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Saying Yes to God **Jonah 1-4**

Jonah 1:1-4:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.

*1:11-17: Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ... ¹⁵ So they **picked Jonah up and threw** him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.*

*¹⁷ [b](#) But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the **belly of the fish** three days and three nights.*

*3:1-5, ¹⁰ The word of the Lord came to Jonah **a second time**, saying, ² “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh **believed God**; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.... When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God **changed his mind** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.*

*4:1-3: But this was **very displeasing** to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for **I knew that you are***

a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ *And now, O Lord, please **take my life from me**, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Wow.

What a story!

I encourage you to take some time later today and **read through**

The whole little book of Jonah.

It's a very easy read, and so worthwhile.

Every one of us needs to know this story because in so many ways,

We are Jonah.

And sometimes we **don't understand or listen** to the God we serve!

So let's look at Jonah's adventure.

One day God asked Jonah to warn the Ninevites that He would destroy them if they did not repent. Nineveh was the capital of the **Assyrian Empire**, a brutal and depraved people who were feared and hated by surrounding nations.

The Assyrians were not too popular in Israel because in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., they plundered Palestine looting and burning the cities and deporting their inhabitants. In 722-721 B.C., the Northern Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist because of an Assyrian conquest!

In other words, this would be like **God calling us** to go warn an incredible enemy, maybe an ISIS terror cell, of God's impending punishment!

It was a **ludicrous mission according to Jonah**, so instead of going East, he got on a boat from Joppa and went **West** to Tarshish!

His presence caused a great storm, so after throwing him overboard, a **great fish** swallows Jonah for three days and nights, until he is spit out on the shore!

But **God is serious** about this mission for Jonah.

Jonah 3:1 says, *The word of the Lord came to Jonah **a second time**, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

(This by the way is the shortest sermon in the Bible—only 5 words long in Hebrew!)

5 And the people of Nineveh believed God.

Not only did the Ninevites believe God, they had a ***citywide revival*** of sorts!
They all turned from their evil ways,
so God gave them ***a second chance***,
and did not destroy them!

This did ***not go over well with Jonah***.

He didn't like those people before,
and he sure didn't like them now that they had repented,
and God had spared their lives!

So he ***pouted***. He got depressed.

He cried and sat down under a little shady bush that God had provided above him...until God got a little frustrated with Jonah,
and had a worm come eat the tree.

God finally asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah complains that his shade bush has been destroyed,
so God says ***should I not be concerned about the 120,000 Ninevites?***
And so ends the story.

It's a ***big fish story***, no joke.

You know how fish stories seem to get bigger and bigger over time?

Well, I don't think it's any coincidence that this story involves a great big fish.

We don't have to think literally here,

because it's the ***moral of the story*** that's so important.

This story is also pretty ***funny***.

What ***makes Jonah think that he can just go*** in the opposite direction, and run away from God, without any consequences?

And what makes Jonah think that ***God is going to give up*** on people that he wants Jonah to warn about their impending doom?

Jonah forgets that if God wants these people warned,

then they will be warned—***come hell or, yes, high water***.

Literally.

Jonah is an **important story** because of what we learn about **Jonah** (who's an awful lot like us) and what we learn about **God**.

Today's verses are a **lesson in contrasts**.

Jonah is not like the **disciples that Jesus called** in our gospel lesson today. Ever wondered how on earth those guys could ever just get up and follow Jesus?

Jonah is not one of them.

He does not drop everything and follow.

He flees in the opposite direction!

Ever felt like **you were fleeing** in the opposite direction of where God wanted you to be? I certainly have.

And remember the **consequences**?

You probably weren't swallowed by a fish, but **God sure is persistent**, right?

When have you turned away from what you knew God was telling you to do? When have you turned away from good advice, gently prodding you in the right direction?

Jonah, like us, **makes some poor choices to avoid God's call**.

But, Jonah has a legitimate excuse.

Like us, he has some **enemies**, with good reason.

He doesn't want to help these people who have done nothing but torture and oppress his people!

His feelings are completely **understandable**.

Think about this, **who are your enemies**?

Who are the people you'd rather leave stranded on the side of the road?

We've all got them, our whole country has them.

Just imagine if God said, **I want you to talk to one of THEM. Care for them.**

What would you do?

How would you feel?

Now imagine it's **Jesus**—who goes so far as to say now **LOVE them**.

Don't just talk to your enemies, love them.

Not easy, right?

Never is.

And yet, that's what God calls us to do.
 That's what ***kind of God we have—a God of love,***
 Love for everyone, anyone in the whole world.
 Do you remember the exact words of ***John 3:16?***
*For God so loved **THE WORLD** that he gave his only Son....*

It seems ***unfathomable*** to us, but God actually does love everyone,
 even the evil people, even our enemies, even the enemies of God.
 Doesn't make sense, but it doesn't have to.
 It's just who God is.

It's ***not that God neglects justice for evildoers.***
 God does after all tell the Ninevites that they have been evil.
 God does say that they will be destroyed if they don't repent.

But when they do, our God is a God of ***love, mercy, compassion.***
 And a God of ***second chances.***

God ***doesn't give up-on Jonah*** and the call on his life,
or on the Ninevites, evil as they may be.
 God is truly a God of ***second chances,***
 for ***anyone who will listen.***

Many commentators believe that ***Jonah represents the people of Israel,***
 because Jonah in Hebrew means "***dove,***" and the dove was a symbol for Israel.
 Israel too had rebelled, and looked into herself too much.
 God had called Israel to be a light to all nations, but she had gotten off track.
 So God punished Israel, they were even taken into exile by ***Babylon,***
 which many commentators believe is symbolized by the big fish.
 Interesting isn't it?
 Sometimes the same thing ***happens to churches,*** don't you think?
 Because ***we too can forget our calling,***
 we too can forget our mission to the people out in the world,
 way outside the walls of the church!

"Tickets for Tarshish," The Rev. Dr. William J. Carl, Day 1, 2008.

This Jonah story is a ***lot like Acts 10,***

when **Peter** receives the famous **roof-top vision** through which he was taught to **accept clean and unclean foods, clean and unclean people**.
He had to change his idea that good Christians had to first be good Jews.

God said no, **you can eat all foods, you can welcome all people**.
Peter ends up joining the household of Cornelius, preaching, repenting, receiving the Holy Spirit, welcoming new people, and eating new foods—like pizza with ham, and pepperoni, and a few other unclean things.

When Peter receives that vision from God he is in the **city of Joppa**.
Sound familiar?

That's right, it's the **same place** where Jonah left to set sail for Tarshish.
It was apparently an important place for people receiving wild messages from God. It was a turning point.
Peter listens in Joppa, but Jonah goes rogue.
The question is, **which way will we go** when God calls us?

We can all **sympathize with Jonah**.

It seems like some people don't deserve the love of God—and it doesn't make sense to spend our time and energy sharing it with them.
Some people **don't deserve** a second chance, right?

Well, what if that's not right?
What if the point of the Jonah story is that **EVERYONE** deserves a second chance?

Jonah certainly gets one.

God asks him a second time to carry out the mission!

And the **Ninevites**, they certainly get one.

God had promised their destruction, but then gave them another chance!

And this just **rubs Jonah the wrong way**.

In the beginning of Chapter 4 he says to God:

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

In other words, I knew you were a forgiving God, **darn it!!!**

It's like a story that Rev. William Carter tells about a **flight from Johannesburg, South Africa, to London, England**.

A woman with a thick European accent got on the plane.

She came down the aisle to the tourist section and discovered her seat assignment put her right next to a man with, an African accent. She looked at her seat assignment; she saw it was correct. She asked her seatmate, "I'm sorry, are you in the right seat?" He smiled and nodded yes. She turned around to see if there were any other empty seats in the section but she didn't see any so she tugged on the sleeve of the flight attendant.

"Excuse me," she said, "as you can see, I'm sitting next to a person whose **skin color is different from mine.**" "Yes, ma'am, I can see that."

"Well," she said, "this is simply unacceptable. Is there another available seat?" The flight attendant looked at her strangely and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, it's against our policy to move people unnecessarily."

"You don't understand," said the wealthy woman, "this arrangement will not do. I have funds in my purse to arrange an alternative."

The flight attendant said, "You do?"

"Yes, I do. Would you please go up to first class and see if there is an available seat? I simply cannot sit next to this person."

The flight attendant shrugged her shoulders, walked up the aisle.

A few minutes later she returned. She leaned over the European woman, tapped the man with the African accent, and said, "I'm sorry, sir, I hate to do this. I must make a seating change.

If you follow me, ***we have a place for you in first class.***"

The love of God makes it possible to give every person first-class treatment. Sometimes, however, we get stuck in our same old seats.

When God Repented, the Rev. William Carter, *Day 1*, 2000

We may not like it,

But ***even those*** we feel like are ***outsiders,***

Even those we consider our ***enemies,***

They too are ***beloved children of God.***

Remember, it was the Ninevites who repented faster than Jonah!

Our God is loving, merciful, and forgiving, of ANYONE!

And our God is a God of second chances!

Now isn't that the ***Good News of the Gospel today?***

I'd say so!

May we be willing ***to share the love and grace of God,***
with ***anyone, and everyone who will listen.*** Amen.