

“A Predetermined Purpose”

Jonah 2:7-17

When I was about five years old I caught a fish, a huge catfish from one of our farm ponds. He was easily 3 or 4 pounds, and I was so proud. I showed him to my cousins, aunts, and uncles. I paraded him on a stringer around the backyard, and after about, oh, say an hour or so, I said, “Let’s put him back in the pond. Let’s let him go.”

To which my mom replied, “Eric, he is dead. We can’t put him back,” and I burst into tears. Apparently, although very tender-hearted, I wasn’t the brightest of kids. That catfish was caught and that was the end. History is filled with people who ran, were caught, and that was the end: Osama Bin Laden, Jesse James, Lee Harvey Oswald, Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, Richard Ramirez, et cetera. Usually when we run and we get caught, that’s the end.

God caught Jonah, but it wasn’t the end. It was a new beginning. And when Jesus catches it, is the beginning of new life and realizing our purpose.

When we left Jonah last week, he was on the run from God, who had told him, “**Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me**” (Jonah 1:2). Instead, Jonah fled in the exact opposite direction, away from God, and boarded a ship to take him far, far away. The boat that Jonah most likely got on was called a *penteconter*—an oared ship that was used for either merchant or military purposes. **(insert pic)** It was probably no bigger than 50 feet long and 12 feet wide with about 30 men who rowed.

It was not long before this 50-foot ship sailed into a terrific storm, unlike any the sailors had even seen. At this time in history, there was a sailing season because during the winter months, the strong storms on the Mediterranean could swamp their small wooden boats. In fact the Apostle Paul experienced that very thing 800 years after Jonah. Sailing was dangerous because of the storms. And this storm came out of nowhere, during the calm season, and was unusually strong. They knew there was something more than mere nature at work. It was the work of a god. And someone on their boat was to blame.

The sailors cast lots (which would have been a lot like flipping a coin) and the lot fell on Jonah. Immediately, in their panic they begin peppering him with questions like a vice detective, “**Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?**” (Jonah 1:8) The sailors wanted to know what Jonah did, where he was from, what race he was a part of—surely that would fill them in as to why they were fighting for their very lives. Jonah told them all this and more. He told them exactly who he was but, more importantly, he told them who had caused the storm. He said, “**I am a Hebrew and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.**”

The sailors already knew Jonah was running from the LORD. We know that because Jonah told they he was running from the Lord. The sailors cried out, “What have you done?” As a side note, if someone ever informs you they are running from God...don’t help them. It is never a good thing to work against God! Nevertheless, this news of Jonah’s God’s identity filled

the sailors with dread. They has underestimated the Lord, Jonah's God.

To understand why, you must know how religion worked in that day and age to truly know how terrifying that was.

Jonah was a Jew and Jews and Christians are monotheists. We have one God who we worship. He is in control. He is in charge. But in the 8th century BC, monotheism was a radical idea. Those sailors, like most people in the ancient world, were polytheists. They worshipped one god for the harvest, another god for fertility, another god for wisdom and another for the seas. So you could literally, if you did not like what a god was doing, get out of his or her jurisdiction; sort of like moving from California to Texas avoid paying high taxes. Jonah's statement of faith, claiming he worshipped the LORD who made everything, told them they were in real trouble because Jonah's God was the real deal. There was no escape from that God. He was the God who was in control of everything seen and unseen, including the very ocean that was beating their boat into little pieces.

Christians may be monotheists, but don't we sometimes live like those sailors?

I call this functional polytheism. We look to Jesus for big things, but we think that He is only interested in some areas of our life, and He only has control over a few choice things. So we turn to other gods, other powers, idols to control those parts in which we mistakenly believe God has less interest and less control. We make idols of politics, power, money, intimacy, acceptance, and there is a multitude of methods and manners in which we bow down and make ourselves slaves to these false gods.

Jesus, who made the sea and the dry land, wants to give us all this and more, and He can, because Jesus is Lord...of everything. Jesus is Lord of our checkbook, Washington D.C., our work, our family, Jesus is Lord of what we watch on TV and look at on the internet. Jesus is Lord of our workplace. Jesus is Lord of the soccer field, the baseball diamond, and the junior high classroom. This may sound a little threatening to some, but it shouldn't be. It should be an amazing comfort because if Jesus is Lord of all things, even the little things, we can know two things.

First, we can know that if Jesus is Lord of all things, He can work whatever happens in those little things to His plan, to our good and His glory.

I mentioned this man last week—one of my theological heroes, Gregory of Nazianzus who was 4th century teacher from modern day Turkey—back when Turkey was a hotbed of Christianity. Gregory, not far from the end of his life, ran afoul of some enemies in the Church who demanded that he resign from his position as a bishop. Gregory didn't do anything wrong. He had no moral failing or sinful offense. Instead, they disagreed with his strong conviction that the Holy Spirit is fully God—every bit God just like the Father and just like Jesus. This is something we believe today and the whole of the Church has practiced and believed since the time of Gregory. But Gregory was dealing with heretics who wanted to see Christianity become less monotheistic and like the religions of the world. And Gregory resigned himself to stepping down and retiring to his quiet home in order to expose his opponents for what they really were. It was a painful decision but he picked a familiar analogy to give comfort him and his supporters that Jesus is Lord and He is in control:

But I have become the prophet Jonah: I give myself up as a means of saving the ship, although I am not responsible for the storm. Take me and throw me according to the casting of the lot, a kindly whale out of the deep will receive me.

Bad things are going to happen sometime. We live in a fallen world, a world broken by the power of sin. We shouldn't let this panic us or fill us with despair. Because in this world where there are storms we can never doubt that God is able to rescue out of it—even by extraordinary means—like a whale swallowing us and carrying us safely away when we just want to call it quits. We'll get to that in a second.

God is always able to rescue us from the worst consequences of our sin and even the worst of other's sin too. Because Jesus is Lord of all, He bends all things to His glory and our good. And He does it in astonishing, unbelievable ways.

Second, we can know that if Jesus is Lord of all things, then we can be forgiven and we can receive grace in all things. The Barmen Declaration was written by faithful Christians in Nazi Germany, a place where the state tried to make the claim that they had the final say in many if not all things. Those Christians disagreed. They said Jesus had the final say. **We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.** Thank God our sin does not have the final say. Thank God our good intentions, good works, and good ideas do not have the final say. Thank God the hopelessness, disillusionment, and self-loathing of today does not have the final say. Jesus has the final say. There is not a single molecule, a breadcrumb, a grain of sand, a miniscule electron or proton in all of creation that does not have His name engraved upon it.

Given this important new information about the claim of Jonah's God over Jonah, the sea, their boat, and them, the sailors asked, "What shall we do to you, so that the sea may quiet down for us?" Meanwhile, the sea continued to rage and bluster, growing more tumultuous and turbulent by the minute. Jonah and the sailors had to yell at the top of their voices to even be heard, and as the wind, rain, and waves batted them in the face, Jonah screamed, **"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you"** (Jonah 1:12).

Throwing yourself into the middle of stormy sea was a very interesting choice, to say the least. The common idea about Jonah, subscribed to by biblical commentators and theologians, is that he had a change of heart and repented by telling the sailors to cast him overboard.

I humbly disagree. Jonah confessed because he knew he was caught, but his heart was as stubborn as ever. He thought this was the end, but when God catches people it is never the end.

Jonah absolutely confessed that he was on the run from God. He made that clear. So why didn't Jonah, knowing now that God had caught him, simply shout out over the wind and the waves, "I give up! I will go to Nineveh. Turn the ship around!" It was certainly something within his power to do. Jonah confessed, but he did not repent, he still would not go to Nineveh.

Confession is important but confession without repentance is incomplete. Too often I see

someone realize they have a problem. They realize what they have been doing is not working. They want the pain of their sin to stop; however, they are not yet ready to have a new mind, the mind of Christ, a repentant heart, a heart that submits to Jesus' Lordship, that leads to a new way of living. Jesus does not merely save us from sins and our wrongdoings, He sets us aside for a new way of life.

This incomplete Christianity leads to a faith that is ineffective in changing our lives or the world. It's so easy to tell people who have an incomplete faith. People with an incomplete faith are known more for what they are against than what or more importantly Who they are for. Incomplete Christians—a lot like Jonah, seem angry, joyless, and known more for what they are against and are prone to despair.

Christ-followers can't just show the world what we're against. We can't just tell people what not to do. We can't just be against sexual immorality, gossip, and envy, a particular political party or candidate or leader, stealing, lying, and idolatry. We have to show people Jesus. We have to offer something. We have to show peace, love, goodness, kindness, patience, gentleness, and grace. Disciples of Jesus have such great things to talk about. We are called, Peter taught, as God's chosen race, a royal priesthood to proclaim the excellencies of the one who called us out of darkness into a marvelous light. It is not enough to call the darkness dark. We have to walk in the light as well.

That is why confession without repentance is incomplete. Not only is confession without repentance incomplete, it is also insecure and replete with danger. An empty soul is vulnerable. It usually does not stay empty for long.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.

Luke 11:24-26

Jesus' clear teaching here is that it not enough to simply clean house—you have to invite in a new houseguest—someone who will take good care of it—namely Him. Confession is not enough. We have to repent. We have to cultivate the mind of Christ. And allow the Holy Spirit to take up residence. It's a good start to confess if you are on the run from God, but it's better to go to Nineveh.

The tell-tale sign of a Christian who has confessed but not repented is that they come to rely upon other gods. They put money on the throne of their life or politics or relationships or people. They allow other things, lesser things than Jesus to come in and take up residence in their heart.

I think that explains some of the madness we see now in our country and why we see people who are pretty decent and upright, solid citizens say and do crazy things. We've confessed but not repented. We've handed our individual sins over to God but we have not allowed Jesus to renew our minds, restore our souls, and bend our will to the Kingdom of God.

The Church is taking a beating today in the world because we have to come see the Gospel as something that only requires repentance from sin rather than something that makes new life possible. Our Christianity is incomplete and other lesser gods, ideas, philosophies and lords take up residence in our heart.

When we confess but don't repent, we always wind up in the same place as Jonah---in despair.

Jonah was caught and he believed the one throw left to make was over the side of the boat into the stormy sea. Rather than arising and going to Nineveh as the LORD commanded, Jonah chose to sink down into a sea of despair. Exhausted and despondent, without hope, Jonah would rather have died than arise and go to Nineveh. And Jonah, I believe, seized with despair and hopelessness, asked the sailors to end his life.

"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea," he said.

Amazingly, the pagan, foreign-god worshipping sailors were less willing to give up on Jonah than Jonah himself.

Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." (Jonah 1:13-14)

Just as God's authority over the world is complete, so is His compassion for the world. All people, not just one race, not just people from a certain walk and variety and stripe of life, no matter how sinful or wretched, are under His care, subject to His compassion, with access to His grace. **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16). God is at work in all the world, and in surprising places and people, not just where we expect to see Him, and certainly not only in the righteous who call on His name. Not only were those sailors, who just moments before prayed to their own local gods, now seeking the LORD, they also risked their lives to save Jonah by rowing hard back to the shore.

They did for Jonah, a sinner on the run from God, what Jonah was unwilling to do for the Ninevites—they risked their lives to save him from God's wrath. Pagans, unclean men, worshippers of foreign gods showed one of God's chosen people the sacrifice and compassion and dare I say, grace, that Jonah was supposed to show the Ninevites.

Part of our storm today is that we have lost all trust, compassion, and ability to show grace people who are different than us—especially those who believe differently from us. Was Jesus, who knew this story well, thinking of these pagan sailors who risked their lives to save Jonah, thinking of them when He preached on a hillside along the Sea of Galilee.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do

the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Matthew 5:43–47

We have a sense in our culture today that in the middle of this storm if we can just cast the right folks overboard—conservatives, liberals, Republicans, Democrats, the elite, populists, the media, the weak and the powerless—then the storm will calm down. Instead the simple conviction we should all carry because of our common humanity made in the image of God is that we should be like the sailors and row with everything we have to get out of the storm.

That's what Jesus commanded.

The storm `Jonah was in—driven by the power of God--was too strong.

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. (Jonah 1:15)

Those crusty old mariners, who survived many storms at sea, first *confessed* to Jonah's God, seeking his forgiveness for doing what they were about to do. After they tossed Jonah into the sea, we are told that the men *repented* by worshipping and committing to Jonah's God, the LORD. They did exactly what Jonah was unwilling to do, and they did exactly what God was demanding that the wicked Ninevites do—confess and repent. God used Jonah in spite of himself to witness to those sailors. God not only pursues us, but He also pursues relentlessly His anointed purposes through us.

You may know, of course, there was another criminal who was caught; however, He did not run from anyone. He set his face to embrace what was to come but His gang ran and hid... for a while. He was put on trial, humiliated, degraded. He was executed brutally. He was thrown down into a borrowed tomb. They thought that was the end. They thought it was over.

The leaders of the day thought if they could just get rid of him, throw him over the side, they could calm the storm that threatened to wreck their power and their lives. In fact one of their greatest leaders—Caiaphas—explicitly said “It is better for one man to die for the people rather than the whole of the nation should perish.”

It didn't work. He rose up from that tomb—all the way to heaven. And this Jesus will raise us up too one day, if we confess and repent and ask to be raised up with Him. We may arise because He is alive.

When God catches us, it is never the end. It is always a new beginning. Jesus practices catch and release. He catches us on the run to send us to out.

As soon as Jonah hit those churning, foaming seas, the storm ceased, and there was calm above the water. There was calm below now too. As Jonah sank below the soothing waves of the Mediterranean Sea, feeling his life slip away as the breath left his body, he didn't fight, he didn't struggle, he just let death's cold grip take hold. Jonah had disobeyed God. He had run from the LORD and now he would receive his due reward for his unrighteous works. At least now

it was over and there was a sense of peace about that, but peace was short-lived.

Off in the distance, Jonah saw something, a shadow at first, but coming closer, and rapidly. His peace suddenly turned to dread. Before Jonah could struggle back to the surface, the monster's gleaming teeth enveloped him and Jonah slipped into the belly of the beast.

Jonah thought he could escape God—but instead he was caught. Now, in the belly of the beast for three days and three nights, God would change his heart, to ready him for the throw...into Nineveh.