

# The Minor Prophets-Jonah?

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sermon Topic: When God's instructions don't go down well

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2018

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Readings: Psalm 116, Jonah 1, 2, 3

We have been looking at a number of the minor prophets. There is some debate as to whether or not Jonah should be called a prophet at all. At best he is a reluctant prophet ... sort of like we can be when we know God wants us to embark on one course of action and we feel pulled to another. The little book of Jonah is almost more about Jonah than prophecy. Equally interesting is the debate about the book itself. Firstly, let us consider: does Jonah tell a literal account or is it an allegorical story to get a message across?

There are a number of challenges to taking the story at literal face value. The “whale” that swallowed Jonah, as it is called in our English translations, is not a “whale” as such in Hebrew or Greek. In the Old Testament Book of Jonah the Hebrew term (גָּדוֹל דָּג *gadol dag*) speaks of a great fish, just as the Greek term (κῆτους *ketous*) used by Matthew (12:40) in the New Testament, to describe Jonah's transport is “a great fish” or “sea-monster”. This is not unlike the issue we have with Adam and Eve's “apple” which is simply described as a fruit. What did swallow Jonah? Great whales, killer whales and various sharks are all possibilities. As underwater video is increasingly available we are able to see some interesting incidents. In 2017 Jacques Cousteau was almost swallowed by a whale that didn't like him and spat him out. Caught on film. In April 2016 a 56 year old Spanish fisherman Luigi Marquez was washed over board in a storm. Despite extensive searches by sea and air he was not located until three days later with the odd story that a whale swallowed him. According to Marquez he stayed inside for three days and nights eating fish and watching time on his digital watch until the whale spat him out not far from land. While some were sceptical no one could explain how he got from the crew and boat at sea to where he turned up. There have also been multiple accounts of people swallowed whole by great whites. Certainly, unusual but, in the terms of Myth Busters, definitely plausible.

Similarly, there is a common criticism of the story regarding the simple problem of the distance the whale is supposed to have travelled. Ninevah is a large city that you have all probably heard of by its modern name in Iraq – “Mosul”. Mosul of course is a much bigger city that encompasses the ancient city of Ninevah. Land locked except for the fact that it sits on the Tigris, one of the great ancient rivers. The Tigris can run from two metres in summer to fifteen metres in winter in depth. Deep enough that at some periods of the year a whale could move up it comfortably. However, the Tigris is a fresh water river and whales are not known to last more than three days in fresh water. The fact that the gulf of the Tigris is some 500 kilometres away at the head of the Persian Gulf and that the trip from Joppa (where Jonah caught his boat) to the Persian Gulf is incredible – there was no Suez Canal until the late 1800's so a trip from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf required a trip out of the Mediterranean, around the horn of Africa and up to the Persian gulf. This would be a round trip of some 25,000 kilometres. At a maximum

of 70 kilometres a day such a trip would take a great fish some 357 days at best, if it could travel at a consistent speed that high. One feels that the storm did not blow Jonah's boat that far out of the way. How do we deal with this one?

Either the story is an allegory or there has to be a further physical explanation or something else. Well actually there are two other factors. The first is that God is quite capable of doing the extra-ordinary. Jesus appeared to the disciples in the locked Upper Room and disappeared on the Road to Emmaus just as the disciples recognised who He was. Elijah was taken away in a firey chariot and, though they looked for many miles around his disciples could not find him. More closely aligned to the possibility here, the apostle Philip, after encountering the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 was miraculously transported some 200 km to Azotus near Joppa (an interesting co-incidence maybe). If God wanted to pick up Jonah in a whale and transport them both to the Tigris near Ninevah then this too is within the realms of possibility. And it would explain why Jonah was spat out. The whale could not handle fresh water and would come into the shallows to die.

However, and here's the rub, the second factor is that the error is made, as Jesus pointed out to the Sadducees, in not actually knowing the text. The Book of Jonah simply says that God sent the whale to rescue Jonah and that Jonah stayed three days and nights inside it (allusion to the crucifixion and resurrection noted) and then spat him out on dry land. It doesn't say where. The text then goes on to tell us that God repeats His instruction to Jonah to go to Ninevah which he does. We are not told how.

The point of this story is an important one. Not just in the message that Jonah will bring to Ninevah but in the message that is given to all God's people. As we commit our lives to God we commit to Father, Son and Holy Spirit as Lord and Saviour. Saviour in that Jesus has saved and continues to save us from our sins but Lord as Lord over our lives. We are His servants. Salvation is into His Kingdom. We are not our own but have been brought at the price of Jesus' life. Many people want Jesus as Saviour but not as Lord. Jonah was in a similar position. He was happy to have God as the Saviour of Israel and conqueror of their foes, but that God would make an actual call on his life was not so comfortable. In fact, so uncomfortable that Jonah ran away. But that's problematic. Where can we run from God? Psalm 139:7-12, King David's cry, **"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.'**" There is nowhere that we can run from the creator of all the earth. To think so is the greatest foolishness. Jonah trying to run from God is about as effective as an ant trying to escape an anteater on a large white concrete expanse. There is simply nowhere to hide. When God calls us to a task it is far better to set about the task than to run.

What did Jonah's running achieve? Nothing. He got himself a long hot journey to the coast, he fell out with the crew and brought danger to others, he had to confess to the crew that he was the cause of the problems and then got into worse trouble being thrown overboard at sea in a storm. But don't we see people do this all the time? Rather than address their problems, deal with their challenges or failings up front, they try to make excuses and run away from the issues or opportunities. This is so sad. God calls us to stand up and undertake the work He wants of us and we might be surprised by the result.

But Jonah is in an even worse state than this. His heart is cold. The reason he runs away he says is that he is fearful that God will forgive. The Ninevites are not friends of the Israelites. Jonah does not want to see them repent and turn to the Lord. He wants to see them smitten well and truly. He wants to see the wrath of God poured down on his countries enemies. He does not want to preach to them and see them respond. Then, finally, he realizes he has no option but to do God's will and he does what God wants the people of Ninevah do repent and turn to God. It is interesting to ponder why the people listened to the Jewish Jonah, why they repented? Did it have something to do with seeing Jonah come out of the mouth of a great fish they had never saw before seen in the Tigris?

Ninevah's repentance exactly what Jonah fears. God is pleased and does not smite Ninevah. Jonah is frustrated and angry. That was why he didn't want to go in the first place. Again, this can be a trap we can fall into – only wanting to do God's will when it suits our purposes, when it is convenient for us. Not a good habit to develop. Jonah is angry at God and goes out of town to sulk sitting under a leafy tree of some form. God challenges him: **what right do you have to be angry?**

Then, as if to rub in the point, the leafy tree or vine shrivels up and Jonah is left in the sun – so much so that now he wants to die. Again, God challenges him but more penetratingly. Jonah is angry now because his shade has gone. God challenges Jonah's priorities, his compassion and his perspective. Jonah was concerned about the vine that was providing for his comfort. Aroused and angry because his comfort had been disturbed. Was not God right to be concerned about some one hundred and twenty thousand people who were in danger of perishing ... and all of their animals as well. God had a real concern for both. And was Jonah only concerned for himself?

We don't hear any more about Jonah but the challenge he received is one that remains true for us today. Do we place our own comfort ahead of the work of God? Do we run from doing His work only to find ourselves back at the same position? Are we as concerned for the perishing as God is?

Like Jonah, we each have to make our own decisions and those decisions are proven by our actions. God's instructions don't always go down well but our faith is demonstrated in how we respond.

Amen