

*Jonah: Reluctant Prophet & a Fish*  
All Creatures Great & Small Summer Series

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. <sup>2</sup>Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble <sup>3</sup>and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. <sup>23</sup>Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; <sup>24</sup>they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. <sup>25</sup>For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. <sup>26</sup>They

mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; <sup>27</sup>they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. <sup>28</sup>Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; <sup>29</sup>he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. <sup>30</sup>Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. <sup>31</sup>Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. <sup>32</sup>Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

### Jonah 1:1-17

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup>The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” <sup>7</sup>The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup>Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” <sup>9</sup>“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” <sup>10</sup>Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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.” <sup>13</sup>Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. <sup>14</sup>Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” <sup>15</sup>So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. <sup>17</sup>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.

When we lived in Columbia, South Carolina, our adolescent son James had an older fishing buddy named Jim Thames. James wrote an essay for his college applications about his fishing friendship with Jim that began something like, “I have sometimes resented being the child of a pastor, however, where else but in church can a seventeen-year-old and a seventy-year-old become friends?” A Vietnam War veteran, Jim had access to remote lakes way up in the woods of Fort Jackson, just outside of Columbia. He’d pick up James and I would say something like, “I hope you come back with a big fish story.” To which Jim would reply, “If not, we’ll just make one up.”

That’s what big fish stories are, aren’t they –mostly made up, a small truth wrapped up in one great big exaggeration. Here in Jonah we have the most famous big fish story ever told. But what may be the greater exaggeration in this book of the Bible – even bigger than the fish – is Jonah himself, that Jonah is called a prophet! How did this reluctant one get tucked in between Amos who railed against injustice saying: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream;” and Micah who took on meaningless worship by asking: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Sandwiched between the likes of these, how does Jonah even begin to bear the title, prophet? Where is his zeal for the Lord, where is the burning coal upon his lips, the fire in his belly? Where is Jonah’s unwavering willingness to proclaim God’s peace?

Admittedly, other prophets started out reluctant to do what God asks of them. When God called Jeremiah, he pleaded, “I’m too young!” Isaiah said, “Woe, my lips aren’t clean, I cannot speak!” But no other prophet goes to the extreme that Jonah does to escape the call of God. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, to ask them to turn from their wicked ways, Jonah hops on the first ship in the opposite direction. Nineveh was east - near the city of Baghdad, in what is now Iraq. It was a part of the Assyrian Empire, where foreign gods were worshipped, and people were

cruel and oppressive. Ninevah was the enemy of ancient Israel. Jonah did not want to travel to enemy territory, did not want God to offer precious mercy and forgiveness to the undeserving likes of them. So, determined not to help the saving of Nineveh, Jonah hopped a freighter out of Joppa to Tarshish ... in exactly the opposite direction. Tarshish was located on the southern tip of Spain, a nice place in season for the beaches, the farthest limit of the Western world a good place to hide from the call of God, for a prophet on the lam.

In Jonah, what we have is a parable about a man who doesn't want to extend the grace and mercy of God beyond his own little comfort zone. He is a good man. He loves God and he loves his country. He is faithful to its institutions, the worshipping community, founded upon God's call to Abraham and Sarah. But he seems to have forgotten that the heirs of Abraham and Sarah were given a blessing meant to be spread through the world, so that all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Professor of Biblical Preaching, Fred Craddock wrote, "This is a story that is trying to help us understand what it is to live before God, to trust in God's call upon our lives, to understand the tensions and the troubles and the pains that are ours to experience" as we seek to respond to God's call. And sometimes it helps, Craddock said, to understand our own life and our own faith, by looking at someone else.<sup>1</sup> Through another person's story we receive truth, as Emily Dickinson said, "on the slant."

So, when Jonah runs away from God's call to go to a wayward, evil people to urge them to turn toward God, and learn about grace, mercy and forgiveness, God will not let Jonah win at resisting this call. God musters up all the powers of creation to make him an instrument of God's peace. The story goes, "the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea." The ship threatened to break up; the superstitious sailors, knowing that the sea god was upset about something, decided to find out who was at fault for the storm. Jonah owned up, and in what may be the ultimate

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *The Collected Sermons*, p. 47 ff.

act of reluctance, as much as said, “I’d rather die; I’d rather drown in the sea than do what God wants of me.” Over the side he went down, only air bubbles coming up until he was swallowed by the big fish. Here’s the truth this story imparts, even if we have to receive it slant: God asks us to do things we do not want to do, to go places that we would rather not go. In this case, God wants us to remember that no matter how “God-forsaken” we might deem another people or person, God does not forsake them. In the mind of God, no one is beyond divine blessing.

In Bryan Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy*, about the founding of the Equal Justice Initiative, he describes the journey that helped him discover his calling. Stevenson was a college student at nearby Eastern University where he majored in philosophy. He says that he did not realize until his senior year that no one would actually pay him to philosophize when he graduated! So, he started a frantic search for a post-graduation plan. Without a true sense of direction, he applied to law school, not really sure what he wanted to do with his life. He felt intimidated at Harvard Law School, surrounded by other students who seemed much more certain and experienced and well-connected than he was. His second year he signed up for a course that would take him off-campus for a month, working for an organization he didn’t know much about, assisting condemned prisoners. Within days, he found himself being sent to meet a man on death row. The nonprofit had not yet found a lawyer to take the man’s case and no one else had time to go, so they sent the intern.

As he drove through rural Georgia, Stevenson was anxious to visit a man he had never met, who had been on death row for two years already. He wasn’t sure he could fill up fifteen minutes, let alone an entire hour of visitation time. His only assignment was to let the man know they were trying to find him a lawyer and to tell him this much: You will not be killed in the next year. Scared, intimidated, and apologetic for his ineptitude, Bryan Stevenson met the prisoner named Henry. When he gave the news he wouldn’t be executed for at least a year, Henry grasped Bryan’s hands and thanked him profusely. Soon, they were sharing life

stories, lost in conversation about their lives and their families. That unexpected calling, a desperate last-semester application to a graduate program he wasn't sure he wanted led Bryan Stevenson to his God-given, God-directed vocation.<sup>2</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative has saved more than a hundred fifty people from death row.

For us, that too may feel like a big fish story, too exaggerated to relate to, too big to identify with. But – think about it – slant, as Emily Dickinson would have said. Where has God called you, where is God calling you, to go to places that feel scary and uncertain, to go into enemy territory, if you will, to share the kinds of blessings God intends for all of humankind - namely grace, mercy and hope for transformation? Is it into one of this church's outreach ministries, or one of this congregation's global partnerships? Is it into the prophetic work of our anti-racism initiatives? Is it into the enemy territory of a family member or close friend who will never understand how you plan to vote this year?

Is it into that risky conversation with someone you think could benefit from being invited to join you for a church event or worship service or small group conversation? Is it possibly time for you to sit with a neighbor and share how you feel about things that do matter to God – about global conflicts, or economic inequality in our country; or more local concerns about homelessness or guns. Are you being called simply to open a door to a relationship that has come apart at the seams? You see, Jonah's story is writ large, so that we can find our own stories within it – whether they be large or small. God calls every single one of us to places we would rather not go, and won't let us flee away forever.

We see this in a most remarkable scene in this first chapter. Did you notice how God uses Jonah's reluctance so effectively? The reluctant prophet became the accidental evangelist. When Jonah boarded the ship with the pagan sailors, and God sends the storm, the sailors try

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, p. 4-12.

everything to save the ship, from throwing heavy cargo overboard to praying to their own gods. When all of that fails, they ask Jonah “Who are you?” and “Where do you come from?” Jonah answers, “I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” Then, at Jonah's bidding, they toss him overboard. But in our last glimpse of him, as the water surges and a big fish swallows him whole, the pagan sailors make sacrifices and take vows to Jonah's God. They worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.

So here we have, on the one hand, the wayward Ninevites, whom we will meet next Sunday; on the other hand, the pagan sailors, and in between them this reluctant, sulking, self-absorbed minor prophet, called by a God who cares for every last one of them with an ocean full of compassion and concern and longing. The God of heaven and earth, who will not let our reluctance get in the way of grace, mercy, forgiveness and transformation.

Amen.