

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Online Series

Sermon: To Hell With Them

Jonah 1:17-2:3; 2:10-3:2

Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2

1 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.

10 And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

3 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.”

Sermon

Have you ever enjoyed the sweet taste of revenge? The act of retribution towards a group or an individual who has wronged you in some way, embarrassed you, harmed you? I remember a church softball team we started years ago. The city had a church league, but it was full. So the official gave the spot of a team that had dropped out of another league, the bar league, and just put the name “Methodist” behind their name. So we were the Fat Boys Methodist” 16 games. We one our first game, then lost the next 14. One of the teams we played were called the “Brewdogs”. Played them twice. The first time, they already slaughtered us by a score of 25 to 2. And that was after 3 innings. I don’t mind losing, but they were arrogant, they were condescending, they were rude, they were the mouthiest bunch of players that we had the privilege of losing to. But in our last game, we had the honor to play them again. Again, they were loud and obnoxious. They hadn’t changed since our last meeting. We played one of our best games, defensively and offensively. Miracle of Miracles, we hung in there. Going into the last inning, we were tied. And then we scored 5 runs, and they only scored 4. They were yelling, cursing, weeping and gnashing of teeth. And I was loving it Now as I’ve said, I don’t mind if we win or lose - but I love beating jerks. There is nothing quite like knocking someone off of their high horse, is there? They got what they deserved. Which is why the Book of Jonah bothers me.

The story of Jonah is probably one that you remember from your Sunday School days. We are not sure if the story of Jonah is based in reality, based in folklore, or just a Hebrew fairy tale intended to make a point. We don’t know if it historically happened or if its just a “Once upon a time” sort of book that teaches and conveys something about the nature of God. Kind of it’s own little “fish story”. <Bad joke> Personally, I find Jonah a little hard to swallow. <Another bad joke>. If these events actually happened, super. If they are works of

fiction, that's fine too. The point still stays the same - to help us to better understand God and God's compassion and mercy. Jonah and whale, the big fish. Being swallowed up for three days and nights in the belly of a sea creature, followed by Jonah's deliverance. You know its going to be a unique sermon when you have the word "vomited" in the scripture text. There are, however, some dynamics behind the scenes that you need to know.

First, when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, it wasn't just a city somewhere in the Middle East. Jonah was an Israelite. Nineveh happened to be the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the sworn enemy of Israel. Assyria would eventually wipe out 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel. If you have ever heard of the lost tribes of Israel, it was the Assyrians who conquered and demolished them. So God tells Jonah to go to their sworn enemy's capital and tell them to repent or they will face the wrath of God. What do you think Jonah thinks about this? Yeah God, give them everything you've got. Give them destruction. Give them death. God is telling Jonah that he can save them, or condemn them. Jonah is thinking to save them, or destroy and kill them. Save them, or quite literally (and in this context, it's not swearing), to hell with them. Save them or to hell with them. Jonah chooses the latter. Matter of fact, he gets on a boat for Tarshish, which is Spain - the farthest reaches of the known world. Exactly the opposite direction of Nineveh. He tries to get away. He wants God's judgement and wrath for the evil Assyrian. God apparently thought that this was the wrong answer. So a storm came up on the Mediterranean. And after a lot of dialogue that we skipped over for today, Jonah gets thrown into the deep, thinking he was the cause of the storm.

Jonah thought that this would be the end. This was his suicide attempt. Again, God thought that this was the wrong answer. So Jonah is somehow saved by a creature of the sea and lives in the belly for several days. This is one big fish! This is the one fish that got away. We've all heard about fishermen stories where they tell about the one that got away. This is it. This story would take the cake. But the interesting part of this section is that Jonah can't even kill himself without having God foil his plans. He jumps into the sea and is saved. He can't do anything right. While in the belly of the whale, Jonah realizes that God isn't going to leave him alone until he goes to Nineveh to give God's message to Israel's enemy. It finally clicks. The fish deposits Jonah on a beach, and Jonah goes to Nineveh. The one that got away. I used that phrase for the fish a moment ago. The one that got away. But I want to expand that meaning to help us in understanding the universality of God's mercy and compassion for humanity. Jonah had a narrow view of God's grace and mercy. He thought that Israel was God's only concern. What he discovered, however, was that God does not want anyone to get away. Jew or gentile, free or slave. Jonah had to learn that God's grace covers all. There is no select group or favored population. God does not want anyone to get away from God's salvation, regardless of what we think God should or should not do. Jonah said, "to hell with them", and God said, "That's my business, not yours". We might say to people in our society, "to hell with them", and God would respond, "worry about yourself". God does not want anyone of us to get away. To often, we judge when we shouldn't. We think that we are more deserving than others. We believe that if God likes anybody, its going to be us, don't we. We must remember, however, that we are all in need of God's grace, we can't do it alone. He doesn't want anyone of us to get away.

There may be groups who need to be punished. Put into their place. To hell with them. And then I realize that I'm a Jonah. This story keeps coming back into my brain. God told Jonah to go into the heart of the enemy's territory and seek their salvation - save them from the wrath of God, their execution. As we said before, the wrath of God is what Jonah wanted for Nineveh. The scripture that we read this morning covers 3/4 of the complete text. There is one more chapter following the text we read this morning. And it is in this last chapter that I get a better understanding of God and of justice and mercy.

Surprisingly, in the end of the story, the people of Nineveh listened to Jonah. They repented, declared a fast, and showed signs of repentance - sackcloth, ashes, the whole bit. Jonah hoped that they would not listen to him. And Jonah got mad. Jonah was angry at God for showing mercy and love. The story ends with Jonah still miserable, still pouting, still not understanding that God cares for everybody - He doesn't want anyone to get

away. That is why I am still like Jonah - there are those that I don't want God to show mercy to. There are those I wish would experience all of the wrath of God possible. To hell with them. Do you have a group where you want God's punishment and fire and brimstone? And God tells me that I do not have a right to have these thoughts. I don't have a right to tell God who deserves punishment and who deserves glory. When I judge others is when I will be judged. God doesn't want anyone to get away. Jonah was still angry at God for saving Nineveh, but he forgot that God also saved him with the fish. The one who was saved didn't want others to be saved. You can see the hypocrisy in the story. That's where I'm a Jonah. I have a hard time forgiving when it is myself who needs forgiveness. God does not want anyone of us to get away. Including us. Including us. Thanks be to God!