



Jonah (Part 2) – Messengers of Mercy

Minor Prophets #3 • July 27, 2025

Opening

Every month or so, I receive a magazine in the mail. It's an edition of *Christianity Today*, a publication that shares stories and articles about faith and the church. It covers a wide range of topics from a broadly evangelical perspective, and I always find the content engaging.

My favorite portion of the magazine is a **story of transformation**. Each edition carries a testimony from a person about their path to Jesus – sometimes from a well-known person, sometimes from a “nobody” ... but always from a person who is changed by Christ!

Here are a few tagline summaries of their stories:

- *A balcony view, a warehouse church, and the sweetness of the Word led me to the safe home of God's love.*
- *I was an outspoken queer leader on my college campus who wanted nothing to do with Christianity. Then God moved.*
- *A couple's weekly dinner invitations helped transform me from an embittered skinhead to a senior pastor.*
- *After enduring brutality as a child and inflicting it as a gang member, I sought healing and wholeness at the cross.*
- *[Psychodelic] Shrooms glittered on the surface—but hid a dark chasm underneath. That's where Jesus found me.*

If you get a chance, I'd encourage you to read some of their stories (search “**Christianity Today testimonies**”). In 1500 words, each article tells a fascinating tale of God at work! I appreciate the **range of people** that receive His grace and mercy, but it is the **variety of messengers** that I love. None of the stories are the same; each person has a unique path to Jesus, and yet each person has a “**messenger of mercy**” that helps make that path clear.

The same could be said for all of us. We may not be featured in a magazine, but for each one of the people sitting beside you here in church, our stories all involve some “messenger of mercy.” It could be a conversation, it could be a crisis, it could be a caretaker, or it could be a confidant. *Someone* or *something* is used by God to make His message clear!

Today’s sermon passage from the book of Jonah illustrates God’s use of messengers. It isn’t exactly a *Christian* story of conversion, but Jonah’s experience does share some parallels. His book shows our God full of **second chances** trying to turn sinners’ hearts toward His own.

And the “messengers of mercy” God uses are dramatic! Today, we’re going to identify some of those messengers and consider what message they continue to share for us.

Recap

In last week’s sermon, we began to look at the prophet Jonah. His story is from the twelve books at the end of your Old Testament known as the Minor Prophets. This summer, we are preaching through **a selection of** these short, prophetic books, because they really matter! They are “small, but mighty” messages from God, helping us hear not just *about* Him...but *from* Him!

- In the book of **Obadiah**, we heard God challenge us to **care about how we treat others**.
- Last week in our first of 2 looks at the book of **Jonah**, we heard God challenge us to give in to His **relentless pursuit** of us and **respond to His call** in our lives.

But we really covered only the first chapter of Jonah. We saw him receive an assignment from God and then promptly run away from it. Rather than going to proclaim a message to the city of Nineveh, Jonah ran away and tried to get as far from God’s plans as possible!

But God didn’t give up on His plans. He pursued Jonah, and eventually He caught him... overboard in the middle of the Mediterranean, on the brink of drowning!

Here’s where our first messenger arrives!

Messenger #1: The “Big Fish”

“Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.”

(Jonah 1:17, NLT)

A big fish (or “whale” as we often call it), swallows Jonah alive.

The animal in question here is the subject of a lot of debate and speculation. Was it a blue whale? A whale shark? A really big tuna? The anatomy of throat sizes and stomach capacities in these marine animals has caused some people to doubt the historical nature of Jonah’s adventure.

But, if humans can build submarines to keep people alive under water, surely God could arrange and/or prepare an animal for this task!

The big question isn’t *what kind* of fish...it’s *why* the fish?

According to Jonah 1:13, the boat had been near enough to dry land that it was within rowing distance. Certainly, God could have rescued Jonah with a piece of floating wreckage to which Jonah could have clung until he washed up on the beach!

The fish wasn’t God’s only option, but it was a **messenger of mercy**.

Where you and I might see only a big creature, Jonah would have seen a message.

In the ancient Near East, **the sea** is a picture of **chaos**. And in Near Eastern mythology, **chaos** is also pictured by the **sea monster Leviathan**. He is pictured as a powerful, unstoppable beast (check out Job 41 for more detail). To anyone from that culture, a giant sea creature (whether whale or fish) would have conjured images of *Leviathan*. And this giant, unstoppable force of chaos...is shown here to be fully under the control of God!

*“See the ships sailing along, and Leviathan, which you **made to play** in the sea.”* (Psalm 104:26, NLT)

Leviathan was **at God’s disposal**; it was a reminder that **every force** (no matter how dangerous) must obey God. The big fish was a sign to show that a chaotic world is **under God’s control**!

And that message was a merciful reminder to Jonah as he sloshed around in gastric juices and partially digested sea creatures. Three days and three

nights in the beast allowed Jonah **time to think**. He had no guarantee his situation was temporary (for all he knew, this could be the final stop!). But he retained hope that he would get out and have an opportunity to do things differently. His prayer is recorded in Jonah 2:1-9.

“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish. He said, ‘I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and Lord, you heard me! You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me; I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves. Then I said, ‘O Lord, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.’ ‘I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death! As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple. Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God’s mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord alone.’” (Jonah 2:1–9, NLT)

With nowhere to run, this second chance helps Jonah recognize God’s provision. He sees the storm and his plunge into the ocean not as a punishment but as a catalyst for change.

He clings to hope, saying, **“I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple”** (2:4). His faith trumps his feelings, and Jonah repents!

He reorders his priorities, recognizing that **“Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy....Salvation is of the LORD”** (2:8-9).

Jonah sets aside his own feelings and his own fears and commits them to God, stating his willingness to do what God has asked. It’s possible that Jonah may have regarded his changed heart as a deathbed confession, but God had bigger plans. Jonah’s newfound faith wouldn’t be hypothetical; it would be given a chance to act!

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway: **God can control the chaos!**

When trouble surrounds you – when chaos is abounding – that is the perfect moment to remember that the only One who can control the chaos is God! That overwhelming situation (at work, at home, in your marriage, in your finances) might carry a message of God's mercy to you. It may remind you that nothing else is stable or trustworthy!

“In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.” (1 Peter 5:10, NLT)

God can and will use messengers (people/events/situations) that call you out of the chaos!

You don't have to enjoy the messenger but be grateful that it points you to Someone better!

Messenger #2: Jonah

The first messenger – the big fish – vomits Jonah out...and immediately, God repeats his marching orders.

“Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.””
(Jonah 3:1–2, NLT)

This time (hopefully after a long, hot shower), Jonah obeyed! And in doing so, Jonah became our **second messenger of mercy** in this story! He would be the messenger for over 100,000 people in the city of Nineveh.

What do we know about this city where Jonah is going? **Nineveh** is located in modern-day Iraq. It was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and it was big! The wall around it was eight miles long, with fifteen gates providing entry to it. It had gardens and parks watered by a 30-mile long aqueduct. Over 120,000 people lived there, giving it a population similar to present-day Topeka.

There was beauty in Nineveh...but it covered an evil core.

The nation of Assyria was violent and brutal. In battle, they practiced psychological warfare to gain an advantage. Innocent civilians were decimated in gruesome ways to influence others to surrender. Displays of

the dead were used to convince stubborn inhabitants that submission was the most sensible option. This was an effective way of instilling fear and establishing respect throughout the empire, and the Assyrian reputation was an effective means of control.

God saw...and God was ready to punish them!

“On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”” (Jonah 3:4, NLT)

What response should we expect for that type of message? Cynically, we might expect that the Ninevites would simply kill Jonah to silence him...or, if they were feeling generous, at least kick him out of town. But they didn't. Their reaction was unexpectedly positive!

“The people of Nineveh believed God’s message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: “No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.”” (Jonah 3:5–9, NLT)

Instead of ignoring the message, the Ninevites embraced it and repented! They believed God, and they engaged in practices like fasting and wearing sackcloth to show their sorrow!

Why did they listen to Jonah?

- We mentioned last week that the **political situation** in Jonah's time was one of weakness for Assyria, with tribes from the north pushing in on their borders. This message – that the city would fall in 40 days – was a more plausible threat than it might be during a time of Assyrian strength.

- **Knowledge of Yahweh** and His powerful displays in history might have lent some credence to the message, too, if they had heard stories about Him.
- But maybe most convincingly, **Jonah's escapade in the fish** might have helped the response! Think about what marinating in stomach juice would have done physically to Jonah (bleach, skin problems). Now think about the attention it would have brought as people questioned why he looked freaky! His story would bolster his voice as a prophet of God.

No matter why they listened, Jonah's message was an opportunity for mercy. His preaching had an overwhelming impact!

"When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened." (Jonah 3:10, NLT)

The Ninevites heard, and they repented – they turned their back on evil (at least for a while!). And God relented!

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway: **God's goal is repentance**

God is not shy about the punishments that await His enemies. There is a justified, divine wrath that awaits those who practice evil:

"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." (Ephesians 5:6, ESV)

We are doing people no favors if we proclaim only the love of God with no mention of His judgment. It awaits, and it may be sooner than we think!

Yet the message of doom is not fixed. God's mercy is still available. His goal is not total destruction; He would rather you turn away from sin! He wants the reaction we see in Psalm 32:

"I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalm 32:5, ESV)

God can and will use messengers (people/events/situations) that call us to turn away from our sin and turn to God instead.

You don't have to like what the messenger says, but be grateful that He gives you motivation and opportunity to turn back to Him!

Messenger #3: The Worm

The second messenger – Jonah – delivered his message, but afterwards he is not too happy about it.

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”” (Jonah 4:1–3, ESV)

Whoa! There is a **profound difference** between Jonah's reaction to the Ninevites' repentance and our reaction as readers. We are happy; he is not!

“Jonah was greatly displeased.” The Hebrew rendering is ever more intense. It literally reads, *“But it was evil to Jonah with great evil.”*

Jonah's reaction is shown not to be just displeased but **opposed** to God! He acts like one who calls good evil and evil good (cf. Isaiah 5:20). And with that statement, the focus changes. *Jonah* is now the one in need of another messenger of mercy!

God could have poured out wrath on Jonah, but He continues to show great patience as a God of second chances. *“Is your anger right?”* God questions.

Now it's time for a lesson. Here's what happens next:

“Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and

wished to die. “Death is certainly better than living like this!” he exclaimed.” (Jonah 4:5–8, NLT)

Hoping against hope that the repentance shown by Nineveh was not adequate to stop God’s fury, Jonah put himself in a prime viewing spot for what he hoped would be forthcoming destruction.¹ Yet just like God “appointed” a fish earlier, here he “appoints” a plant, a worm, and a hot wind to change Jonah’s attitude.

Have you ever felt entitled to something? Maybe you think your day serving at the LVCO Fair parking is supposed to be cool. Maybe you think your marriage is supposed to be smooth. Maybe you think your bank account is supposed to be bigger.

But success and comfort are not the things that matter most to God! Jonah had lost the plot. He was more concerned about his own comfort/reputation/nation than about the eternal destiny of 120,000+ people! God challenges him by asking:

“But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”” (Jonah 4:11, NLT)

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway: **God can fix your attitude!**

The book ends with that exchange. There is no wrap-up, no record of Jonah’s take. But the fact that Jonah shares these unflattering looks at his own character and heart tells me he was changed by the experience!

I can imagine him sitting down later in life, writing this account down. He knows it isn’t complimentary, but he understands God’s heart now. He structures the prophetic book to show the lessons learned by the sailors, the Ninevites, and by Jonah himself are lessons worth sharing.

God doesn’t teach us these lessons to humiliate us. No, He does it to change us.

“For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There’s no regret for that kind of

¹ Some suggest that Jonah was not there to view destruction but instead to try to figure out God’s reasons for sparing the city.

sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10, NLT)

God can and will use messengers (people/events/situations) that call us to align our attitudes with God.

You don’t have to like what the messenger says, but be grateful that God gives you second chances to understand and conform to His heart!

Messenger #4: You

The messengers of mercy in the book of Jonah give us plenty of opportunities to learn about God.

They also remind us that we can be messengers, too!

God can and does use messengers (people/events/situations) that change people. He might steer you into an encounter you didn’t expect, or plant you in a friendship that was unlikely.

Is He “appointing” you like He appointed the fish, the plant, the worm, and the wind? Is He “calling” you like He called Jonah?

You might not know if/when you are a messenger of mercy, but you can be prepared for it anytime.²

Pay attention to needs. Recognize that people are *harassed and helpless* (Matthew 9:35-38): they are troubled, distressed, overwhelmed, and need Jesus. Be aware that many of your friends feel isolated, vulnerable, and lost. Notice the needs of your friends the way Jesus did.

Pray for your friends and for wisdom concerning how to share Jesus with them. Then be an answer to your own prayer!

Speak Jesus. Faith comes to humans through hearing the word of God:

“So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.” (Romans 10:17, NLT)

²Adapted from https://www.logos.com/grow/hall-evangelism-training-for-students/?utm_source=logos_desktopapp&utm_medium=rss_blog

God manifests faith in Christians through the word of Christ. Our is not to beg or pressure for faith because faith is not a resource their hearer can supply. The task of the evangelist is to deliver the word of (and about) Christ. As pastor Tim Keller says, “The gospel centers on Jesus. It is about a person, not a concept; it is about him, not us. ... It is a declaration about God’s Son, the man Jesus.”

Your most natural question, then, as a messenger of mercy is: “Do you know Jesus?”

Conclusion

I’m thankful for those who have been messengers of mercy in my own life, and I pray that others around us (like Jonah, like the Ninevites) will be able to hear that same message through us.

We may not be featured in a magazine, but I pray that...through a conversation, in a crisis, as a caretaker, or to a confidant... *YOU* can be used by God to make His message clear and to be a messenger of mercy for others!

Prayer

Invitation

Sermon Notes

Messenger #1: The “Big Fish”

(Jonah 1:17; Psalm 104:26; Jonah 2:1-9)

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway:

God can control the chaos! (1 Peter 5:10)

Messenger #2: Jonah

(Jonah 3:1-10)

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway:

God’s goal is repentance (Ephesians 5:6; Psalm 32:5)

Messenger #3: The Worm

(Jonah 4:1-11)

Here's Your Merciful Takeaway:

God can fix your attitude! (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Messenger #4: You

(Romans 10:17)

Sermon Discussion Questions

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Who is one person that was influential in helping you come to Christ? What did they do or say that was most helpful?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- What swallowed Jonah? What do you think his experience inside would have been like physically?
- Read Jonah 2:1-9. What were the spiritual results of his time in the big fish?
- Do you think his prayer was sincere? Why or why not?
- How can hardship help us learn lessons from God? How does hardship help us be aware of God's presence?
- Read Jonah 3:3. How would you describe Jonah's attitude before the big fish? After?
- Are there people and/or location you don't want to go? Who scares you, in terms of evangelism? Why?
- Why do you think the people listened to Jonah's message?
- Are you equipped to share the gospel message with people? If so, what are some key points to remember? If not, what are you missing?
- What counsel would you give to the residents of Nineveh as they engaged in repentance? What would help their newfound faith last in a culture that was not used to following God?
- In chapter 4, God teaches Jonah about His priorities. What were Jonah's? What was God's? Which most closely aligns with yours?
- Do you ever feel like God is "appointing" you like He appointed the fish, the plant, the worm, and the wind? Is He "calling" you like He called Jonah?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Thank God for those who have been messengers of mercy in your life.

- Ask God to help you be faithful sharing His message with others around you