

Jonah 1 Sermon for 8am

Today we start looking at the story of Jonah. It's a story of how God loves the whole of the world he has created, and wants none of it to perish. It's a story of a disobedient prophet and his refusal to accept that God could love his enemies. And today, it's a story of how there's no getting away from God.

There are a few things I want you to look out for as you read the story, since they'll keep coming up over the next few weeks. Some of these are hidden in the translation and I'll point them out as we pass by.

One is vertical direction. God speaks to Jonah initially and sends him to Nineveh, but in doing so, he tells Jonah, literally, to "arise", to "get up and go" there. Jonah doesn't want to go and so throughout the story, we have downward travel whenever Jonah is running away from God, and upward travel, when he is not. So Jonah went down to Joppa, down onto the ship, down into the ship's hold where he lay down, and then sank down into the sea. God tells him to get up, the ship's captain tells him to get up; but Jonah keeps going down.

Next, there's the word "Great". Nineveh is called a great city repeatedly throughout the story, the storm is a great storm and later, the fish is a great fish. Throughout the story, God is sovereign and in charge of all things, great and small. This is one of the themes of the story. Despite Jonah's actions, God is in charge. The ship's captain understands this in verse 6 where he says 'Perhaps the god will spare us a thought,' and verse 14 where he says 'you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' Later in the story, the same will be echoed by the king of Nineveh, and even Jonah himself.

So today, we have the start of these great themes of God's care, his sovereignty and his global influence. Jonah is asked to go to Nineveh, a city known in Israelite memory for conquering and exiling its population, and a nation known for their violence and conquest. So of course Jonah doesn't want to go, though we aren't told his reasons yet. So rather than go East to Nineveh, he heads West, in the opposite direction, off to the edge of the known world, to try to evade God.

The problem with trying to run away from God is that it doesn't work! There are Psalms that speak of there being nowhere that God cannot see us. The other problem with disobeying God is that it tends to affect others too. So here we have Jonah's disobedience putting a whole shipload of people in danger. The sailors do everything they can, practically and spiritually to survive the storm but nothing works. Eventually, they decide this is no ordinary storm and they desperately throw lots, and of course, this identifies Jonah, hiding in the belly of the ship, trying to avoid God.

The sailors aren't a bad lot, they try to save Jonah and themselves, and they fear the consequences of killing Jonah in case his God, the one causing all this storm, decides to revenge himself on them for the murder. But in the end, Jonah is thrown overboard, and the storm calmed. As Jonah sinks to his death, the sailors offer worship and sacrifice to the God of the Israelites, since, where their own gods had failed them, Jonah's God had shown himself to be in control. These men had learned to know God, to cry out to him in their trouble, and to worship him for their deliverance despite knowing nothing about him. Jonah, in contrast, knew it all, knew all the correct words in verse 9, but at no point prayed. He was still trying to slip away under God's radar. Jonah would rather be thrown into the sea to die than have to deal with God directly. But God is merciful and sends a fish.

The story will develop over the next few weeks, but for this week we are left wondering. Is there anyone, or any group of people, who are so beyond the pale that we wouldn't want to go to tell them about God? Is anyone beyond God's grace and mercy?

Then, secondly, how amazing is it that when people outside the church experience hardship and suffering, it is at these times that they turn to God – perhaps without fully knowing what they are doing even. You only need to listen to the news to understand that - as people begin to use the language of prayer, or attend vigils at churches, and so on. However, for us, in church, it is when things get tough, that we are often heard to start to question God, or to avoid praying since we believe we deserve better, or our faith is challenged by the idea that God shouldn't have let this happen. The irony of this is the same as that of Jonah, sulking at God in the belly of the ship as the sailors, ignorant of God really, are desperately calling out to him.

Thirdly, the big theme in Jonah is God's sovereignty, and this affects how we pray and think as Christians. Our prayers are not instructions for God to follow, but requests, that if God is willing to, he may grant them. That's how Jesus understood it in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said "yet not my will be yours be done". I wonder if this means we need to rethink our prayers? We can be assured we are never outside of God's eyesight, but we need to acknowledge God's freedom over all that we pray about rather than simply give God our instructions on how we think he should run his world.

Finally, here, as later on in the story, we have God's mercy. If we have ever run away from God, he is ready to accept us back. There is nothing we can do which finally separates us from him. Jesus came so we can follow God despite our failings, and so we simply need to come up for air, acknowledge our running away, and ask God to let us return to him. Amen.