



JONAH

pursued by grace

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Sunday 14 August 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> Read Jonah chapter 2.

Firstly, what has happened so far? The word of the LORD came to Jonah, telling him to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. But Jonah does a runner. He goes the other way boarding a boat heading for Tarshish, in the opposite at the other end of the known world.

But God sends a storm that threatens to sink the boat. Ultimately, Jonah admits to the sailors that the reason this calamity is facing them is because he is attempting to run away from the God who made the sea and the land.

The solution to the situation, Jonah offers, is to throw him overboard. Now, if you are someone who reads the Bible hoping to find a character you can emulate and try to become more like, you could do a lot worse than these sailors sharing the boat with Jonah.

Even when Jonah admits that he's the one that caused them to throw their livelihood overboard, that he's the one who is putting their lives at risk, that he is the one, who, even when begged by the Captain, can't be bothered to pray for the ships' welfare - even then, when Jonah offers the sailors the solution of throwing him overboard, they're like "Nah. That seems a bit rough. You seem like a really good bloke. Let's have another crack at rowing this thing."

Don't think for a minute that Jonah's offer to be thrown overboard represents some sort of change of heart on Jonah's behalf... This is no brave and magnanimous act.

From the moment God called Jonah to go to Nineveh he'd been on a path of his own. He goes *down* to Joppa, *down* into the boat, *down* below deck, lies *down* and falls into a *deep* sleep (the word used here implies a deep, almost comatose, sleep).

God calls him to go and instead Jonah goes *down, down, down...* So when God catches up with him, so to speak, what he doesn't say to the sailors is, "Hey, would you mind if we turned this thing around?" They seem like top blokes. They probably would have done it.

"My problem is," he thinks, "I haven't gone *down* far enough." He's still planning on escaping from God.

So they do throw him in.

And this is what happens next:

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto the dry land. (Jonah 2:1-10)

At Face Value

Jonah prays this prayer, I believe, in all in earnestness and God seems to respond to it. So I think a good place to start with this prayer is just to take it at face value and sort of see what is good about it.

Honest to God: You don't need to butter things up for God. He doesn't want your pretence. If you are angry with Him, disappointed in Him, His shoulders are big enough to hear it from you.

It's a late, but not too late: You might think that you have been too far away from God for too long; you've left it too late and you've gone too far down a particular road to ever turn back. Jonah pushed God away as hard as he could for as long as he could and yet God still heard his prayer.

Borrowed prayer: Jonah uses others prayers. The original audience hearing the story of Jonah for the first time would have been struck by the familiarity of Jonah's psalm. Very little of it, if any of it, could be considered to be original. It is what we call a 'pastiche', a patchwork of phrases and verses pulled from the book of Psalms.

I think there is a strength to this.

I grew up going to St Joseph's Catholic Church at Oatley. In my late teens I stopped because I just didn't see the relevance.

Later in life, when I realised I needed to get back to God, the reason I didn't feel able to go back to the Catholic Mass was because so many of the prayers felt rote and meaningless. I used to yawn at exactly the same part of the Nicene Creed every week, both as a kid and then when I tried to return in my early 20's.

I was arrogant and naïve enough to think that the problem resided in the prayers themselves and not me as the pray-er.

Now when I read the Nicene creed:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God;

And on it goes...

I'm just so grateful that those words are in me; that I said those words out loud frequently enough for them to soak into my bones.

At various times in your Christian life you are going to feel like Jonah: crushed by circumstance and seemingly abandoned by God. When you don't have the words to pray and you don't even want to pray, I commend you to do as Jonah did and to call on the prayers of those who have come before you.

Trusting Prayer: Jonah trusts in God's goodness even before his prayers are answered. I am not here supporting a name-it-and-claim-it approach to prayer. I am saying our view of God should rest on something bigger than our present moment circumstance.

So that is taking Jonah's prayer at face value.

If we are going to get the most out of this prayer we really need to consider it in some sort of context.

The first hearers of the book of Jonah would have heard this story with a few more layers of meaning and nuance buzzing around their heads.

For instance, when they heard the opening words at the very beginning of the story, "The word of the LORD came to..." they would have immediately been primed with what to expect from this story. "*The word of the Lord came to*" tells them that this is a prophet story.

Hosea begins: "*The word of the LORD that came to Hosea...*" Joel begins "*The word of the LORD that came to Joel...*" It's a phrasing used for Elijah, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and I think pretty much all the prophets.

So straight away the audience sort of knows what to expect. They're going to expect a story with 3 basic movements:

(1) Judgement against immoral treatment of fellow humans and a lack of faithfulness to God.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals - they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way. (Amos 2:6-7)

(2) Exile.

*They made kings but not through me; they set up princes but without my knowledge. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction. Your calf is rejected, O Samaria. My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? For it is from Israel, an artisan made it; it is not God. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces. Israel is **swallowed up**; now they are among the nations as a useless vessel. (Hosea 8:4-8)*

*I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said: Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake and shatter them on the heads of all the people, and those who are left I will kill with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape. Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; **and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.** (Amos 9:1-3)*

(3) Restoration

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord; say to him, "Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips. (Hosea 14:1-2)

I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon. (Hosea 14:4-5)

So when the first hearers heard, "*The word of the Lord came to...*" this would be the sort of story they would expect to follow:

1. God's upset with us because we have turned away from him to other gods, we take advantage of the needy, we sexually abuse women, we ignore the plight of widows and we ignore justice.
2. Unless they turn from worshipping other gods and their reckless abuse of the poor and needy, then God will send a neighbouring army to take them into exile. The language is always about Israel being devoured.
3. God will look tenderly upon them and restore them. Israel will once again live as God's representatives in the world.

So they are probably thinking "Oh great. Another prophet going to tell me how badly I'm treating others and why bad things are coming my way..."

But then they hear, "*The word of the Lord came to Jonah...*" and they'd be like, "What!? Jonah! Really?" Jonah has a slightly richer presence in Hebrew writings and scripture than in our Bible, but the primary reference is there in both in 2 Kings 14.

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash (II) king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. 24 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat (I), which he had caused Israel to commit. 25 He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher. (2 Kings 14:23-25)

Can you feel the tension here?

Jonah was a prophet who prophesied expansion and favour over Israel when they least deserved it, while they were ruled by an evil king and gave little consideration to the ways of God. Here was a prophet who wasn't associated with judgement and exile, but just,

unmerited mercy and favour!

But this prophet in the book of Jonah is heading off to Nineveh - to prophesy to their enemies.

And of course, if this hasn't got the listeners off guard enough, rather than being a collection of prophecies we end up with the parable about a prophet!

Have you ever had a young child ask you to read something and then they put it up right in front of your face. And when it is that close, you just can't see it.

The brilliant thing about a parable is that it pulls the story away just enough that you can actually take it in. That's the power of a parable. Like when the prophet Nathan spoke to King David after he had slept with Bathsheba and then arranged for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah to be killed in battle:

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. "Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7)

While preparing this sermon, I challenged myself to consider: "If Amos and Hosea were able to prophesy to the church today, what would they say?"

I tried to think about it honestly. I thought about those prophets' warnings about worshipping false Gods. I thought about their passionate concern for justice.

My mind kept swirling around how angry I was about the impact of the sorts of conspiracy theories and Christian nationalism that attached itself to some branches of White Evangelicalism from the USA. It bothered me that podcasts and YouTube had allowed those forces to reach our shores so easily, and that they had impacted some people I knew and thought to be really strong Christians, and that it had taken them into some really weird directions...

I thought about what this branch of Christianity was doing to the character of Christians.

Studies actually tell us that White Evangelicals in America are:

- Far more likely to support the death penalty than non-Christians.
- More likely to own a gun than a non-Christian.
- More likely to carry their gun with them than the typical gun owner.
- Far more likely to deny the existence of historical and existing structural injustices against Black people.
- more negative in their views about immigrants, than any other religious demographic or non-Christian person.
- More likely than any other religious group to be climate change skeptics.

I looked at my list of concerns and I looked at Amos and I thought "Yes. this is exactly the sort of thing he would want me to be angry about!"

Then I re-read Jonah chapter 2 and I got to:

Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. (Jonah 2:8)

And it stood out like a sore thumb that even after all that Jonah had done wrong, this was the only confession he made was the sins of others - but none of his own! And I had just done the same!

The parable exposes, as Scott mentioned, just how conflicted our inner lives can be.

Jonah, in chapter 2, prays a heartfelt prayer promising a great appreciation for God. But as the story unfolds in chapters 3 and 4, we see that he changes his heart very little. It is outrageously fun to point the finger at him and scoff and think, "What a hypocrite!"

He delivers the message he has been told to deliver - just five words in Hebrew - and his heart is not in it. And he still thinks God is wrong to extend His grace to people he doesn't like.

And yet God uses him mightily. If we take this to be a historical account (not JUST a satirical parable - and some Christians do) then we would have to say, in terms of outcome-per-word-spoken, Jonah is the most successful prophet ever!

I think there is great comfort in this!

I'm like Jonah. I pray at times - sometimes in response to a rousing sermon, or a moving hymn, or one of those moments of self awareness - that my heart might be transformed and that I will give my life fully to God. And then, like Jonah, I change one behaviour at the edge of my being ... and I somehow conflate those two things as if there were synonymous.

The story of Jonah dares me to believe that God can work with that.

God is more than willing to work with that.

God can even do great things with that.

God is so patient with us.

In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 we read: "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from **one degree** of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*"

Jonah changed by that one degree and it made all the difference.

There's one last layer we really need to reflect on. As I was preparing this I began to wonder and worry if there would be any parents out there who had called their son 'Jonah'. You can see why I would be nervous. Let's be honest. Jonah is flakey, petulant, and only accidentally, reluctantly and regretfully successful at fulfilling God's will.

And yet, Jonah is, I believe, the only prophet Jesus actively compares Himself to.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees told Jesus, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." But he replied to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves a sign. Yet no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah, because just as Jonah was in the stomach of the sea creature for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment and condemn the people living today, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. But look—something greater than Jonah is here!" (Matthew 12:38-42)

Jesus, it is fair to say is the true Jonah:

- For Jonah it's his disobedience to God, and his lack of willingness to see God's mercy reach all people, that takes him to the edge of death.
 - Jesus' obedience to God and His desire to see God's mercy reach all people takes Him into death.
- Jonah can't see or own his own sin and he is blind to its consequences.
 - Jesus sees and takes on all our sins and bears all their consequences.
- Jonah abhors God's mercy to others.
 - Jesus endures what He endures, for the joy set before Him, of extending God's mercy to all.

Josh Round and I got together through the week (he's speaking at the evening service tonight) and we were talking about all these thoughts that touch on the story of Jonah:

The three movements of the prophets (judgement and exile, always ending in restoration), the way God uses Jonah's reluctant efforts to extend justice and mercy, and then the way Jesus comes to us as the true Jonah extending freely what Jonah brought so reluctantly... And I wondered out loud about what it might be that connects them all.

And Josh said, words to the effect of, "I think it is God's way of saying to us: 'I'm not finished with you yet.'"

I think that is a pretty good summary.

As we leave today, might I invite you to ponder through the week (or if you are feeling daring, to discuss over coffee): Where, over the years, have you felt God's patience with you?