwelcome word in what the Lord asked of him – to go to Nineveh. Perhaps God's word often finds lack of welcome in our lives, not because of the divine intent to show mercy to those upon whom we would prefer curses to fall, although our lack of forgiveness or humility or compassion may indeed be an issue of our souls with which the Holy Spirit wants to deal. Perhaps God's word to our lives may be unwelcome because that challenging word challenges us to acknowledge sinfulness and pride, or deep inner brokenness and pain and accordingly to repent and confess, to seek and give pardon, to open ourselves for God's healing and transforming touch. It may simply be that God's commanding and claiming word demands an answering response of love and praise we don't want to give right now; or perhaps demands a surrender to a grace we've never fully

believed could be so big and good and invites us to make that step of faith and commitment we have for too long been resisting.

It may also be that God's word has been whispering or shouting at us to yield ourselves into a deeper surrender of discipleship than we would presume or conceive on our own. Maybe God is asking us to increase our tithes and financial giving in a time we would rather give less. Maybe God's outrageous call is to volunteer to teach Sunday school, or risking a conversation with our neighbour about things of faith, or picking up the phone and reaching out to the person from whom we've been distant for too long, or who knows to who else or what else or where else that word would direct us. May it be that the word of the Lord is coming into our lives asking us to commit to love the Lord more today than ever we have allowed ourselves to love and trust and praise him.

Yet however much we might not welcome that Word because of how it may challenge us or request of us, this is far more true. That same word remains the word of the Lord spoken in love, spoken with abundant grace and holy purpose, spoken with eternal desire to win us more deeply to his own heart, spoken with intent to grow and conform us more fully to God's own plan and to the very image of Christ. Thus the word of the Lord that is being spoken into your life remains above all the most welcome word, the most precious word, the most saving and grace-filled word in all the world, and our hope and joy.

Lord speak. Your people are waiting. Let us pray:

God our Father, we are desperate for you. Like ground hard, parched, cracked and lifeless from days and years of drought, our hearts are barren and devoid of joy and promise without you, God. O Jesus Christ, who is the wellspring of our hope, the author and finisher of our faith, the vine, the way, the truth, the life, flood into our hearts your own powerful word of

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grace and promise and peace, we pray. Send your Holy Spirit to refresh and renew us in our brokenness, to speak anew your loving and unconquerable claim upon our souls. Send your Spirit and bring us alive in your power and goodness and love.

Holy God, to say we hunger and thirst for you is such an understatement – we cannot live without you, the bread of life and the river of blessing. Only awaken us this day to how great our hunger and thirst truly is and make us insatiable for you, for your word, your presence, your Spirit. That then we may honour and love and obey and serve, not out of fear but from love, not out of duty but from desire to bless you and not out of resignation but with rejoicing because of all your goodness to us. Speak Lord, your people long to respond with praise and love, for Jesus' sake. Amen.