

NOT THEM!

The Call to Unpalatable People | Not That Series (Part 1)

Text: Jonah 1

There may be no Bible story more famous across the world, or which more of us learn at a younger age, than the story of Jonah. Raise your hand if you've never heard the story of Jonah and the Whale. Welcome to Planet Earth! Even if you believe you know this story, hang on to your scuba gear because over these next four weeks we're going to do a deeper dive into this story than you've ever done before. You are going to emerge amazed at how much this familiar tale has to teach us – especially at this moment in American life.

The story begins with this verse: **The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1)**. Not let's stop right there and notice what just those first five words tell us. They tell us that God is active. He is a being that comes to people where they live. That's important to remember because we sometimes slip into thinking that God is far away out there, largely unconcerned with life here. Or we think of God as some passive resource we can tap into when we want to or ignore when we feel like it. But this text (and many others in the Bible) remind us that we cannot count on God to stay in his place. God is liable to break into our comfortable well-patterned lives and say something to us when we least expect it and maybe don't want to hear it.

The last five words of that first verse are also important. We're being told about a particular person whose life God interrupted in just that way. **The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai**. Now, that little fact is something of a giveaway because earlier in the Bible – in 2 Kings chapter 14 – we meet a man by the same name who lived in the northern portion of Israel during the time of King Jeroboam II, about eight centuries before Christ was born. We're told there that Jonah was a prophet – a person whose job it was to discern God's will and then speak it to God's people. God uses prophets to call the people he loves to recognize their sins and repent of them, in order to bring them back to himself and bless them.

Knowing this, we might predict what happens next. Jonah will hear from God and then go to the Jewish people and preach God's Word to them and they'll turn back to God and all will be well. But this is where the story starts to get really unusual and interesting. In an extraordinary departure from the normal pattern – in a move that prefigures the call the Jesus would later give to his Church to take his gospel into all the world -- God calls his servant to go preach his word not to God's chosen people but to pagans: **"Go to the great city of Ninevah and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2)**

When I say "pagans" and God says "wickedness," it helps to understand what we mean. Ninevah (located where Mosul, Iraq is today) was the capitol city of Assyria, a

nation 500 miles to the east of Jonah's home in northern Israel. The Assyrians of the eighth century were not a group of people you would probably invite to your Thanksgiving table. Archaeologists have found huge carved tableau's commissioned by the Assyrian King Sargon II, depicting the kinds of atrocities his armies perpetrated upon people. When they captured an enemy soldier, for example, Assyrian troops would cut off both of his legs and one of his arms, leaving the remaining limb, just so they could shake their foe's hand in mockery as he bled out. That was if they were feeling merciful. The Assyrians could and did a lot worse. They routinely forced people they vanquished to march through their cities carrying the decapitated heads of their own loved ones on pikes. They roasted people alive and tore out tongues and made skin-tapestries of their enemies. Are you getting the picture?

What is worse is that by the time Jonah lived, Assyria had set its sights on taking over Israel. It was already exacting a demanding tribute that had crippled the nation's quality of life. Prophets before Jonah had predicted that Assyria would be God's rod of judgment against the spiritual bankruptcy of Israel – a prophesy that came true in the year 722 BC. For these reasons, average citizens quaked at the possibility that, at any moment, the Assyrian armies could come sweeping in and do to Israel what they'd done elsewhere. This is the context of Jonah's story and of God's call to him. God says, in effect: I want you to go into the middle of the terrorist stronghold and give them what for on my behalf. **"Go to the great city of Ninevah and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2).**

And the Bible reports: **But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.** Just FYI, Tarshish isn't sort of just slightly off track from Ninevah. It is like you got a call from God today to leave here and go to Pittsburgh. So you nodded and immediately drove to Las Vegas. That's what Jonah did. **He went down to Joppa** (a little town on the coast of Israel) **where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish** (2500 miles away on the other side of the Mediterranean) **to flee from the Lord. (Jonah 1:3).** God was very clear about what he wanted done, but Jonah said, in effect: ***"Oh no, God. I'll do a lot for you, God, but NOT THAT!"***

Part of the reason why this story is so relevant is because there is something of Jonah in most of us. Like Jonah, we are spiritual people. We've demonstrated more religious commitment than the average person. We'll go to church, even if it doesn't always thrill us. We'll strive to be good people, even if it takes a stretch. We'll try to understand God's purposes, even if they confuse us at times. But there is a limit to this, isn't there? There is a point past which each of us will not go. There are some things which, even if God opened the roof and shouted: *"I want you to do this,"* we'd frankly respond: ***"No, God. NOT THAT!"***

Part of the problem is that there are times when we just can't see any good reason to do what God wants us to do. He calls us to be radically loving or truly generous or

repeatedly forgiving or daringly courageous and we don't or won't. Why? Because the obvious DOWN sides of doing what He asks seem so huge that we assume there couldn't possibly be an even larger UP side to his calling.

The classic example, of course, is in the Garden of Eden where God calls the first human beings to respect a boundary around a certain tree, but because the fruit of that tree looked very good and pleasing to the eye (Gen 3:6), Adam and Eve thought about the instruction and decided, NOT THAT! They couldn't trust that God actually had their best interests in mind when he called them to do this tough thing. So they blew it off.

It's no different with Jonah. Jonah could see no good reason for going to Ninevah. "*They will cut me up into pieces,*" he probably thought. "*That trip could not possibly end well.*" Jonah was convinced that he knew better than God. How often do you and I refuse to go past a certain point in our discipleship because we figure, we know better than God?

This is especially true when it comes to answering the call God gives us to relate creatively to ***unpalatable people*** – people who are distasteful to us or even make us retch. In some cases, as for Jonah in this story, what we're really saying when we think NOT THAT is ***NOT THEM!*** I will not do what you are asking toward them. It wasn't just because he was afraid of being hurt that Jonah didn't go to Ninevah. He loathed those pagans. He wanted nothing to do with those Others. Jonah might even have feared that if he did go and preach to them, they might actually repent of their sins and be saved from God's judgment and that would be awful.

But that IS what God wanted. As atrocious as the Ninevites were, God wanted to turn them from their wicked ways – to stop them from damaging others and further damaging their own souls. God's passion to redeem even the most unpalatable people is simply staggering. That is why Jesus gives his followers some pretty explicit and difficult instructions. As we explored a few weeks ago, Jesus calls us to pursue reconciliation with those with whom we have a grievous gap (Matt 5:23-25). He calls us to turn the other cheek and go the second mile with those who take advantage of us (Matt 5:39, 41). He calls us to do good to our enemies and pray for those who persecute us and (Matt 5:43-44).

And, much of the time, we respond like Jonah. I see no good reason to do what you are asking of me God, so I am not going to build a relationship with THEM. I am not going to make myself vulnerable to them. I am not going to give another chance to them. I am not going to consider the possibility that there is something redeeming about them. I am not going to try to learn something from them. I am not going to find out what you might do through me or in me if I followed your call and reached out to them. You can have a lot of things from me, God. But not that. Not Them.

Our politics, our race relations, our religious communities, our schoolyards, sometimes even our own family systems are afflicted today with the Jonah syndrome. God has made it clear about the direction he wants us to go. But we often turn not toward Ninevah but toward Tarshish. Because we know better. Because we know that what God calls for won't work. How is that journey going? Let's finish this part of the story.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. Please note that important detail. Jonah has gotten on that boat out of a desire to avoid having to have contact with a bunch of non-Jewish pagans. But guess who he now finds himself being transported by and at the mercy of? That's right. A bunch of unpalatable pagans. **But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." (Jonah 1:1-6)**

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:7-9)

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (Jonah 1:10-12)

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. (Jonah 1:13-16)

There's so much in this part of the tale. Let me just give us two things to ponder as we go today. FIRST, please notice who demonstrates spiritual insight and maturity in this story. Who in this narrative shows concern to understand the back story of somebody else's life – the life experiences and religious traditions that shaped them – before

automatically judging and disposing of them? Who first demonstrates the spiritual insight that there might be a connection between somebody's actions and the storm going on around them? Who demonstrates a willingness to go and row the second mile, enduring tremendous danger to save a stranger's life? Who engages in prayer in this story? Who makes a sacrifice to worship the true God?

The answer is: The pagans. The Bible is making a point here. It is not always God's people who act most like the people of God. It is not only in us that virtue is found. For all of their sin, there is often a beauty and goodness in those we might be tempted to write off as THEM. For all that may be wrong with THEM, the OTHERS in our lives may have something to teach us.

And so, **SECONDLY** and finally, can at least consider the possibility that when God calls us to move toward THEM (whoever they may be) in your life or mine, God may know what He is doing, even if it makes no immediate sense to us. Because there is this possibility that this call he is giving us is not only for their redemption, but maybe also for ours.

We'll have to see how this story goes – Jonah's and ours. For the time being, we'll just have to let those thoughts wrap around us. **Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17)**

Let's pray together...

Lord, as we sit in the belly of whatever enwraps us right now, remind us that we are surrounded and preserved by a whale of a lot more grace than we even recognize. In these next days, do your good work in us, so that we can eventually rise to a place where you can even more fully do your good work through us. In the name of Jesus and for the sake of others we pray. Amen.