

Jonah is a very human protagonist, a flawed and troubled person trying his best to do as God commands. But Jonah gets it wrong. We can empathize with Jonah, because we Christians are a mass of contradictions, too. We are righteous in Christ, and yet we sin every day. We have the power of the Spirit, and yet we feel our own weakness. Christ's work in us is begun, but it is not yet complete. At our best, Christians are always Christian sinners, who depend wholly on the righteousness of Jesus, counted as ours, in our union with Christ through the bond of faith. If God were to judge us based on our performance in the Christian life, none of us would make it to heaven.

So, we depend on the righteousness of Christ, counted as ours as much on the day we enter heaven as we did on the day we first trusted Christ. We will never be able to stake our claim before God on the quality of our obedience, so we hang on the life Jesus lived for us because we dare not stand on the life we have lived for Him. Which is why we can look to Jonah's story and see in it images of our own.

The outline of Jonah's life is simple. Jonah lived during the reign of Israel's King Jeroboam II who reigned from 793-753 BC (2 Kings 14:23-25). God called Jonah to leave a successful ministry in Israel to go and preach in Nineveh, a city notorious for its wickedness. Jonah didn't like this idea, so he got on a ship and sailed in the opposite direction. God intercepted the ship by sending a storm and when the crew realized that the storm had come because of Jonah, they threw him overboard.

God rescued Jonah by providing a great fish that swallowed him whole, swam to the shore, and spat him up on the beach. After his experience in the whale, Jonah decided to do what God directed, so Jonah went to Nineveh and preached the message God gave him to share. When the people heard Jonah, they believed God, they repented of their sin, and God spared the Ninevites from judgment.

You might think that a man who experienced miracles in his own life, and through whose ministry God transformed an entire city, would get beyond the struggles that "ordinary" Christians experience. But in Jonah we see that we are all the same: sinful, flawed human beings, putting selfish desires before God's wishes. At the end of the story, Jonah is angry, dissatisfied, and out of sorts with God. Instead of rejoicing, Jonah slumped into despair, convinced his life had no further meaning or value.

Jonah's story begins with him running from God and it ends with him arguing with God. This raises the interesting question about when Jonah wrote his story: you can't write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when you are arguing with God, so we may assume that Jonah wrote this book later in his life and that his account offers a mature reflection on the triumph of God's grace. Some scholars argue, however, that Jonah did not write this account at all: they claim another writer wrote Jonah's story later and with the benefit of hindsight. Some skeptics even claim that the Jonah story is nothing more than a fable of Biblical proportions. But in the end, and in spite of its murky origins, Jonah's story still has much to teach us.

Many people seek to teach us by their example; Jonah stands apart, unique in the Biblical narrative, because he teaches us by his confession. Jonah's confession is like a mirror in which we see the struggles brought to light and our own questions answered. Jonah, a prophet of God, widely respected with a blossoming ministry, struggled with the impulses of his own self-interest, doubt, resentment, and despair. Jonah's story tells us, first and foremost, that pursuing a God-centered life won't make our struggles easier; in some ways it will make our struggles harder, but those struggles will also enrich our life, our faith, and our walk with God.

As we dive into Jonah's story we will discover a window into the heart of God, who is the real hero of Jonah's story. God speaks the first word, calling Jonah to a new ministry and unsettling his comfortable life; and God speaks the last word, confronting Jonah's self-indulgence and revealing the extent of God's own compassion. But somewhere in the middle, at the heart of the story, Jonah compresses all his learning and experience into a single confession of faith: "Salvation comes from the LORD" (2:9).

Through this, and his honest confession of personal failure, Jonah shows us something about the grace of God. Jonah's story is full of God's redeeming love, God's extraordinary patience, and God's relentless pursuit of lost and rebellious people. Jonah's story is about a man who, being humbled by his own failure, finds that he can rejoice in God's ultimate triumph.

If you work long enough and hard enough in the cause of Christ, there will be times when you feel that God cares about what you are doing more than God cares about

you. But it isn't so! If God cared only about getting God's work done, God would have ditched Jonah and sent someone else to Nineveh. If all that mattered was the work, God could have abandoned Jonah in the self-indulgent resentment that gripped him after the people of Nineveh repented. But God cared about Jonah, and God cares about you, more than you can imagine.

God saved a vast city from judgment through Jonah's ministry, but the salvation of the city gets very little attention in the story. The bigger story is about God's patience and perseverance with one struggling soul. God goes to extraordinary lengths to rescue Jonah from the perverse power of his rebellious will and the self-interest of his despondent heart. That gives me hope. Jonah's story opens a window into the heart of God where we may discover God's faithful, persevering and ultimately triumphant love for us.

By any standard, Jonah lived a remarkable life. Few have the privilege of preaching with such power that a whole city is transformed, and nobody I know ever experienced God's grace in the belly of a fish! Jonah may be exceptional in this way, but his story speaks to our more ordinary lives in powerful ways.

Jonah's confession maps out our battle and gives testimony to the patience, perseverance and ultimate triumph of God's grace in the conflicted experience of a Christian disciple. Our journey with Jonah will help us to explore the dynamics of our own struggle with God. It will challenge our self-interest, and give us a fresh glimpse of God's inevitable grace. May God use Jonah's story to show us God's hand in the storms we experience and to help us navigate a more God-centered life!

Prayer: Forgiving God, like Jonah we resist when asked to tell your story. We find it hard to confess the name of Jesus. We are awkward and feel inadequate. But you have called us to speak and to act. Like Jonah, help us to rise up and follow wherever you lead. Lord of surprising light, make us followers. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Source Material: This sermon series draws heavily on Colin Smith's book, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.

Jonah: A Fish Tale

Sunday, June 18, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jonah 1

I love a good fish story! We all have them. Maybe it's the day you went ice fishing and you caught the limit in a couple of hours. Maybe it's the monster walleye you hooked and lost just as you got it close to the boat. Maybe it's the trip to the Pacific Northwest where you went salmon fishing with some buddies. Maybe it's taking your grandkids fishing for the first time. Maybe it's cruising around on the pontoon pulling in pan fish. Maybe it's the trout you caught and ate around a campfire. Fish stories are great and they usually get better the more you tell them.

The story of Jonah is one of those great fish tales that gets better with the telling. We all know this story from Sunday school: but, like every good fish story, there's more to the tale of Jonah and the whale than we might think. The story is about the disturbing possibility that having pledged your life to Christ, you may end up spending much of that life avoiding the God you set out to serve. It's about the conflict in the heart of every Christian and the grace of God that, when you see it, will draw you into the pursuit of a God-centered life.

For the Christian, a God-centered life begins with Jesus. Living a God-centered life means giving your life to Jesus. God-centered lives are driven by a passion for Jesus that shows itself in love, trust and obedience: all themes we'll find in Jonah's story. And although Jesus doesn't appear in the Jonah story, as we delve deeper into this fish story, we will discover again and again parallels to the life and teachings of Jesus, and his call for us to be "fishers of people" (Matt. 19).

Jonah is one of the most interesting and complex characters of the Bible. A mature believer, widely known and respected for his public ministry, Jonah became absorbed with himself and in large measure failed to live a God-centered life. God spoke through Jonah and Jonah's preaching changed people's lives. But behind Jonah's celebrated ministry lay intense private battles as the deep wells of selfish desire, love of comfort, and resentment toward God erupted in Jonah's life.