

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series through the Old Testament book of Jonah. Now, when you say the name Jonah, most people instinctively know that Jonah is that guy who was swallowed by a whale, or a great fish as the Bible actually puts it. But this story is not just a cute Sunday School story for children; it is a masterfully told story with a lot of relevance to our lives today. We are going to begin by reading the first three verses today:

***Jonah 1:1-3** - The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.*

Before we dive into the relevance of this passage for our lives today, a few background questions need to be answered. Is this a historical story? What is a prophet? And what is the significance of Ninevah and Tarshish?

**First, is this a historical story?** Maybe. We do know that Jonah is a real person, for he is mentioned elsewhere:

***2 Kings 14:23-27** - In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. <sup>24</sup> He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. <sup>25</sup> He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant **Jonah** son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher. <sup>26</sup> The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. <sup>27</sup> And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.*

So we do have corroboration elsewhere that there is a prophet named Jonah son of Amittai, who spoke God's word to a wicked king named Jeroboam, who was used by God to restore the boundaries of Israel so that they would be safer from foreign nations who were attacking them. But that does not mean that the story found in Jonah is necessarily history as we understand history, especially given the supernatural elements. It could be a historical story that is used by the author to emphasize something of spiritual and theological significance, or it could be similar to one of Jesus' parables, telling a story using the prophet Jonah to reveal a

deeper truth about Israel and their relationship with other nations. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** There is reason to lean that direction, because unlike other prophetic books, it is not grounded in actual dates or timelines of kings, there is only one brief oracle, as opposed to the many oracles found in other prophetic books, and it is essentially a narrative about the relationship between Jonah and God. It has similarities to some of Jesus' parables, like the parable of the prodigal son or the unforgiven servant.

The important thing is to not get hung up on the question of historicity in this case and whether a guy could actually get swallowed by a giant fish and live to tell the tale. Certainly all things are possible with God, but for our purposes, we are going to focus on the theological significance of the story for Jonah's contemporaries and for us today.

So we know that Jonah was a prophet. **What was the job of a prophet in those days?** Nowadays, people think of prophets as those who foretell the future, but in those days, the main job of the prophet was to be a covenant mediator. After God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus, he brought them out to Mt. Sinai and made a covenant with Moses and the people of Israel. I will be your God, you will be my people. Here are the laws of what it means to be my people. Here are the blessings that will come your way if you obey my laws. Here are the curses that will come your way if you disobey my laws. After that time, whenever the people of Israel were disobeying the covenant and in danger of bringing the curses upon themselves, God would raise up a prophet to be a covenant mediator. The prophet would speak the words of God to the people and call them to repentance, to give up their sin, their injustice, their false worship, their idolatry, or whatever else they were doing. Prophets were not very popular people as a result.

And sometimes, God called his prophets to speak words of warning or judgment against foreign nations. In this case, God is sending Jonah to be his mouthpiece to a foreign city called Ninevah, to warn them that if they do not change their ways, that he will destroy them. **Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria, one of the oldest civilizations in the world and one of the most brutal nations in Jonah's day, a nation that frequently attacked Israel.** It is located in what would be modern-day Iraq. And given what we know about Israel during Jonah's time from the 2 Kings passage we read earlier, we can see how vulnerable Israel was at this time to foreign invaders. And so God, in addition to using King Jeroboam to strengthen Israel's borders, also sends Jonah to confront a foreign threat, with the potential

outcomes of either giving up their violence or experiencing the violence of the Lord.

But as we see in Jonah 1:1-3, instead of going to Ninevah to preach against it, Jonah runs away for Tarshish. Where Tarshish is, commentators are unsure – most believe it was on the southwest coast of Spain, which is about as far away as he could get in Europe. All we know for sure is that it is the opposite direction from where God has told him to go. As it says in v. 3, Jonah sails for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Now that we have settled the background questions, again remember that this story is not just a tale about a disobedient prophet, but as a parable is also a mirror that God uses to hold up to us and reveal something about ourselves. This passage is essentially about God's call and Jonah's refusal to obey that call. **In that light, there are two levels I want to look at this morning with this mirror.** The first is God's call to us to find our identity and purpose in Him. And the second level is God's call to share His message with the world.

Let's begin with the first level. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah. This is the usual phrase in the Bible that is used for the calling of a prophet. God calls Jonah to be His prophet, to live in obedience to His will. And Jonah, instead of obeying, runs away; instead of going to Ninevah, he goes the opposite direction to Tarshish.

The Bible tells us that there is a God who created everything.

***Genesis 1:1 - In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***

In the beginning, God created. God is the Creator. And we were created for relationship with God and to find our identity and purpose in the one who created us. **God designed everything in this world, including us, and knows how it all should work.**

***Colossians 1:16-17 - For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.***

He created us. He designed us. We were created by him and for him. And because he designed us, he knows how we should live.

My wife loves to tag sale. Sometimes, she will bring home something like a lawn mower, where it's not obvious to me how to get it to work, leaving me with a couple of options. I can try to figure it out myself. Or I can find the model number and google it to see if I can find a manual, and follow those instructions to get it to work. I can just use it however I want and hope I don't break it, or I can listen to the one who designed it about how it should run, how to take care of it, and how to use it. If there is a God who created us, then the wisest thing that I can do is to consult the manual, so to speak, to live my life in response to His will, because if He created me, He knows best how I am to live.

I think it is clear that an increasing number of people in our culture believe and live as if there is no creator, no designer. More and more people are not concerned with how a God may want them to live. We are like Jonah. God calls. We run away. God calls us into relationship and we reject Him, thinking that we will be better off if we do our own thing. An increasing number of people believe and live as if they have the freedom to be self-creators, self-designers, to be whoever they choose to be and to live however they choose to live. **This is a very attractive message,** because it is a message that declares that you answer to no one, that happiness is found not by conforming to some external standard, but rather by looking inward, figuring out who you are and what you want, and then giving expression to that, and expecting the world to affirm that.

Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

*I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.*

Another great term for this is "expressive individualism." As Carl Trueman puts it, *"Expressive individualism particularly refers to the idea that in order to be fulfilled, in order to be an authentic person, in order to be genuinely me, I need to be able to express outwardly or perform publicly that which I feel I am inside."*

This belief is the cultural water in which we now swim. And it is understandably very attractive to many people. But as Jonah is about to find out, and as our world is also experiencing, running away from a relationship with God and His will does not lead to freedom and happiness and a world of love and peace but to personal

and cultural chaos. Jonah thinks he is gaining freedom, but he is about to experience some significant chaos.

**Our culture places a high value on freedom.** I believe our culture defines freedom essentially as the absence of restriction. In other words, the free person is the one who is free to choose to be or do whatever he or she wants, throwing off the shackles of parents, religion, God, and society's expectations, and nobody can tell them what is right or wrong for them. It is the attitude that says, to quote William Shakespeare: *This above all; to thine own self be true.* It is expressive individualism, the conviction that the most important thing is to look inward, to find out who you truly are and what you truly desire, and then to live that out, no matter what others say. To not let anyone else tell you what you can and can not do, or who you can or can not be, that if there is a God, than surely He or She would want you to be true to yourself.

This attitude seems self-evident to us in America today. We believe that we are basically good people with good desires who should have the right and the freedom to live as we please, without anyone telling us what to do. That in order to be fulfilled and free, we need to be able to follow our inward desires and beliefs and others need to affirm those.

**But I would argue that true freedom is not the absence of restrictions.** In every area of life, true freedom comes when you submit to your design, submit to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. Consider some analogies: Freedom for the **fish** is not going on dry land. What about the bird: freedom for the **bird** is not swimming. Freedom for the **pianist** is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the **basketball player** is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the **car owner** is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. In every area of life, freedom as the absence of restrictions, as the ability to indulge every desire, does not lead to life but to chaos, to breakdown, and to death. In every other realm of life, violating the design leads to chaos, breakdown, and death. And yet somehow, our culture has come to believe that if we can all just have the freedom to look within and choose our own path, that we will be happier and that the world will be a better place.

So what is true freedom? **True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but submitting to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions.** True freedom is

living as you were designed to live, as God intended you to live, living in obedience to the call of God and to the Word of God.

**1 Peter 2:16** - *Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

According to Peter, these are the right restrictions: you were created to serve God, to live for Him, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. **If that is true, then that means that your authentic self, your true self, your best life, will not be found by living as a self-created, self-designed, autonomous individual, looking within and living according to the desires you find in there, but will only be found by looking to God and to His Word and living according to the will of the one who designed you, as you submit to His design for you and serve Him.**

Our mistaken belief that a life apart from God is freedom, when it is really a life submitted to God. Jonah will not find freedom running away from God's will, but chaos, and the same is true for us.

The second level is running away from God's call to be a witness. In Jonah, you have one who is called by God to preach a message of sin, repentance, and salvation, but instead of obeying, he runs away.

The call on Israel was to be a city on a hill, a light to the nations.

*Isaiah 60:1-3* - "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. <sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. <sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

*1 Chronicles 16:23-24* - Sing to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim his salvation day after day. <sup>24</sup> Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

This call to proclaim God and His message continued throughout the New Testament:

*Matthew 5:14-16* - "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let

*your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

The Great Commission to go and make disciples.

**Matthew 28:18-20** - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

**Luke 24:46-47** - *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."*

**Acts 1:7-8** - *He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

**2 Corinthians 5:17-21** - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Notice the terminology – reconciliation. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins. This hints at the message that Jonah was called to preach to Ninevah, that our sins and wickedness have separated us from a holy God and brought evil into this world. And consequently, there is a need for repentance – turning away from sin and evil. There is a need for forgiveness – to have our sins forgiven. And there is a need for reconciliation – to be made right with God.

**John 3:16-18** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not*

*believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

The stakes are high! And God has called us to be a part of a rescue operation, to showcase God's goodness and glory by our words and actions, and to call people to repentance and a right relationship with God. God has called us to be his witnesses, his ambassadors. Jonah, as God's prophet, is called by God to fulfill this calling. And he runs the other way. And so often, we run away from this calling as well.

The story of Jonah is not just about a disobedient prophet, but I believe is meant to be a mirror held up to the Israelites who read the story, and to us even today. The call has not changed to go and make disciples; if anything, it has only become clearer. Will we obey? Or will we run away? We can understand reasons we might run away:

Fear of rejection  
 Don't want to seem different  
 Lack of love for others

Sharing the gospel is not easy because it involves some confrontational elements. It proclaims that you are not God, that you are not a self-creator or self-designer who can live however you please and expect God to applaud and affirm you. It proclaims that you are a sinner, a rebel against a holy God, someone headed to Hell if there is no intervention, no turning around, no repentance. It proclaims that you can not save yourself by your own good works, but that you need a Savior. And it proclaims that the only Savior is Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for your sins and offers you by faith in Him a right relationship with God, eternal life.

*1 Corinthians 1:18 - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

*2 Corinthians 2:14-16 - But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup> To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.*

As you share the gospel, some will rejoice, and others will revolt. Some will welcome you and others will reject you or hate you. And so, like Jonah, it is understandable that we will be tempted to run the other way, to sugarcoat or water

down the gospel message. But the call is clear: go and make disciples. Preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Be his witnesses.

Paul understood this. In Acts 20, speaking to the Ephesian elders, he says this:

*Acts 20:20-21, 26-27 - You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus...<sup>26</sup> Therefore, I declare to you today that I am **innocent** of the **blood** of all men. <sup>27</sup> For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

Can you say that you are innocent of the blood of all men?

This concept reminded me of a powerful video by Penn Jillette of the Las Vegas illusionist duo Penn & Teller. Penn Jillette is a very smart, outspoken atheist, and it is not hard to find videos online of him ridiculing religious people for their beliefs and practices. In one video, however, he spoke briefly of an encounter he had with a gentleman after one of his shows. Let me share some of what he said:

*He walked over to me and he said, "I was here at the show last night, I saw the show and I liked it." He was complimentary about my use of language and my honesty... he said nice stuff... and then he said "I brought this for you" and he gave me a pocket Gideon's Bible with the New Testament and Psalms... he said "I wrote in the front of this, and I wanted you to have it... I'm proselytizing... I want you to know I'm a businessman, I'm sane, I'm not crazy." And he looked me right in the eye, and it was really wonderful. I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive, and he looked me right in the eyes. And he was truly complimentary. It didn't seem in any way that it was empty flattery; he was kind, and nice, and sane, and looked me in the eye and talked to me, and then gave me this Bible. **And I've always said, I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there is a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever and you think "well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward."** **How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believe that there is a truck bearing down on you, and you didn't believe it, there's a certain point***

*at which I tackle you. And this is more important than that. This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane and he cared enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible which had written in it a little note to me and five phone numbers and an email address in case I want to get in touch. Now, I know there is no God, and one polite person living his life right doesn't change that. But I'll tell you, he was a very, very, very good man, and that's really important, and with that kind of goodness, it's okay to have that deep of a disagreement. I still think religion does a lot of bad stuff, but that was a very good man."*

Who do you need to share the gospel with? Can you say that you are innocent of their blood?

Jonah was called by God to find his identity and purpose in Him, and to share His message with the world. The same is true for us today. And true freedom and joy is not found in running away from those calls, but by living in submission to those calls, living in submission to our design. True and eternal joy is found in being used by God to bring people to faith in Him, to rescue people from death and to help them find eternal life.