

# JONAH

Ever since I first heard the story as a kid ... I have always enjoyed the Book of Jonah as one of the most entertaining stories in the OT.

To compare: all the pages and pages of lineages, allotments and authorizations of families and lands and laws all codified into the OT are really hard to understand as a child.

For example, how would I even know if I was wearing *linen and wool blended clothing*? An infraction of God's Law prohibited in Leviticus 19.

I was a kid, I didn't even buy my own clothes.

In Jonah there are great ingredients for a story.

There are ships and storms and sea creatures. There is a descent into the depth of the ocean and a journey back up to land. Children love that stuff. **And the word vomit appears** at the end of chapter 2. It's epic.

And Jonah was a prophet of the Most-High God. So one might think that his relationship to God would be simple.

God speaks ... Jonah tells everyone what God says. Repeat.

But there is real drama in this call. The contest of wills between Jonah and God makes this a great story for children and all of us of any age.

But for the more mature reader, what makes the story truly great is that there is gospel in it.

## THE CALL TO NINEVEH

God commands Jonah:

***"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,  
and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."***

Wouldn't it be exciting but also terrifying to receive the call of God so clearly? But Jonah is neither terrified nor excited. **He is full of hatred.**

Why did Jonah hate the people of Nineveh so much? Because it is the capital city of the Assyrians. And they were the biggest and baddest Empire of the day. The Assyrian Empire moved its capital to Nineveh sometime after 705BC -we therefore know that we are meant to understand that by the time Jonah hears the call from God to preach in Nineveh, the Assyrians have already devastated Jonah's and inflicted deep pain upon **most or all** of everyone he has ever known and loved.

Remember, Jonah lived during the Divided Kingdom ... Judah, the **Southern Kingdom**, and its capital of Jerusalem. And Israel, the **Northern Kingdom** and its capital city, Samaria.

The story of Jonah is set in the decades after Assyria devastated Samaria which happened in 722 BCE.

Samaria was destroyed and many of its people died during the siege, killed when the city was breached and many of those who survived would have been deported to other parts of the Empire, many never to be seen again.

This was the Assyrian scheme for colonizing newly conquered places.

They colonized through deportation and assimilation. The Assyrians conquered a city or land and then removed the local people. They would replace the deported locals with their own loyal subjects. Then through the deportation, they would begin to erase the religion, culture and history of the conquered people by sprinkling them throughout their Empire, folding them into the dominant culture.

The Assyrians were great colonizers but they were also brutal.

Encyclopedia Britannica states that the Ancient Assyrians publicly tortured the people they conquered in attempts to control people through fear.

Another source states that their military was so efficient at besieging walled cities and brutalizing the trapped citizens: men, women and children -and starving and crushing them into submission. They were so good at developing these siege technics of city-breaking, that their techniques went almost unchanged for thousands of years.

They were brutal and anyone in their way suffered the curse of their military might.

## **GOD'S CONCERN FOR NINEVEH**

No wonder the book of Jonah closes with God saying these words to Jonah:

***And should I not have 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 animals?”***

In the Bible, the right hand bestows blessing and is always offered in friendship.

But beware the left hand. It is the left hand that issues curses.

God is saying that the Ninevites are so blind in their ambition for Empire and power that they no longer know the difference between blessing people and cursing them. They are blinded by their quest to dominate.

No wonder God wanted to talk to them.

No wonder God wants them to turn away from their evil ways.

No wonder God needs a prophet to set them straight.

No wonder God calls Jonah.

And no wonder Jonah hates the people of Nineveh.

So, no wonder Jonah runs away.

## **COLONIZATION OF THE HEART BY HATE**

Long before God's call to Jonah, Jonah had witnessed the full brutality of the Empire. Jonah saw his city destroyed and his people, the people he loves, tortured or deported and his heart filled with hate for his enemies.

As his hometown fell to the Assyrians and his people colonized, his heart became colonized, by hatred. The culture of hatred has no respect for any other culture.

Jonah wants nothing to do with any errand of mercy and grace. He wants God to erase his enemies. The call to save the Ninevites was unthinkable to Jonah.

Jonah's heart is so colonized by hate that the final scene of the story leaves Jonah on a hill outside of the city Niniveh, laying siege to Nineveh with all the rage of his hate filled heart, and cursing the day of his birth.

So filled with hate is Jonah that he too, no longer seems to know his right hand from his left. He no longer knows the difference between blessing and curse.

## **GOSPEL IN JONAH**

But Nineveh is saved anyway. There is gospel in this story.

And this is what makes the Book of Jonah such a great introduction to our God whose character is full of grace and mercy. And who seeks to colonize our hearts with that very same grace and mercy.

There is gospel in the Book of Jonah.

But we only glimpse the gospel in the story as it is partially eclipsed by the story itself.

Salvation by faith in what was preached to the Ninevites, ***it is there*** but it is overshadowed by the storms and the sea-creature, the drama of disobedience and the rage of the prophet.

The gospel however obscured cannot be contained, because the God of salvation cannot be contained, and the gospel of salvation cannot be undone, not even by a petulant prophet.

Good News always gets out. And Nineveh is saved by trusting in God's character and promise.

## **MARK: JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD MADE FLESH**

If the gospel is only glimpsed in the Hebrew Bible, it is in the fullness of time, made fully known and given flesh in the life of Jesus Christ.

Like the story of Jonah, I love the story of Jesus calling Simon Peter and his brother Andrew then calling James and his brother John.

This story is, in my memory, every bit as foundational to my faith as is the story of Jonah. There are some similarities too. There are boats and mariners and a sea; and while they aren't mentioned specifically in Mark, the presence of fish is implied.

There is a sermon too. Jesus' sermon that begins his ministry isn't quite as short as Jonah's sermon in Nineveh.

***"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."***

People like short sermons. We preachers know this, but we often can't help ourselves.

***"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."***

In this translation, where Jesus says: ***the kingdom of God has come near***, other translations render it: ***the kingdom of God is at hand***.

I prefer that second translation ... *the Kingdom of God is at hand*.

I like it better because the Greek word behind this phrase, is in its verb form, was originally understood to mean 'to bend'.

As in its noun form may have, at one time, may have meant 'arm'.

So, in this sense the Kingdom of God is at hand, it is in reach, yet often like Jonah, we humans struggle to grasp it ... or to be grasped by it.

We humans wrestle with God's call too, because our hearts can be colonized by so many different powers.

Our hearts tend to want independence ... but we must instead bend our hearts ... bend our spirits ... to the reality that God's Kingdom is near.

The God of mercy and grace has not changed between testaments and calls to you to receive mercy and in turn to preach mercy.

Sometimes each one of us struggles to see the Kingdom of God. Sometimes in the storms of life our hearts remain uncolonized by the gospel.

But remember friends the gospel cannot be contained.

And so, Jesus issues a call to the fishermen, to become bearers of the Kingdom of God ... a call filled with grace for those being called and all for the sake sharing the gospel of grace.

## THE BROTHERS

By the time Jesus called to the brothers on the seashores of Galilee, it is likely that in their minds the opportunity for any kind of religious vocation had passed them over. It is likely that they believed, that in terms of serving God, they would have very little to offer to God.

As younger men, it is likely that one or more of them may have gone and sought out a Rabbi. In seeking out a Rabbi a young man would seek to learn Talmud and Torah. The Rabbi would keep and train a select few, but most would be sent away, unworthy to teach Israel.

So, by the time Jesus calls to them, the two sets of brothers had already been sent home and deemed unworthy to interpret and teach the Laws of Moses.

And for Jesus maybe this is just perfect. What better person to teach the gospel than someone who is deemed not worthy of teaching the Law?

Who better to have their hearts bend to the gospel of mercy than someone who already knows they he or she does not measure up in full righteousness before the Law? Who better to grasp the Kingdom of God, than someone who knows they aren't perfect and has been affirmed in that belief by a religious leader?

So here comes Jesus, himself the Kingdom of God made flesh calling to these fishermen. Calling them to lives full of gospel purposes.

They didn't have to go find a Rabbi and prove themselves to the teacher. The teacher was coming to them ... calling to them to become ambassadors of the Kingdom of God and to have their hearts colonized by the gospel of grace and mercy.

They had maybe failed with another Rabbi, but by grace and in the fullness of time, they were called again to preach the Kingdom of God, with Jesus.

## FISHING

I think it is interesting how fish play a role in both these stories. When you and I think about fishing today we probably visualize someone casting a single fishing line into the water.

And a person fishing for halibut will fish in this way.

And a person fishing for salmon will fish in that way.

Each one, fishing with just that single line, looking to catch a very specific fish.

This is why modern fishing IS a terrible metaphor for evangelism. Modern fishing is far too particular about the type of fish to be caught. But this may also explain the struggles of many churches today, some being far too particular about who we are fishing for.

Maybe in our evangelistic endeavours we have cast our attentions in the direction of those who most resemble us?

But when a person fishing casts a net, as did Simon and Andrew and James and John, well there is no telling what you'll get.

I remember my Old Testament professor preaching in chapel one week. I so clearly remember her saying that the fishing net is the perfect metaphor for evangelistic ministries, ***precisely because it keeps the undesirables in too.***

She was preaching to me. And my fellow seminarians. I think she was trying to remind me that as we went out to build church communities, that it will be tempting to try and attract a very particular group.

But it is God who calls and so the church must receive all who are called. Anyone who fishes with the gospel nets must first have a heart bent to and grasped by the gospel of mercy and grace. Only then would we be able to welcome all who get caught up in our gospel nets, remembering that it is God who calls and we who serve the gospel, and so as servants we receive, by grace, all whom God calls in



the same way we too were first called by grace. Our ability to cast the gospel nets has everything to do with how our hearts have been colonized.

It is all about what is in our hearts.

It is in your heart, where the Kingdom of God is made flesh again and again.

## **NINEVEH**

Remember when I told you that the Assyrians were master colonizers and used deportation as a means of forcibly making loyal citizens for the Empire by assimilating them to Assyrian culture?

I suggested that Jonah's experience of this through the destruction of his own city allowed hate to colonize Jonah's heart.

I know that the word 'colonize' is a troubled word these days, understandably so. We too have inherited the destructiveness of a colonial policy. And we work hard to recultivate relationships through reconciliation, through being restored.

But originally it meant simply to cultivate land. To colonize meant to cultivate crops for harvest in the hopes of abundance.

But hate leaves only a wasteland. Whether at the ruins of Samaria or in the heart of Jonah, hate the type of colonizer that cultivates even more destruction, even more bitterness and most profoundly destroys the ability to forgive.

We see it in Jonah, he is so full of hate he curses himself when his curses toward Nineveh are deflected by God's mercy. The heart that is colonized by hate is unable to repent because it is too focussed on the evil of the other. It cannot tell blessing from curse.

That was the culture cultivated in Jonah's heart. This is the greatest truth in the story of Jonah. Because it is still true today in many parts of the world.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD MADE FLESH

But there is a Kingdom whose colonial mandate is cultivate hearts with grace, for the sake of mercy and peace. There is a Kingdom that seeks to cultivate love, even in those hearts where hate has previously colonized.

A heart that is colonized by the gospel, is a heart that ready to bear God's Kingdom and its gospel to anyone.

Do you remember the first time you believe you heard God calling to you?

Do you remember what it felt like?

If you have never sensed that call, remember it isn't always a voice! It can be an intuition too. Mercy calls to us gently. But grasps us securely.

I would describe the feeling as an ability to lay down my past wounds for the healing that comes with the gospel.

For the four brothers in Galilee it was putting down their old nets, for gospel nets.

Is God calling you today. I believe it! God is calling to each one of us: saying put away all those old traps and come learn from me. Put down those old sources of security and open your hearts to be cultivated again, in order to be a blessing.

It is a call that is by grace and as this call grasps our hearts, The Kingdom of God is made flesh again, in us, in the pattern of Christ's own life.

And while I wouldn't wish this on anyone, because of the pain it would represent, but **when our hearts are right**, when they are properly cultivated with grace and mercy, when our hearts are colonized by The Kingdom of God, where hearts of stone become flesh again, then by grace we would be ready, even to go to our own Ninevehs. To that place or to those people to which only a heart colonized by the gospel can dare to go.

## JESUS

Jesus is calling to you ... I believe it.

I believe it because each one of you knows the difference between blessing and curse, because you have heard The Kingdom of God preached here, again and again, Sunday by Sunday.

You have seen it in the life of Jesus who not only knows the difference between curse and blessing ... but as Paul so clearly states it in Galatians 3 ... Jesus became the curse having his own arms and hands bent to the gospel, by being nailed to the cross.

So that pierced ... his hands together might proclaim the end of the cursed and the final blessing of God, to all.

### Benediction:

May you hear the voice of the ONE in whom the Kingdom of God was made flesh calling to you. May Holy Spirit cultivate in your hearts the gospel that you seek. And may the God in whose IMAGE you are fashioned and who gives you good purpose ...