

SERMON—4 AUG 2019

Jonah, Chapter 1

Will you pray with me? God, whether because of my words or in spite of them, may your word be spoken. And whether we come with willing hearts or with stubborn ones, help us to receive. Amen.

I don't believe that Jonah, if he actually existed, actually went on a boat that caused God to send a storm, terrify a bunch of guys on the ship with him, and throw him overboard. And I certainly don't believe that a literal fish swallowed him and kept him in its belly for three days. I've had plenty of people in my day try to explain how it's actually physically possible. I don't buy it. And throughout this series, you'll hear all sorts of things from the life of Jonah that I don't believe actually happened.

I'm not sure who said it first, but I heard from a preaching professor once that all stories are true and some of them actually happened. I'm not going to argue that the story of Jonah actually happened, but I do believe that it contains some real truth for us, even nearly 3,000 years after it was written down.

In the age-old debate of whether humanity is essentially good or essentially bad, I fall squarely in the essentially bad camp. It's okay if that's not the camp you find yourself in, but I know, at least for me, it is not in my natural wiring to do the right thing. Maybe that's why I need Jesus, because, for me, if I'm all the world is working with, we're in big trouble. And that's what I like about Jonah—he has a huge opportunity; an opportunity to go and tell the Ninevites that they're in big trouble. God says, "Get up, and go to Nineveh." And the text says that Jonah starts out really well, he gets up. And that's pretty much the extent of Jonah following God's call. He gets up and goes *down*. Down to Joppa, to get on a boat heading the opposite direction. Jonah's like me. Given the opportunity to follow God, he runs the other way.

It's hard to read on the screen, but there's Nineveh, about 550 miles from Joppa. And there's Tarshish—2,500 miles in the opposite direction. And then he gets on the boat and goes down into the bottom of the boat. Maybe if he sleeps it off, he'll get out of this mess all together.

You may be thinking, "Sure, I may not do *everything* God wants me to do, but I've never gotten on a boat to go the opposite direction of where God's calling me." Or maybe you weren't thinking that, but now you are. And that's probably true. We don't tend to hear or follow God's call for us in a literal, audible sense. But I do think that we're runners, all the same. I know that I am.

On Sunday evening, as we were finishing up at Front Porch, someone said, "Oh no. There was a shooting at the Gilroy Garlic Festival." And I said, "Oh, that's awful." And then they said there were eleven injuries but no deaths and everyone said, "Well, at least no one died." And later I found out that people had, in fact, lost their lives. On a day when they were out in Gilroy, eating garlic fries and garlic ice cream, senseless violence erupted. And Monday I felt a huge heaviness about it. And Tuesday I felt it a little less. By Wednesday, it was a sad background to my

otherwise normal life. I knew that by today, many of us would be well past it. Yes, another tragedy happened and yes, this one was in our backyard. But that's just the world we live in.

But then yesterday's news about a shooting in a Walmart in El Paso broke. And this morning I read about the shooting in Dayton. I don't think that God sent Jonah to Nineveh because he was angry. I think God did it because God was heartbroken. Because God hurts when God's people hurt. God mourns when God's people mourn. And God was mourning with us this morning. It is ok to feel overwhelmed. It is ok to feel hurt and sad and angry.

Jonah gets this call from God and chooses to run the other way. And then, on top of that, he goes down in to the bottom of the boat and falls asleep. Maybe he could sleep it off and eventually it would go away. But it would not go away. The storm kept raging all around him.

We keep trying to sleep these shootings off. Maybe eventually people will figure it out. Maybe eventually we'll get it together. But it's too hard right now. It's too much. The problem is too big. And so we find ourselves snoozing in the bottom of the boat and people are having to wake us up to tell us that there's a real storm happening here and we're all in danger.

We are on a boat in the middle of a storm right now and it is our job to wake up and to get ourselves to Nineveh. We should take time to mourn, most definitely. And as we grieve, let us be reminded that God grieves right alongside us. But then we have to wake up and go and deal with this. Not someone else. You. Me.

We might disagree on the best way to work on this problem, but why don't we work on it together? Those who think gun control is the solution, go work for gun control. Those who think mental health is the way to work on it, go get people access to mental healthcare. Those who think violence intervention is the solution, go work on violence intervention. Those who think loneliness is the problem, go and find a way to create meaningful connection with people.

The story of Jonah tells us that Jonah ran away from God, but I believe that God was right there with Jonah the whole way to Joppa and on that boat in the middle of the storm, and in the water and even in the belly of the fish. The awful news is that this has gone on far too long and that it hurts so very much. But the good news, the gospel in all of this, is that God hasn't given up on us. God is still calling us. God is still here with us in the midst of this storm. "Take today to mourn," Jesus says, "But tomorrow, you've got to wake up. We've got work to do."

Amen.