

Session 5: The Jonah Complex

Opening:

Many of us know the highlights of the Jonah story: call from God, boat to Tarshish, overboard, whale, vomited on land, off to Ninevah. But few of us know how Jonah ends. So today we will spend some time reading portions of Jonah, including the entire last chapter.

Reader 1:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But 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. ⁴But 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.

Reader 2

¹¹Then the sailors said to Jonah, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He 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.” ¹³Nevertheless 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.

Reader 3

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.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Reader 4

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying,
“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

...

⁷As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

Reader 5

⁸Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Reader 6

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Reader 7

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. ⁴ But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Reader 8

And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

Reader 9

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

You are almighty, all-powerful, majestic, the overflowing source of all good—and yet you choose to work through us. As your power works within us, may we bring you glory and build your church, now and forever. Amen.

Read aloud:

Last time we learned that open doors aren’t about us—God open doors for us so that we can bless others. Today, we will learn that open doors aren’t always fun. Or safe. Even when a door is wide open, we may hesitate because it will cost us too much, or take too much time, or put us in a place we don’t want to be.

Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah. This was a large city filled with evil people; barbaric people who did horrible things to their enemies. Imagine what they would do to a foreigner yelling at them to repent? This was not a job that Jonah wanted. So he went the other way. But it didn’t work. God didn’t let Jonah off the hook. And when he finally went to Ninevah—lo and behold!—his preaching worked! They repented and turned from their evil ways.

One would think that Jonah would be thrilled! His missionary work had enormous success! But he was ticked. Why? Because he didn't want them to be saved. But God did. God's love was larger than Jonah's stubbornness.

Here's a question: what invitation of God are you currently resisting?

Some possibilities:

- Confronting someone about an area in their life that needs attention
- Serving in an area that would be new for you
- Investing more in your church
- Inviting someone to worship with you at church, chapel or LOFT
- Giving more money away
- Pursuing an area of giftedness that may lead to risk or failure

Add some from your group:

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"Sometimes open doors are not fun. Sometimes they're not even safe. Always they're about something greater than our own benefit. Often they lead to Ninevah. Ninevah is the place God calls you where you do not want to go. Ninevah is trouble. Ninevah is danger. Ninevah is fear. What do you do when God says to you, "Go to Ninevah; go to the place you do not want to go"? *Because God will say that to you.* (p. 75, italics mine)

Remember this line from last week: "Biblically speaking, open doors are divine invitations to make our lives count, with God's help, *for the sake of others.*" (p. 63, italics mine) God's love is larger than our stubbornness. Is there a person or group who comes to mind when you think about a call that you're resisting?

Because of this lesson, what will change in your life with God and others this week?

Here's our prayer for today:

Pursuing God,

You run after the lost and bring them home. You seek in order to save. You did that for us! Forgive us when our hearts are cold to those that you want to bring home. Holy Spirit, warm our hearts to those whom you love. Open our eyes to see the open doors and give us the courage to walk through them. Break through our resistance and use us to seek the lost and disciple the found, for your glory. We ask this through Jesus, who spent three days in darkness and then rose to save us all. Amen.