

Sermon Response Guide - October 15, 2023
Jonah 1:4-16 "God in the Storm"
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Sermon Overview:

Jonah has made a deliberate choice to run away from God. He attempts to move in the opposite direction of God's call. While God calls him to arise and go out as a missionary to the despised Ninevites, Jonah goes down to Joppa, down onto a boat, and down below the deck of the boat. The repetition of this word down is used intentionally. Jonah is on a downward trajectory. Instead of going east he goes west, instead of going up, he goes down.

In our scene today, we see that his choices catch up to him. And as he sets sail, "A violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up." This scene points out, in a symbolic way, that the choices we make often cause stormy conditions for us and those around us. When we intentionally decide to walk away from the calling and the leading of the Lord, there are often consequences.

Now we need to be careful here. Not all storms that we face in life are the result of our choices. Sometimes, like in the case of the sailors in our story, we are implicated by the bad decisions of others. Other times, the storms we face have no connection to our choices. That's what the book of Job is all about. Job is facing hardship and everyone thinks it is because he has sinned, but this is not the case. Timothy Keller writes, "The Bible does not say that every difficulty is the result of sin, but it does teach us that every sin will bring you into difficulty." A life of self-centeredness and indulgence will have negative consequences for our well-being, our relationships, and our world. Our attempts to find meaning and fulfillment apart from God will lead us into stormy waters.

Jonah is looking for refuge and hope apart from God. There is an interesting phrase that shows up verse five. It literally reads "Jonah went down into the far reaches of the ship." This is not the normal way to say that person goes down below the deck of a boat. Hebrew scholars point out that this is a wordplay on the phrase "The far reaches of Mount Zion." The two phrases sound almost identical in Hebrew.

Rosemary Nixon comments, "In using the phrase, the narrator is tickling the ears of his listeners with sounds which remind them that Jonah's only secure refuge is God." There is an irony being presented here. Jonah is making a mistake in seeking refuge in this ship, when true refuge is found in God. Indeed in Psalm 48:2 the psalmist compares the security that is found in the far reaches of mount Zion (Psalm 48:2), in contrast to a ship sailing from Tarshish that God brings down with an East Wind." (Psalm 48:7). We have another hyperlink here in our passage to Psalm 48.

The point is this. Jonah has put his trust in the far reaches of a boat sailing for Tarshish, rather than in God, and he is about to discover consequence of this decision. Jonah's decision leads him into a storm.

Notice, though, that God is at work in the storm. In fact, God initiates this storm. This is not because God is a vengeful deity who is trying to get revenge. No, the storm is going to

become a source of God's severe mercy. God works together this disorienting and difficult situation for his redemptive purposes.

The first thing we notice in this scene is that the storms can cause Jonah to wake up. While Jonah's shipmates are scrambling to save their lives, Jonah starts out aloof and asleep below deck. Jonah continues to seem indifferent to the well being of his neighbors. His decent to the far reaches of the ship is an attempt to escape responsibility and avoid God's call on his life. However, the intensity of the storm compiles his shipmates to wake Jonah up and call him to help.

I wonder if there is an important image in this for us as Christ followers. As Christians we are called to be in but not of the world. I wonder if, at times, we get this balance wrong. Do we sometimes prefer to huddle away from the world and disengage from the problems in our community? Rosemary Nixon suggests "Being fast asleep to all but our own self-interest, we church people, can sometimes be blind and deaf to the cries of many whose lives are no more than a grim struggle for survival."

Do our homes sometime resemble ships from Tarshish? Are we tempted to set up a comfortable cocoon of relative affluence, that insulates us from the cries of our neighbors? Do our churches sometimes function like this as well?

Jonah is resistant to God's call to go out on mission to the nations. This continues in our text today. He would rather escape the cries of his neighbor instead of engage. The storm causes the sailors to wake him up. Similarly, when we come into proximity with the pain of others, it can stir us from our slumber. When we courageously step into places of deep suffering, it can reactivate our call to engage in mission.

Storms also invite us to grow up. Jonah is depicted as someone that needs to grow spiritually. The book functions like satire. With great irony the pagan sailors, the Ninevites, and even the cows in Nineveh repent and turn to God, while the one who is supposed to be a prophet is reluctant to turn to God. The whole story functions like a mirror for the people of God. It invites us to attend to the fact that spiritual transformation is not only needed for those outside the religious establishment but for us as well.

In our chapter today, the sailors are more attuned to Yahweh than Jonah is at first. At the end of the text they quote a common phrase from the Psalms, "everything you purpose you do" (Jonah 1:14, using exact language of Psalm 115:2-3 and Psalm 135:5-6). They are acting like true believers as they acknowledge God's sovereignty, seek God's mercy, and offer vows to Yahweh.

Jonah's relationship to God continues to be more ambiguous. He does pay lip service to God by saying "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." Yet, Jonah does not fully repent at this point. His walk doesn't fully match his words. Jonah has some work to do.

Rather than simply abandoning Jonah, God continues to pursue him. The storm God sends, provides the context where Jonah must wrestle with some important questions. The sailors ask him 8 different questions that he has to reckon with. They are probing questions about why he is running from God, what his true identity is, and who he worships and trusts.

Good sailors are not formed in calm seas. Sometimes storms can be a source of severe mercy that enable us to work through the foundational questions about who we are and who we trust. God can use storms to help us grow up in our faith.

Ultimately storms can cause us to look up. As the story unfolds, the sailors discover that they are dependent on Yahweh. The storm causes the sailors to look beyond their own strength and their own human resources to the sovereign power and grace of God. The sailors come to the end of themselves. They hurl their precious cargo from Tarshish overboard—it cannot save them. They strain with all their might to row to shore, but their strength cannot save them. As Jim Bruckner summarizes in his commentary:

"The sailors provide us an excellent example by their readiness to acknowledge their helplessness, hear Jonah's witness, act on it, and worship the true God . . . They surrender, believing a seemingly impossible word from Yahweh, that Yahweh's appointed man will die for their salvation. They believe and worship Yahweh."

This, too, is one of the ways God works through storms. Storms can break the false illusion of our security and self-sufficiency. Storms can deconstruct and break down our false Eden's, and the ships from Tarshish that we turn to for hope. Storms can humble us enough to realize that we need something beyond ourselves for salvation.

Questions For Reflection:

1. What stood out to you in the text / sermon today?
2. What are some of the things you turn to for security apart from God?
3. Are there ways you insulate yourselves from the pain of others in our world?
4. How have you grown through adverse conditions and difficult circumstances?
5. Where have you witnessed God at work in the various storms you have navigated in life?