

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. I'm going to continue in the preaching series that Pastor Dave has crafted through the book of Jonah. For those who weren't with us last Sunday, allow me to offer a brief recap.

**A Brief Recap:** The Book of Jonah is a historical account of God's interaction with the prophet Jonah and the people of Nineveh. As Dave said last week, the ancient city of Nineveh was situated where you would find the present-day city of Mosul, Iraq. Nineveh was a part of the Assyrian Empire and the archenemy of Israel. It was Assyria that destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and carried off many of its people into exile.

The prophet Nahum records the wickedness of the city of Nineveh: their plotting against God (1:9), their cruelty in war (2:2), their exploitation of the helpless (2:12), and their involvement in idolatry, prostitution, and witchcraft (3:4).

God called the prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and speak a word of warning—*judgement was coming*—but when confronted with God's call, Jonah chose to run, or more specifically to sail in the opposite direction. We're not told how far Jonah got before the Lord sent a great wind and violent storm arose that threatened to destroy the ship. When the sailors asked Jonah to pray to his God, they discovered that Jonah's disobedience was the reason for the storm. At Jonah's request, they threw him overboard, Jonah sank under the water, and the storm subsided. To keep Jonah from drowning, God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah.

**Swallowed By A Great Fish?** Pastor Dave was kind enough last week to refer to me as the expert who would definitely settle the debate on whether a fish exists that is large enough to swallow a human being. As you may know, some have simply brushed the question aside, suggesting that the Book of Jonah is not a historical account of what really happened, it's a story, a metaphor, that imparts important spiritual truths about God.

Others have spent significant time discussing the various species of whales, the size of their throats, the availability of breathable air (once ingested), etc. *Why?* Because for many people, what's at stake in this discussion is the credibility of the Bible. The thought is that if we can prove that a sea creature fish exists, large enough to swallow and sustain Jonah, the credibility of the Bible is preserved.

But unwittingly, in searching for a natural explanation for this event, they ultimately undermine the Bible's view of God. *How?* This search assumes that God is bound by the laws of nature, that there are things that He cannot do, and so, we must find a natural explanation for what the Bible records.

The dictionary defines a miracle as "*an extraordinary...event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws*". God is not bound by the laws of nature; He is free to do the incredible, the unexplainable, the miraculous, whenever it serves His purpose. I have no trouble believing that a human could be swallowed by giant sea creature if God willed it so. In fact, it could be argued that this swallowing is the lesser miracle in the account of Jonah; the greater miracle takes place when the entire city of Nineveh repents and turns to the Lord.

And so, we come back once again to the central message of the Jonah account. The account of Jonah in one in which hearts are on display—God's heart and our hearts. We come to see that Jonah is an unwilling prophet; He doesn't want to go to Nineveh because he doesn't want to warn them. He's afraid that God will offer his Assyrian enemies mercy, and what he really wants is for them to experience God's judgement.

The Book of Jonah exposes the anger, prejudice, and racism that exists in all of us. In a few moments we are going to fix our attention on Jonah chapters 2 and 3, but first I want to share about my own experience of growing up with prejudice.

**Growing Up With Prejudice:** I grew up in the city of Surrey; a city that was rapidly growing in ethnic diversity. By the time I got to High School, the surrounding neighbourhoods were home to Filipino's, Vietnamese, Indo-Canadians, and Caucasians. But my earliest memories of prejudice come from the jokes I heard on the Elementary School playground. Most of the racially-charged-jokes were aimed at Polacks and Packies—people from Poland and people from Pakistan.

**Q.** *How many Polacks does it take to screw in a light bulb?* **A.** *Five. One to stand on a chair and hold the lightbulb, and four to spin the chair.*

**Q.** *How do you get a one-armed Packie to fall out of a tree?* **A.** *Wave.*

The thing is, our school didn't have a single Polish or Pakistani student. I would wager that the students telling these jokes had never even met a person from Poland or Pakistan before—but the prejudice was there nonetheless. The message was clear, immigrants from Poland and Pakistan were dumb, and therefore, a fitting target for juvenile mockery.

Ignorance *can* lead to curiosity—the opportunity to learn something new about a person, a language, a culture—but all too often ignorance leads to suspicion and fear. *These people are not like me, and so they are dumb, or devious, or even dangerous.*

My elementary school had been called Riverdale Elementary for years, but while I was a student there a French Immersion program was launched and the sign on the front of the school was changed to read: *Ecole Riverdale Elementary*. I can remember my mom commenting on the name-change negatively—something about the French taking over everything. She didn't know that the word "ecole" simply means "school" in french.

Every time it snowed on our playground, the students would engage in snowball fights, and can you guess how we divided into teams? The English against the "Frenchies". But we were careful to use this slur quietly because the toughest kid in the entire school was a French Immersion girl by the name of Kirsten—nobody wanted to mess with her.

Russians are stern; the Irish are angry; Italians are argumentative; Germans are robotic—they don't have emotions. We regularly label entire people groups with one adjective. And what about the labels we attach to rich and poor, to young and old, to those battling mental illness, or trapped in addiction?

Categorizing people in this way is dehumanizing; it ignores the truth that *all* people have been made in God's image. While our politically correct culture denounces prejudice and racism, it has not been eliminated, it has simply gone underground; it may not come out of our mouths but it still lives in our hearts. At this time let me encourage you to turn in your Bibles with me to Jonah 2.

*“From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 2 He said: ‘In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. 3 You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*

*4 I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’ 5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.*

*7 When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. 8 Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. 9 But I, with*

*shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’ 10 And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”*

There are a limited number of things one can do while trapped inside a great fish; Jonah decided to pray. It's worth noting that while the storm was raging and the boat in danger of sinking, Jonah was the only one *not* praying. Perhaps it's not surprising—we avoid conversation with those we are trying to avoid. Jonah was running from God, running from his calling; he didn't want to talk to God because he didn't like what God had said in their last conversation.

Perhaps we are more like Jonah than we care to admit. We can go for days, weeks, months without really praying, but a desperate circumstance or unexpected trouble drives us to our knees in prayer. Jonah's prayer is desperate; it describes his descent into a watery grave; he fully expected to die.

Vs. 3, *“You hurled me into the depths...all your waves and breakers swept over me.”* This isn't an accusation; Jonah recognized that his disobedience was the reason for the storm, and, that his life was in God's sovereign hands.

Vs. 4, *“I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight’.”* The simple fact is that God did not banish Jonah, Jonah abandoned God. In speaking of banishment, Jonah communicates how he feels: *his disobedience is so great that he can never return.*<sup>1</sup> But he goes on to say, *“yet I will look again toward your holy temple.”* In vs. 7 we

<sup>1</sup> James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 73.

read, “*When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*”

Verse 7 is the turning point in the psalm, Jonah *remembers* God and turns towards Him once again. And while all prayer is a re-orienting practice—it reorients us to God—our prayers do not reorient God to us. The implicit truth in vs. 7 is that when we pray, God hears. Vs. 2, “*In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.*” God is not far from any of us.

Jonah’s prayer concludes with the following promise: “*What I have vowed I will make good.*” Now, it’s much easier to make a vow than it is to keep a vow, but implicit in this phrase is the promise to take up his prophetic calling again. Following this promise, the fish vomited Jonah up onto the land.

One final word before we turn to chapter 3. While Jonah vowed to take up God’s mission to Nineveh, his fundamental conviction remained—he wanted Nineveh and its people to go down in flames.

**illus:** Our prejudices can be so strong that they overwhelm what we say we believe. The genocide in Rwanda is a good example. Reading now from John Stackhouse: At the time of the Rwandan genocide, “Rwanda was among the most Christian countries in Africa—indeed, in the world—with upwards of 90% of the population espousing Christianity... The Hutu and Tutsi peoples had managed to get along, often amiably... But simmering [animosities] were fuelled by both Tutsi exiles and particularly by the Hutu government and its schools.

Children were made to stand on either side of classrooms according to their ethnicity. “Cockroach” was a common Hutu epithet for Tutsi countrymen and women.

So when on the evening of 6 April 1994, the airplane carrying the Hutu president... was shot down the genocide began... God allowed the world to see that the Christianity preached and practiced by the Rwandans was not as deep as ethnic and political rivalry, and not as powerful as tribalism and hatred.”<sup>2</sup>

And the danger in using an example like this one is that we will point our finger at the Rwandans instead of recognizing that the problem lies within each one of us. Our commitment to Christ calls us to love our enemies, to look after the poor, the oppressed, and the immigrant, but often, our commitment to self, to family, to ethnicity, or economics runs much deeper. These primary commitments orient us towards others in suspicion and fear.

And so, this tension remains—Jonah has been rescued but his prejudice remains. He is praying, which is good. He obeys God and goes to Nineveh, which is also good, but there is much to be done in Jonah. We are a lot like Jonah in this regard; our hearts are like a field in which wheat and weeds grow up together. We can be passionate in worship, faithful in prayer, *and* hold on to resentment, or seek to punish others. Like Jonah, when God calls us to follow He shapes us along the way.

Lets now turn our attention now to Jonah 3.

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<sup>2</sup> John Stackhouse, *Learning From Rwanda*, <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/2019/01/11/learning-from-rwanda/>

*“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.”*

This first verse gives me a great sense of relief: *“the word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second** time”*. How many of us get anything right the first time? How many of us obey God *perfectly*, follow Him *faithfully*, or always serve Him *diligently*? He is the God of second, and third, and fourth chances. Because of God's mercy, a second call is extended to Jonah; it's because of God's mercy that He calls to us again, and again.

But this second calling was not just for Jonah's sake. James Bruckner writes, “God calls Jonah a second time because he wants the lost saved... When God...see[s] the great need in Nineveh, Jonah does not want to see it. The contemporary application of this text is the great need of the world today. God's call does not allow for the privatization of religion...God calls the second time because he wants the lost delivered and he wants human participation.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, every so often there are things that can be lost in translating the Bible from the original language to our own. For example, a more literal translation of vs. 3 would read, *“Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a **great city belonging to God**; it took three days to go through it.”* Nineveh was more than

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<sup>3</sup> Bruckner, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin J. Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary On the Old Testament: Jonah*, 131.

<sup>5</sup> Youngblood, 132.

simply a large city, it was *important* to God, it *belonged* to God, it contained 120,000 people that God loved.

You may remember that when Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem for the final time, he paused outside the city and we are told that He wept...for all the people who refused to turn to Him and find life. Do we not think that Jesus continues to weep over cities today?

Beijing: 22 million

Manila: 10 million

Tehran: 9 million

Johannesburg and area: 8 million

London: 9 million

Greater Vancouver: 2.4 million

Every city belongs to God, from Nineveh to North and West Vancouver.<sup>4</sup> Kevin Youngblood writes, “God's mercy is as broad as his sovereignty. Though Jonah readily acknowledges God's sovereignty over all the earth (1:9), he struggled with the equally universal scope of God's mercy once he realized that not even Assyria, Israel's dreaded enemy, was excluded.”<sup>5</sup>

For three days Jonah made his way through Nineveh preaching a message about God's coming judgement, summarized by the words we find in vs. 4: *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”* What's interesting is that in the original language, the word for

“overthrown”—*hapak*—has a double meaning; it can mean “to destroy,” or, to “turn around” and “repent”. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, he had a choice; when God’s word came to the Ninevites, they too had a choice. Inherent in Jonah’s message is that there is still time to turn to the Lord and repent.

And that’s exactly what happened. The citizens proclaimed a city-wide fast and everyone dressed in sackcloth. Bruckner writes, “Fasting is a means of seeking God’s mercy, while sackcloth is a symbol of repentance.”<sup>6</sup> And when Jonah’s warning reached the ears of the King, he joined in the fast, shedding his royal robes for sackcloth. Not only so, but he called for the animals to be clothed in sackcloth, and for the people to “give up their evil ways and their violence. **9** Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

Vs. 10, “**10** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

Next Sunday, Pastor Dave will focus on chapter 4 where Jonah’s anger erupts over God’s mercy to the Assyrians. Jonah had forgotten an important truth about God and about Israel’s calling. God hadn’t chosen Israel because they were more faithful or righteous than other nations; nor did He didn’t choose Israel for their own sake. He chose this one people for the sake of all people; they were to showcase His mercy, love, and righteousness to the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruckner, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Youngblood, 144-145.

Again, we are more like Jonah than we care to admit. We are troubled—angered, offended—when God’s mercy extends to those we perceive as our enemies. The account of Jonah reminds us that mercy, forgiveness, and grace are core attributes of God, and, they are available to everyone.

Kevin Youngblood writes, “Mercy towards one’s enemies is the first imperative of the gospel for the simple reason that that is what God did when he took the initiative in reconciling sinners to himself by sending his Son.”<sup>7</sup>

**Gospel presentation:** The good news is that *everyone* is invited and *anyone* can follow. John 3:16, we read, “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” In Luke 9:23, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross daily and follow me.”

At the heart of Jesus’ invitation are these two words—everyone and anyone. Jesus’ invitation extends to **everyone** who chooses to believe, and **anyone** who chooses to follow. Two different words with one meaning. Sinful though we are, Jesus meets us where we are and invites us to follow.

None of us come to God on the basis of our own righteousness; the Bible makes it clear, before a holy God, no one is righteous, not even one. We all stand in need of a Saviour, we all need forgiveness, we

are all in need of mercy. And as those who have received God's mercy, we are invited to extend this same mercy to others, that they might know the grace of our God.

Hanging on a cross, suspended between heaven and earth, Jesus died in our place—the Righteous One for unrighteous people. Jesus was buried in a tomb for three days, but on the third day, He rose from the dead. Jesus referred to His own death and resurrection as “the sign of Jonah,”<sup>8</sup> a sign that God can make the dead to live again.

This is good news. God hears our prayers, He is not far from any of us; He is full of mercy, He calls out to us, He can rescue us if we turn to Him.

**Pray**

**Worship**

**Benediction**

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 12:38-42.