

## **Kids Stump the Preacher: Jonah and the Big Stinky Fish**

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Jonah 1:1-17**

So today as we continue in our series of messages titled “Kids Stump the Preacher,” where we are looking at favorite Bible stories selected by the little ones of the church, I am suuuuper excited because today we are entering into the second most-requested story from our kiddos – second only to Noah’s Ark – and today’s story just happens to be one of my own personal all-time favorite Bible stories.

A lot of our stories in this series I’ve learned that for one reason or another I’ve just been avoiding preaching on them for my whole entire ministry career. But that is not the case with Jonah. Partly, because Jonah is really preach-able. Partly, because Jonah is so relatable. At least, to me. I personally relate a little bit too well to this story. Uncomfortably well. And partly, because it is just such a great story. With so much to teach us.

Plus, when I was studying Hebrew in seminary, our big second-semester project was to translate the entire book of Jonah. Word-for-word. Don’t get too excited, though – I was an absolutely abysmal Hebrew student and I retained almost nothing from that class, except that I did get to spend a lot of time in the book of Jonah and I discovered just how much I *love* this story.

So, let’s just jump right in.

Jonah is one of what we call the “Minor Prophets.” The minor prophets are a series of 12 relatively short books toward the end of the Old Testament. And together with the three much longer books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, these books all make up what the Jewish faith calls the *Neviim*, or the “Books of the Prophets.” Just about all of these books – the major and the minor prophets – were written around one particular time in history – a time of crazy political and social unrest.

I’ve talked about this time in history a lot before, so I’m not going to spend a lot of time on it today. But just as a brief recap, after the reign of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel finds itself in a bit of a Civil War and splits into two separate kingdoms – the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. At the same time, there were some major players on the world stage, that were basically obsessed with world domination. Early on, the kingdom of Assyria was the big bad bully, and Assyria was responsible for basically wiping the northern kingdom of Israel off the map and then making the southern kingdom of Judah beholden to them in exchange for military protection. And later, Babylonia swoops in and conquers pretty much the whole Assyrian empire – including the southern kingdom of Judah. When we talk about the

Babylonian exile – that was *the* major event for the Israelite people during this period of time.

So this is what is going on when the books of the prophets were written. There was a lot of turmoil happening in the world, and a lot of uncertainty, and a whole lot of fear.

Jonah was actually one of the earliest books of the prophets. Jonah was from the northern kingdom of Israel, and when his story takes place, Babylonia isn't really even in the picture much yet. The big scary bully during this time is Assyria. Assyria is basically swooping through the whole Ancient Near East and wiping out one country, after another, after another, and Israel is terrified that they might be next – this was a nightmare that did later actually happen to come true. And the capital city – the biggest and most powerful city in Assyria and the place where the Assyrian king and most of his army lived – was the city of Nineveh.

Just the very mention of the name Nineveh would spark fear and hatred in most Israelites. Including the prophet Jonah.

So one day, God said to Jonah, “Get up. Go to Nineveh, and preach to the people there.” And I love Jonah's response. It is so passive-aggressive. He doesn't tell God “no” directly. He just books a trip on a boat going in the opposite direction. He is going to have nothing to do with the people of Nineveh. No way, no how.

But God doesn't stop there. And God doesn't exactly take kindly to being ignored. “You want to screen my calls? Fine. I'll speak a little bit louder next time.”

And so God sends a storm. And this is where the story really starts to get funny. And ironic. So, Jonah didn't just board a boat. He boarded a boat filled with pagan sailors. And the moment this storm hits and the sailors realize they are in trouble, *they* start praying. But Jonah? The Israelite? One of “God's chosen people?” And a *prophet*, no less? One who has supposedly given his life to serve God? Yeah. He's not praying. He's checked out. Asleep, under the deck. His head is as far in the sand as he can go. “LALALALALALA! CAN'T HEAR YOU, GOD!!!!”

Finally, the sailors realize that Jonah isn't there, and they go get him, and then they play “Eenie meenie miney mo” to figure out who God is punishing by sending this storm and...lo and behold...Jonah is Mo.

So finally, Jonah relents. “It's my fault, guys. Throw me overboard into the sea, and the storm will stop.”

Now, this SOUNDS good. Noble, even. Sacrificing himself to save the sailors. Finally, Jonah fesses up and admits that he has done wrong and takes responsibility. Except, that he doesn't. All that has happened is that he has realized that God has found him.

God isn't going to let him *not* go to Nineveh. And so Jonah thinks "the only way I am going to get out of this – the only way God isn't going to touch me – is if I am dead. And right now, that sounds like a pretty good trade-off. I would rather be *dead* than go to Nineveh."

So in one final last-ditch effort to flee, Jonah has the sailors toss him overboard to certain death. The storm calms. Finally, Jonah is going to get a moment of peace – if not in life, then in death.

But God is not done yet. God sends a big fish. To swallow Jonah up – to prevent him from dying – and to physically carry him (against his will) to the water's edge at Nineveh.

And then here comes the next thing that I love about this story. Jonah is such a hot mess. If there were ever a time for somebody to fall down on their face before God and repent, now would be that time. Jonah has basically hit rock-bottom. There is literally no place he can go. The smell alone inside that fish had to have been absolutely awful. He knows he's done wrong. He knows he's been running away from God. Now would be the time for Jonah to say to God "I messed up, God. I am so sorry. I will try to do better next time."

But Jonah isn't going to give God that satisfaction. Jonah *never* admits that he is wrong. Even when he is inside the fish. He spends three days and three nights singing praise songs to God, hoping that if he stoked God's ego enough maybe he could manipulate God into letting him go.

But that didn't work, either. We are told that after three days the fish "spat" Jonah out onto the shores of Nineveh. At least, that's what our English translations say. But in the Hebrew it isn't so pretty. The fish "vomited" Jonah up onto the shores. God isn't going to let Jonah get out of this with his dignity intact, at any rate.

And so Jonah pivots again. And says, "fine. I can see that I'm not going to get out of this. I'll do it. But I'll do everything I can to botch the job."

So he marches into Nineveh, still reeking of fish vomit, and proceeds to preach the absolute worst sermon in the history of sermons. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." That's it. No "here's what you need to do." No "repent and turn to God." No mention of God whatsoever. Jonah is not on speaking terms with God at the moment, and if he can avoid mentioning God – if he can avoid bringing God into the picture – that is what he is going to do."

And then, without so much as an "amen" he marches right back out of town again, sits on top of a mountain, and watches. Eager to see the downfall of this great city. "I'm a prophet, after all. What I say, happens. I say they will be overthrown, and so that's what God will do."

Except, that's *not* what happened. The people of Nineveh – including the king and even the *animals* didn't hear Jonah's words, but God's message to them hidden underneath Jonah's words. And they repented. They prayed to God. And God changed his mind about the destruction he had planned for them.

And then Jonah *finally* gets into it with God. He is hot, sitting up there on that hilltop in the desert. God grows a plant up overnight to bring him shade from the sun, and Jonah is grateful. But then, God sends a worm to eat the plant and Jonah gets mad again. "Why did you do it, God? Why did you forgive them?"

"Because I wanted to," replies God.

And that's basically where the book ends. With Nineveh repenting, and Jonah sulking.

This is such a great story. Because literally *everything* in this story is so upside-down. We have, on the one hand, a prophet. A man of God. Someone looked at as faithful, and wise, and obedient. But when God tells Jonah to go east, he goes west. When Jonah should be repenting, he spends his time praising. When Jonah should be rejoicing, he is sulking. This man of God wants to have absolutely nothing to do with God, throughout the entire story.

But then, on the other hand, we have everybody and *everything* else. While Jonah is spending every waking moment playing "opposite day" – whatever God says, I do the opposite – we have the weather heeding God's call and responding. A giant fish doing what is contrary to its nature and following God's command. A plant growing out of nowhere because God says so. And even a worm doing what God tells it to. The pagan sailors spend time in prayer and find themselves moved and converted by God's amazing power, and even Israel's most bitter enemies hear God's voice in what was *not* spoken, and obey. From the biggest weather systems to the tiniest of worms. Plants and animals and the entire created order. Those who know nothing of God, and those who are hostile to God's people – God can and does work through all of them.

But the one person who remains un-moved, and un-changed? Right up to the very tail end of the story? God's prophet. God's chosen one. The one who *should have* been a beacon of God's love and grace. *He's* the only one in the whole story who puts up a roadblock every chance he gets.

Usually, when we tell the story of Jonah, we talk a lot about our tendency to run away from God's call – and the lengths to which God will go, to get us back. And that is certainly a *part* of the story. That's definitely there. But I think that for us as followers of God, the deeper truth is a far more sobering one. We, as the church, are called to be the body of Christ. To be God's hands and feet in the world. To bring God's healing touch to a hurting world; to model God's unconditional love in a world built on conditions. We

are called to be the ones who go first when it comes to things like seeking forgiveness, and admitting our mistakes, and working for reconciliation. We should be standing alongside all the voices of heaven and rejoicing when the lost sheep is found or when the prodigal son returns home.

And that is hard. Especially when the lost sheep happens to be somebody who we do not really like all that much. Or better yet – somebody we detest. If I were to be honest, I would much rather see my least favorite congressperson's political career go up in a pile of ashes, than admit that maybe God can work through them too. And there are times when I find myself glued to YouTube, waiting on the edge of my seat like Jonah for that crash-and-burn that never seems to come.

And it's because of attitudes like this, that Gandhi so famously said "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

And if I were being perfectly honest, I'd have to say "Yes. Guilty." So often, when God works through me, it is actually that God is working *in spite of me*. Because I've stuck my head in the sand and plugged up my ears and refused to believe that maybe I could be part of the problem. And maybe God could be working powerfully through and in the people I least expect.

So today, I would invite each of us to do that hard, uncomfortable work of inviting God to show us where it is that we may be throwing up barriers to the work of God in the lives of those around us. And where is it that we are refusing to see the hand of God working?

And when God opens our eyes – both to our brokenness and to God's amazing grace, may we do what Jonah could never bring himself to do. And may we repent. Turn around. And find ourselves astonished by God's amazing and powerful work both around us and within us.