

The Divided States of America
Plan “B”
June 30, 2019

Good morning everyone.

God is bigger than we think He is. God is bigger than we think He is.

On the one hand, that’s really good news – sort of in the way we heard it described in the song the band just did. God knows us, God understands us, which means that no trial or tribulation in our lives is too big because God is bigger and God is for us.

On the other hand, sometimes the fact that God is bigger than we think He is *isn’t* such good news.

And, in just a few minutes, I’m going to tell you a whole of a story about that.

But first, just to catch everyone up to where we are in this series, *The Divided States of America* ... we’ve been talking about all the political and cultural strife these days over issues like abortion and immigration and what “equality” means.

- In week one we saw that part of the reason there is so much division is that, on almost every issue, you and I are forced to take a side. So, we talked about how to engage in the debate over issues with our eyes wide open so that we don’t get sucked into the black hole of mindless tribalism.
- Then, in the second week, we talked about the need for those who are Christians to never forget that we are to love *God* first and most. Our love for Him is to be greater than our love for our “cause” (our opinion on what is right concerning all the current issues).

Otherwise, if our cause becomes our first love, we lose our perspective and all kinds of things get out of whack.

- And then last week we talked about how all this strife affects our interpersonal relationships. And we saw that, for someone who follows Jesus, it’s actually worse to denigrate another Christ-follower because they hold a different opinion than we do (“how could he have voted for Trump?” “How could she support the right to abortion?”) than it is to be wrong on a particular issue.

That’s how important the oneness of his people is to Jesus.

And if you missed any of those messages, I encourage you to take the time to watch, listen to or read them on our website, app or podcast.

But today, we’re shift the focus just a bit. We’ve been talking a lot about politics and policies and how to think

about and talk about and even act on those things.

But today, we're going to get a lot more personal. Today we're going to talk about *people* – specifically ...

- People who do not agree with what we believe is "right."
- People who do not live up to our moral standards.
- People who we believe are part of the problem and not part of the solution.
- People who – if we could be totally honest – people who we believe the world would be better off without.

For instance ...

- Those who don't just *support* the right to abortion, they *have* abortions and help run abortion clinics.
- People who don't just *support* the right to gun ownership, they *own* guns and proudly boast about it.
- Those who don't just *support* LGBTQ rights, they *actively promote* those lifestyles to our children while labelling those who object as "haters."
- Individuals who don't just *object* to environmental legislation, they *actively contribute* to the problem.

And the list could go on and on of people who not only don't see things like we do but are also, in our opinion, contributing to the downfall and destruction of society and even the world.

A Whale of a Story

It's going to get personal today ... which brings me to that whale of a story about a God who is far bigger than we think He is.

It begins like this:

*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."
Jonah 1:1-2 (NIV)*

I'm curious – how many of you are familiar with the biblical story of Jonah?

A lot of us are which, on the one hand is a good thing – it's good for people to be aware of what's in the Bible – but, on the other, it may not be so good because what people *know* of the story isn't really *the point* of the story.

Most people know that, in the story, some guy named Jonah gets swallowed by a big fish (the Bible never calls

it a whale) and lives to tell about it because (the Bible says) God causes the fish to spit him out at some point.

Of course, that then leads to lots of pointless debate as to whether or not the story is literally true; how big a fish it had to be, why it's possible or impossible for a man to survive such an event, etc, etc.

Some people (but not most people) know that Jonah was a Jewish prophet and that the reason he got swallowed by a fish was because he was running away from God.

Instead of doing what God had told him to do which was (as we just read) to go to Nineveh and preach, Jonah went in the opposite direction. And the big fish was God's miraculous mechanism to put him (literally) back on the right path (which is *also* not the point of the story).

So *lots* of people know at least *something* about the story of Jonah. But very *few* people know what the story is really about.

And even *fewer* know that it has much to say about you and me and those who do not live or think in the way that we believe is "right."

So, that's what I want to talk to you about this morning.

And I'm going not going to spend any energy on whether or not the story is historically and literally true, other than to say that ...

- There really was a prophet by the name of Jonah in the historical line of Israel's prophets. He lived during the reign of one of Israel's most evil kings around 800 BC.
- And there really was a city of Nineveh in the Kingdom of Assyria. It was discovered and excavated in the late 1800s and many of its artifacts (including tablets and drawings depicting how for centuries Assyria brutally terrorized the ancient nation of Israel) ... many of its artifacts are in the British Museum in London.ⁱ
- And you can actually go to the location of Nineveh today. It's in modern day Iraq. The city of Mosul is built around it.
- Unfortunately, however, ISIS destroyed much of what was left of Nineveh, especially the ancient statues and buildings, one of which was referred to as the Tomb of Jonah.
- On top of all that, Jesus talked about Jonah a couple of times in his ministry.

Of course, none of that means that the story *actually happened* as it is written and, in fact, there is nothing in the story indicating that the author *intends* for it to be taken literally.

There are no dates mentioned, and neither are the names of Israel's king nor the name of Assyria's king, both of which are standard practice in the Old Testament writings that *are* intended to be literal and historical.

Point being – and this is all I’m going to say:

- If you want to believe the story of Jonah is *not* literal – that it’s intended to be a historical parable, you’re on solid ground.
- And if you want to believe it *is* literal, you’re on solid ground, too.
- And if you want to think less of someone else because they see it differently than you do ... you should go back and listen to last week’s message! And you should pay very close attention to this one.

Now, regardless of whether it’s meant to be literal or not, the Book of Jonah is one of the most brilliantly told stories in the entire Bible – a feature which is apparent at the very beginning.ⁱⁱ

The first sentence (as we saw) is “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai” which makes you think, “Oh, I know what kind of book this is. It’s a book of prophecy.” You think you’re about ready to read a collection of Jonah’s poetic prophecy, like every other book of the prophets.

But that’s not what you get. What you get is a story *about* the prophet Jonah.

So the very first sentence throws you off ... which is precisely the point. It’s a clue that everything in this book is going to be odd and strange. It’s going to be ironic and sarcastic and, in some places, downright funny.

In fact, one biblical commentator says that the Book of Jonah contains two forms of literature, the first being *satire*.

Satire is where you take well-known personalities or character-types and place them in extreme, ridiculous stories that highlight how flawed and screwed up they are. It’s what *Saturday Night Live* does, where they take political figures or celebrities and make them the butt of every joke.

And in this story, that’s what happens to Jonah. As a prophet, he should be the hero but he’s not. He’s actually the punchline.

For instance, the name “Jonah” means “dove.” And son of Amittai means “son of faithfulness.”

So, at the very beginning it *seems* we’re going to be reading about someone who is innocent and pure and faithful. But, ironically, Jonah actually turns out to be a terrible person and the most faithless character in the entire story!

The other form of literature that this book resembles (and this is obviously a modern form) is a *superhero comic book* in which everything is over the top; everything is great or huge.

And in the two short pages that make up the story of Jonah, the Hebrew word for “huge” (gadol) occurs fifteen times!

- The storm is huge!
- The ship is huge!
- The fish is huge!
- Jonah’s anger is huge!
- Nineveh is huge!

So huge, the story says, that it takes three days to walk through it which means it’s a 45-mile wide city. But there was no city in ancient world 45 miles wide. Nineveh was about 7 miles around.

Point being that all of these things – the satire, the irony and the overstated comic book nature – are signs that ...

Jonah was written to communicate truths far more impactful and important than what actually happens in the narrative.

So, with all of that said, let me show you a video of a comic-book-like telling of the story of Jonah which comes from the excellent free resources of *The Bible Project* which can be found at www.thebibleproject.com.ⁱⁱⁱ

As we watch, look for the satire and humor built into the story.

Voice: “The story opens as God ...”

Voice: “... with God asking Jonah for permission to show mercy to his enemies.”

Now, let look closer at the way God deals with Jonah at the end of the story because it’s brilliant.^{iv}

This is the first time in the entire story that there’s a *teeny tiny corner* of Jonah’s heart that cares about something other than himself.

So God says to him, “Okay, Jonah. You’ve got a soft spot in your heart and you care for this plant. I can work with that.”

“Now, for sake of argument, I’m going to grant the legitimacy of your strong, emotional attachment to this plant” ...

... which, because this is satire, you and I know is *not* legitimate. We all know Jonah's attachment is silly. It's ridiculous how concerned he is over a *plant*.

"But," God is saying, "I'm just going to grant that to you, Jonah. It's a good thing for you to be concerned about something other than yourself."

"So, maybe, you can grant *Me* the possibility that *I* might also have a strong and emotional concern about something other than *Myself*: a concern that in some ways is similar to yours but about something far more significant than a plant."

"I'm talking about my ..."

"... concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many cattle?"
Jonah 4:11 (NIV)

That part – about the cattle – is meant to be humorous and satirical.

But the part about "people who can't tell their right hand from their left" is not.

Some commentators suggest God is talking about "children" because kids don't know the difference between left and right.

But others suggest – and I tend to agree – that this is a figure of speech meant to communicate the *absolute lostness* of the people of Nineveh.

- They've been deceived (like all of us are deceived)
- They're walking in darkness.
- They're morally and spiritually misguided.
- They're confused and clueless.

Now, that doesn't *excuse* their behavior. God never says, "Well, you know, it's OK that they viciously slaughter thousands of people from time to time. It's OK for them to continually invade and plunder surrounding nations."

Not at all. They're *absolutely accountable* for their terrible behavior – which is why God sends Jonah to them in the first place!

But God understands that their behavior is because they're lost and misguided and spiritually deceived – which is *also* why God sends Jonah. *That's* the root cause of their sin and their injustice ...

... *just like it is ... Jonah's.*

It's obvious from his actions and his five-word message (that he clearly hopes no one will listen to!) that he thinks the Ninevites are the most wretched and immoral people on the planet. And they deserve nothing good from God.

But, in the story, the most undeserving and hard-hearted person is actually *him!*

Because, ironically, everything he despises about how God treats the people of Nineveh is how God has treated him! God has been gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster to *him!*

No one in this story has received more grace than he has. But Jonah is resentful and hard-hearted because he has forgotten that he, too, is a lost and misguided sinner.^v

And God is gently trying to get him to see his own hypocrisy. It's as if He is saying "You're just as broken, and lost, and deceived as they are, Jonah. And I love you, too, but you need to repent."

The End of the Story

And that's the end of the story. We never find out how Jonah responds. God asks him a question and we don't know his answer.

But that's OK ... because this story was never really about Jonah in the first place.

Instead, it's about you and me and a God who not only understands *us* and loves *us* (like we heard in the song before this message) but a God who also understands and loves *them*, too.

- The people who do not agree with what we believe is "right."
- The people who do not live up to our moral standards.
- The people who we believe are part of the problem and not part of the solution.
- The people who we believe the world would be better off without.

The Book of Jonah is about you and me and a God whose grace and mercy is so huge that He is concerned for those who we, in our moral superiority, consider to be Ninevites.

For instance ...

- People who support abortion rights and run abortion clinics.
- Or people who own guns and proudly defend their right to do so.

- Or people who actively promote certain lifestyle choices to our children while labelling us “haters” when we object.
- Or people who could care less about the environment and are contributing to the problem.

And the list of “godless liberals” and “heartless conservatives” could go on and on.

The story of Jonah is really about you and me and every single person who we consider to be our political or moral or tribal enemy and a God who is ...

- *Wildly* gracious and compassionate
- *Dangerously* slow to anger
- *Recklessly* abounding in love
- *Shockingly* taking no delight in the destruction of anyone ... including them and us.

The story of Jonah is about a God who is *bigger* than we thought He was ... which might be good news.

Or it might not.

See, the question God asks of Jonah at the end of the story is really a question for you and me. Actually, there are two questions.

1. Are you OK with the fact that God loves your “enemies” just as much as He loves you?

Because He does. He’s that big.

2. Furthermore, are you OK with the fact that God sees you as being just as messed up and sinful as they are? As someone in need of His mercy and grace just as much they are?

Because you are.

And these are the truths that are far more important than what actually happens in the story of Jonah.

Becoming “OK”

Of course, at this point, the question is ... how can we become OK with those things?

Because we might not be.

Or we might be only some of the time.

Or only with certain "sinners" and not with others.

So where do we start?

One author and theologian suggests we begin by seeing our enemies as a gift from God. It sounds a little crazy at first but here's how he explains it.

He writes:

"Our friends seldom show us our flaws. They're our friends precisely because they are able to overlook or ignore those parts of us."

But our enemies don't do that. Instead, they perform another invaluable function.

"We cannot come to terms with our own inner shadows except through our enemies."

"We have almost no other access to those unacceptable parts of ourselves that need redeeming except through the mirror they hold up to us."^{vi}

In other words, by looking at them and their faults, we can actually see things about *us* if we're open to it. That's why they're a gift from God.

Here's how it works. Visualize an "evil person" in your life and ...

1. Write down every character trait about them that you hate.

For instance ...

- They're selfish
- They're careless
- They're arrogant
- They're greedy
- They don't listen
- They don't care about God
- They don't care about others.
- They're not truthful.

Whatever it is that you despise about them – write it down.

And then pray and ask for God's Spirit to guide you in what you're going to do next ...

... which is to go line by line through each characteristic that you wrote down and ...

Ask yourself, “have I ever engaged in the same kind of behavior?”

- Have I ever lied?
- Ever been selfish?
- Ever been greedy?
- Ever been insensitive to God and others?

Now, you may not have done it to the same extent but that’s not the point. The point is whether or not the same tendency exists in you as it does in them.

Then ask yourself “why? Why have I acted in these ways?”

- *When* I have not listened (like them), why have I not?
- *When* I have been arrogant (like them), why so?
- Why have I been greedy?
- Why was I self-centered in that situation?
- Why was I < _____ >?

As you work through the list and you honestly answer the “why” question – you’ll discover something. *You had a reason.*

This doesn’t mean it’s right. It doesn’t excuse your behavior.

It just means that you are acutely aware of how your background and/or experience has somehow hurt or hindered you and that, in response, you have chosen to act in ways that are less than perfect and, in some cases, wrong and downright evil.

It means that, in your own mind, you have figured out a way to *humanize* your own flaws and your own sin.

And now you’re ready to take the final step which is to ...

Extend the gift of allowing them to be “human” too.

What most of us tend to do naturally with our enemies is to fixate on “that thing that they do or did.”

We take this complex human person who has a family of origins and crazy stories of growing up and a list of people who have wronged them – not to excuse what they’ve done but they have a story. People don’t behave in screwed up ways for no reason. We have all those stories behind the ways that we act.

And what we do is as we replay the movie of their faults and sin a million times in our head is to take this complex human person and reduce them down to the thing that they do or did.

Maybe, for example, they lied to you about something.

And then they become "the person who told a lie to me."

Then they become "a liar."

And then, in the movie in your head, they have a pitchfork and horns until, finally, their humanity is gone. They're nothing but a that trait that's annoying to you or the thing that they did to you.

That's why it so important to give your enemy the gift of being human – recognizing the common brokenness that we share with them.

This is clearly where God was leading Jonah and where He is leading us if we are followers of Jesus.

Jesus once told a group of "Jonahs" in His day – religious leaders who were ready to stone a woman for her sinfulness – "whoever is without sin, let him be the one to cast the first stone."

You know how the story goes. Jesus kneels down and starts drawing in the dust until, one by one, they all walk away.

Only Jesus is left and He asks her, "where are your accusers?"

"They're all gone," she responds.

And Jesus says, "neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin."

Jesus understood her humanity and he didn't condemn her for it. He understood that she was living in Plan B and she had her reasons.

What's Plan B?

Well, "Plan A" is how our life would be not if *our circumstances* were perfect but *we* were perfect.

Plan A is how life would be if we had never been wounded; how life would be if we had never sinned.

But no one is living in Plan A. Everyone is in Plan B or worse. Plan B is the life you have to live because you somehow screwed up Plan A.

- Plan B is the life the woman was living.

- Plan B is the life the men who took advantage of her were living.
- Plan B is the life the people of Nineveh were living.
- It's the life Jonah was living.
- It's the life our enemies are living.
- It's the life you and I are living.

But God can deal with Plan our B. Or Plan C. Or Plan G. Or Plan Z or even double Z because God is bigger than we thought He was.

Now, that doesn't mean God sugarcoats things. He doesn't call "Plan B" "Plan A."

He doesn't say "oh, it's OK for you to do <whatever>" because it's not. And it's not because it's ruining your life and the life of people around you. Plan B is plan B.

But God is a friend of sinners regardless of what "Plan" they're on.

And, if we are followers of Jesus, we are called to do the same.

Let's pray to that end.

<PRAYER>

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. 25th Anniversary ... short video testimonies of how God has impacted your life thru NHCC. Beginning next week running thru end of July.
2. Potluck and worship night (great experience on our first try). A week from this coming Wednesday.
3. Blessing

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://lachish.org/geographic-and-historical-context/>

ⁱⁱ The following are observations noted at <https://thebibleproject.com/podcast/amazing-jonah-part-1-running-your-life/transcript/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Jonah resource page is here: <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/jonah/>. The actual video (which I have edited for purposes of time) is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLlabZc0O4c>

^{iv} This next section is based on observations from <https://thebibleproject.com/podcast/amazing-jonah-part-5-when-god-loves-your-enemy>

^v <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=7074435c-1f82-4aaa-9788-2e9995e7d128>

^{vi} Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*