

We can never know the full extent of God's plan or see the whole picture of what God is doing. What we can know, as the disciples, crew, and Jonah discovered, is that God comes to us in the midst of life's storms, and sometimes storms are the means of God's mercy. This is the case with Jonah and the crew: the storm provided a means for God's grace to shine through.

Undoubtedly the ship's crew faced storms before; but this storm was different. They were in real trouble, and they knew it. So long as the ship held together, they had a chance; but as the storm battered the ship to pieces, they had nowhere to turn and no one to cry out to. These men did not know the God of the Bible: each of them cried out to his own god (1:5). As they cried to their gods, they threw the cargo overboard to lighten the load. The sailors doubted their god's ability to save them, and so they took matters into their own hands.

The tragedy is made more poignant by the fact that the one man who knew the Living God, slept soundly below decks. Jonah knew the Lord could save them; but how could Jonah appeal to this God while in the act of rebelling against God? Locked in his unresolved conflict with God, Jonah could neither pray nor prophesy. Surrounded by men who needed to know the Lord, Jonah had nothing to offer. His disobedience silenced his ministry.

It's worth pausing for a moment to hear the sailor's rebuke to Jonah as a rebuke of the church: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God!" (1:6). When we put our dreams and desires before God, we silence God's call, negate the redeeming work of Christ, and shut down the power of the Holy Spirit in our life. That jeopardizes, not just us, but our church and the world. Think of all the people who pursue other gods or who do not know to whom they can turn in a storm. If we don't pay for them, who will? If we don't tell them about God, how will they know God? The world cannot pray for itself. Only the church can intercede for a lost world, and if we're asleep or out of step with God's will and purpose, no one else will do the work.

The captain did not need Jonah's help to run the ship, but he wanted Jonah's prayers when trouble hit. The world never wants Christians to have their hands on the ship of state, but when trouble comes even our opponents covet our prayers! Sadly, Jonah did not pray even when the captain rebuked him. The storm raged, but Jonah still wrestled with God. Jonah wouldn't pray, couldn't pray. But God's next move would expose Jonah's secret sin.

The ship's crew knew the storm to be a judgment from the gods, and someone must be responsible. They decided to cast lots – much like tossing a coin or rolling dice – believing the gods would point out the offender. When the lot fell on Jonah it exposed his disobedience.

When God exposed Jonah's sin, it lit the fire of hope for the prophet and the crew. God disciplines those whom God loves (Heb. 12:6), so when God exposed Jonah's sin it showed God's love for Jonah and God's intent not to let Jonah go. The crew peppers Jonah with questions about his God and why Jonah would turn from God. With his sin exposed, Jonah's silence is broken. He tells the crew about God who is the Master of the wind and the waves, and the storm raging about them begins to make sense. If Jonah is running from God, the crew need look no further for the cause of their troubles. But what should they do now?

Jonah knew what to do. "Pick me up and throw me into the sea...and it will become calm" (1:12). That's a pretty big claim! How did Jonah know that the sea would calm if they threw him into the sea? Simple: God told him. With Jonah's sin exposed, God's silence ended, and Jonah heard God's voice once again, and he told the crew what they must do to be saved.

The crew's reaction shows that they still did not know or trust God: they rowed harder (1:13). They didn't want to give Jonah up, which is admirable, but their rowing contradicted God's command. God told them how to be saved, but they refused the sacrifice and tried to save themselves. Some days it doesn't matter how hard you row: you just can't save yourself. There's courage in that, but there is also resistance to God; and in the end, it's futile.

When the crew realized they couldn't save themselves, they did as God commanded and threw Jonah overboard. When they couldn't beat the storm, the crew staked their lives on the sacrifice of Jonah. Notice how beautifully this points to Jesus! The storm of God's judgment is stronger than we are. We do not have the ability or the strength to survive the storm on our own, no matter how good we are or how hard we try. The storm of God's judgment will wreck us, unless we are saved by the sacrifice of someone else, unless we stake our lives on Jesus.

On the cross, Jesus gave his life to deliver us from God's righteous judgment against our sin. He offered himself as a sacrifice in our place, to make right what we had made wrong. The Gospel is all about God's storm and Jesus' sacrifice for us. Jesus dives into the storm of God's judgment so that, through his life sacrifices, our life might be saved.

For that sacrifice to mean something, we must recognize our complicity in Christ's death, just as the ship's crew recognized their complicity in Jonah's. Knowing the power of God and also the value of human life, the crew cries out to God, "Do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood" (1:14). Jonah had done the crew no harm, so they had no reason to take his life; but to save themselves they threw him overboard.

Receive God's Provision

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Jonah 1:4-17

You may wonder why Jonah didn't throw himself overboard and save the crew the anxiety. God shaped this story to throw light on what we most need to understand about Jesus: he did not take his own life. Jesus was crucified and that truth is pictured in the crew throwing Jonah over the side. Just as the crew stood guilty in throwing an innocent man overboard, so do we, as members of the human race, stand guilty in the crucifixion of Jesus. Yet the death in which we incur this guilt is, in God's amazing grace, the means of our salvation!

The ship's crew knew they would incur guilt in sacrificing Jonah, and yet to their amazement they found salvation through his sacrifice. God's storm ended when Jonah hit the water. The crew sacrificed Jonah and they were saved. All of this shines a light on how the death of Jesus is a demonstration of God's love for us. We crucified Jesus – that's our guilt in the sacrifice – yet Jesus willingly laid down his life for us – that's our salvation through his sacrifice.

This is God's provision for us: in God's unmerited grace, Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins. Receiving God's provision for us through the sacrifice of Jesus is the first step in navigating a God-centered life. As long as we feel that there is something we can do to save ourselves, we will find ways to avoid giving ourselves completely to God. But as we begin to see the wonder of Jesus offering himself on our behalf, we will begin to feel that this Savior is worthy of our full devotion. Knowing that God saved them from the storm, the crew committed their life to God: they made vows (1:16) and pledged their redeemed lives to God.

When we finally understand that God is always at work, even in the midst of life's storms, and when we commit our lives and our way to Jesus, we are on the way to living a more God-centered life. The words of 1 John 2:2 say it best: "[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world." When our heart is gripped by the love of God poured out on the cross by which Jesus became *the* sacrifice for our sin, and when we are convinced that Jesus offers himself in redeeming love to others who do not yet know him, a passion will be lit in our heart to pursue a God-centered life.

Prayer: Loving, Lord Jesus, I need you in my life. You are righteous and just, worthy of my praise and my obedience. I now desire to lead a more God-centered life. I dedicate myself to you. I place my faith in you. Fill me with the Holy Spirit. Sanctify me by your truth. Empower me to live according to your Word. Guide me in the path of righteousness. In your matchless name I pray. Amen.

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

Paul wrote: *God demonstrates God's love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom. 5:8). This affirmation stands at the heart of our Christian faith. The death of Jesus is not a symbolic or empty gesture; his death shows God's love because it achieves something for us: by his death we are forgiven and redeemed. Becoming a sacrifice for us, Jesus delivered us from the storm of God's judgment. We experience God's love by grasping what Christ accomplished for us at the cross, and by discovering why this is truly good news for us.

In our text today, a ship's crew begins the journey to a God-centered life when they find themselves facing a judgment from God and when they experience deliverance from it by the willingness of one man to lay down his life for them. The sailors face a storm and find salvation through Jonah's sacrifice. Seeing the storm and embracing the sacrifice is where we begin to navigate a God-centered life.

God sent this storm as a result of Jonah's disobedience. If we believe that God sustains all things by God's powerful word (Heb. 1:3), and that even the wind and the waves obey God (Mark 4:41), then we must believe life's storms don't happen by chance. But the idea that storms, floods, landslides, volcanoes and earthquakes happen by God's decree makes many Christians squirm. They prefer to speak instead of God "allowing" natural disasters to occur. But think carefully about this: a "god" who merely allows things to happen is presumably at the mercy of another power. Such a "god" is of no help to us in a storm, because this "god" is also at the mercy of the storm and unable to control it. Only the God who makes things happen can intervene in human lives to change their trajectory.

God did not "allow" this particular storm to happen: God made it happen, sending wind and waves to fulfill God's purpose. The storm is the direct, intentional action of God. Jonah tells us that God "hurled" the wind (1:4), as if God threw it out from heaven by God's own hand. Jonah disobeyed God, and God sent the storm as a judgment against Jonah.

But be careful: it's easy to jump from the observation that storms come by God's hand to the conclusion that all storms are judgments from God against human sin and disobedience. That conclusion would be a mistake. Think of the disciples on the lake when a storm blew up (Mark 4:35-41): these men followed Jesus and obeyed his command to cross the lake. Sometimes following God will get you into a storm!