

Lent Sermon – Jonah 1:7-16, Mt.12:38-41

Last week Pastor Rich introduced the book and person of Jonah, and how by using him as an example we can do the opposite as him. We're going to continue that this morning, and specifically how Jonah points to the need for humility in our lives. Jonah, in his arrogance thought that he was better than the Assyrians. Jonah acted like Israel deserved the grace that God gave them. Jonah looked down on the heathen Assyrians, and by doing so built pride in himself that caused him to try and run from God's call.

Lent is a time where we hopefully learn humility. We give something up, and learn just how weak we truly are. We see how much we depend on different things more than God. At least that's what we should learn.

Jonah 1:7-17

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

⁹ He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

Alongside this passage, we will look at how Jesus says that his life and death is "the sign of Jonah" (Mt.12:38-42). Just as we learn to follow God by doing the opposite of Jonah, Jesus did this perfectly. Jesus is the perfect anti-Jonah, living in perfect obedience and humility.

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Mt.12:38-42

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

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A central theme in the book is the need for humility before God. Having humility before God is, of course, a big part of most of Scripture, but here in Jonah, it is really central. God gives us this story with all its irony and funny twists to show us that he is in control, not us. Even when we try to do the complete opposite to what he desires, he works through our disobedience. This should teach us how we should stand before him. More than this, it teaches us about ourselves. What are the dangers in being a religious person? How should we relate to non-Christians around us? What is the essence of God’s love to his people, and how do we fit into it?

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Our sermon today is going to take three steps, first we are going to look at Jonah, how is he being portrayed in this story, and how do our lives show similar sins? Second, how are the sailors portrayed, and how does our world show similarities? Last, how is this part of the story fulfilled by our Lord, who fulfills the ‘sign of Jonah’?

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So first, how is Jonah portrayed in this part of the story? How does Jonah teach us about the need for humility?

We find Jonah here fast asleep on a boat that is in the middle of a divine storm. He had just been given a word from God that he was told to deliver to his archenemies, the Assyrian Ninevites. Jonah had good reason to be afraid of these people. These Ninevites were not only his arch-rivals, but, even for ancient times, were an especially brutal state. Called a ‘terrorist state’ by historians.¹ They engaged in all kinds of horrific behaviour with their enemies, dismembering them alive in ways intended to humiliate. Jonah has good reasons to run from

¹ Bruckner, NIV Application Commentary, 28-30.

telling them that they need to repent, one of which was keeping his arms and legs attached to his body.

Jonah would not have any reason to believe that the people of Nineveh would listen to God's word, that is, other than the fact that God told him to go and tell them. For Jonah to go and deliver this message would be like sending a Rabbi to Hitler with a message of repentance. People do not tend to like to hear the message of repentance to begin with, let alone one of the most terrible civilizations known to man!

Of course, the power and terror of Assyria is no match for the creator of heaven and earth, Jonah knows this. Our passage calls the city of Nineveh 'great' and uses the same word for the storm that God sends to Jonah. If Jonah is running for fear of the Ninevites, he has his fears in the wrong order. We might think of Jesus' saying in Matt.10:28, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

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While Jonah was afraid to go and deliver this message, the more likely reason why he has fled is because he believed that God might actually bring repentance to the Assyrian people. Jonah hated them. He also knew what kind of God the God he served is. He is "gracious and compassionate...slow to anger and abounding in love," as he says himself in 4:2. He made a covenant with Noah to not destroy the earth no matter how evil we became. The Assyrians at this time might have been testing God's patience, but he still loved them, and desired their repentance.

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It's probable that Jonah was blinded by his patriotism to his homeland. Too proud of his status as a member of the only true God's people to see that the only true God wants all to know him. That Israel was intended to be a shining light on a hill for all to see. Jonah is suffering from spiritual pride, something that can easily destroy the life of God's people.

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What is spiritual pride? It is what happens when we think that God saves us for what we do rather than what he has done. We have faith in our ability to have faith, rather than God's gracious and saving action. It can come when we least expect it, and in the most confusing

ways. It can come to novice Christians who think their emotional religion is so much more ‘on fire’ than the stuffy old religious types. And it can come in mature Christians who supposedly have it all figured out, maybe even to the point of questioning God’s word like Jonah is.

Recognizing this spiritual pride in oneself is essential. It is easiest to see in two ways. First, we deny our own faults. When we come to the time of confession in the service, our minds are empty. Spiritual growth is not seen in recognizing that we are always getting better, but in an ever-deepening knowledge of our sin, and need for God. This leads to the second way; spiritual pride is also seen in being hostile to those who are different. When a person has a deep sense of their own sin, and so a deep sense of God’s mercy for them, they will show this mercy to those around them. This is why we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Jonah shows these two elements in his life well. He says to the sailors in the story, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” He has pride in his nationality, as he mentions this aspect about himself first. He assumes this nationality entails his religion—as so many in our Dutch-Reformed world do—despite his lack of acting on this professed belief. He denies his faults, hiding and even sleeping during this divine storm. Out of this pride he cannot see the humanity in those around him, or the value of their lives. God not only shakes him out of this prideful delusion with the storm, but also with the way the pagan sailors react to the storm.

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This leads to our second section, how are the sailors portrayed, and how does our world show similarities?

In this story God uses the sailors as an ironic twist to highlight Jonah’s prideful disobedience. Unlike Jonah, the sailors are constantly seen acting selflessly for the common good of those on the ship. They recognize the divine origin of the storm, as they cry out to their gods, offering to them sacrifices from the cargo. Meanwhile Jonah simply goes into the hull for a nap, knowing full well that it’s his sin that is causing these men danger. In v.6 the very words of God are on the lips of the sailors, as they call Jonah to “arise” from his sleep, just as God had called Jonah to “arise” and go to Nineveh in v.2.

Despite Jonah telling them about how he had fled from the creator of heaven and earth, they still try to save Jonah’s life, knowing that it would be wrong to kill him despite his flight. The

more they row the harder the storm becomes, and they recognize what must be done. Even so, they cry out to God for mercy. All this shows them acting honourably in comparison to Jonah.

It's clear that the sailors, though pagans, have a much better general piety than Jonah. In v.9 Jonah claims to fear the true God, but the sailors show this fear in their actions. If you compare a couple different translations, you might notice that some say the Jonah 'worships' God, and others say 'fear'. The underlying word is most often translated as 'fear' elsewhere, even if here that fear, or respect, comes out in worship. We might not be used to thinking of worshiping God out of a holy fear, but that's probably out of an inflated sense of our importance.

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The way the sailors grow in their understanding of the God that is giving them the storm is shown in their growing fear of him. At first their fear is simply of the divine storm. V.5 shows them afraid, and so offering their cargo to the gods in an effort to appease them, not knowing who the storm is coming from or what they might want, just that this is no normal storm. In v.10 they respond to Jonah's confession of following the creator "God of heaven", with 'great fear', as they recognize this God's power, though not yet his character. Last, in v.16, they are seen offering a sacrifice to the true God out of their 'great fear'. Again, though Jonah claims to worship the true God and fear him only, the sailors show this in their actions. Everything they do shows deep humility before the awesome power of God.

Notice the sailors respond to God's calming the storm with worship. They don't give God a foxhole conversion, that is, when you say, "God I promise to follow you if you save me," and then quickly forget about it once the saving is done. No, they give the appropriate response, out of gratitude for being saved, they offer sacrifice. This is the only true worship of course. If we feel that out of our singing, or church attendance, or tithing, or other good works that we are able to get something from God, then we are not worshipping him, but our ourselves and our desires. God can see through this.

God tells us this story so that we, who might be spiritually proud like Jonah, thinking that God chose us because of who we are rather than out of his grace, can respond with humility. Jonah has what we might call here a half-way repentance. He hears the word from the sailors, who according to Jonah's pride have no place telling him what is right and wrong, in v.10, "what have you done?" and recognizes that either they all die or just him.

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With this rebuke from the sailors, Jonah should be supremely humbled by this experience. At the beginning of the story, the thought of these pagans repenting so was so repulsive to Jonah he got on a boat to get to the end of the world. These pagans are now correcting him, one of God's chosen people, is a supremely humbling experience. This should teach us to not look down on those around us who do not know the Lord. We should remember that it is not because of us that we are saved, in fact those who are not saved might be much kinder and more considerate people. They might have a much greater appreciation of God's creation and his people. They might be able to recognize the natural order of the world and seek to live by it. Like our relationship with God, our relationship with our neighbour should be marked by humility too. It is by God's grace alone that we are saved, and that should cause us to both worship God, and learn from those around us with proper humility.

When I was preparing for ordination, one of the things I had to do was study world religions. I was amazed at the wisdom that can be found in many of them, especially Buddhism and Confucianism. These reminded me of all that I learned studying Greek philosophy. It is clear when you read all these that humanity is able to decipher from God's creation an order of things, an inherent morality, and a responsibility of humanity to live up to that. We see that in the way the pagan sailors are acting with Jonah. What they do not know, and no other religion knows, is what Jonah knows, that this God is gracious and merciful.

Opposite to Jonah, Christians should always be looking at how God might be drawing those we think the most unlikely to himself. After all, he chose us. And if we know ourselves, we then know how undeserving we are, how unlikely we should be. This is how we learn humility in repentance.

With the sailor's rebuke Jonah asks them to throw him into the sea. He has every intention of dying rather than calling the Assyrians to repentance. Jonah is somewhat noble in his final admission of fault and need to sacrifice himself.

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This half-hearted self-sacrifice of Jonah leads to our last question, how is this part of the story fulfilled by our Lord, who fulfills the 'sign of Jonah'?

In the chapter where Jesus tells about the "sign of Jonah," Matt.12, Jesus is seen having a few disputes with some religious leaders. It begins with him plucking some grain, and healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, both of which are condemned by the Pharisees. Next, Jesus goes out into the gentile area, and Matthew sees this as a fulfillment of the Prophet Isaiah

who said the Messiah would reach out to the gentiles. Right after this Jesus heals a demon-possessed man and these leaders accuse Jesus of working with the power of Satan, something Jesus says is unforgivable. When these same leaders then ask for a sign that proves he is not with Satan, Jesus responds that these leaders will only receive “the sign of Jonah,” as “the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jesus says that, in contrast to the Ninevites, even when they receive this sign, the Jewish leaders will not repent. This was proved to be true, when Jesus went into the grave for three days and was resurrected they maintained obstinance to Jesus and his followers.

Like Jonah, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day despised the way that Jesus was proclaiming the gospel to the gentiles. These leaders condemned Jesus and staid that he was filled with demonic power, which Jonah said with his actions by doing the opposite of God’s word to him. Like Jonah, these leaders thought that it was because of their goodness that God had saved them, and so they looked at those Jesus was ministering to as beneath them. Both were blind to God’s extraordinary actions because of their pride.

Unlike Jonah, Jesus heard the word of the Lord and obeyed. Jesus faithfully went to God’s enemies and called them to repentance. Unlike Jonah, Jesus was able to recognize the unique calling of Israel as a light to the nations. Unlike Jonah, Jesus sacrificed himself on our behalf, not because of his own poor choices in running away from God, but on behalf of us who have run away from God. Jesus had every right to condemn, but he had mercy. Jesus models the humility that we ought to have despite “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” Phil.2:6-7.

As we continue on in our time of lent, we should focus on our need for humility before God. This humility should both allow us to recognize what God is doing in our communities, and at the same time give us security in God’s word. This is what our Lord shows us. This is what he is teaching us through the prophet Jonah. I pray that like our Lord, we will proclaim God’s message of repentance to all, even ourselves, and receive it with humility.

I’ll invite the praise team to come up as we close in prayer.