

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 28, 2016)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Good News!

The Greatest (reluctant) Evangelist Ever Study #1

(a study of Jonah)

Introduction: Good news is for sharing...

I'm thankful to God for gifted teachers who give great messages at our church. So, thanks to you, Pastor Jeff, for your wonderful messages about building faith at home over the last three Sundays.

And, while I'm so grateful to God to be with you this morning, I want you to know that I won't be with you next Sunday, because my daughter, Erin, is getting married next Sunday. Kathy and I are pretty excited about it. I'll miss seeing you, but...I'll be at my daughter's wedding and Alex Mandes (who has lots of experience with daughters getting married) will be bringing a great message.

On Friday, Pastor Manuel Abarca and I drove to Houston to take part in the Annual Conference of the EFCA Texas/Oklahoma District. It was a really great conference where we heard some wonderful speakers and interacted with some great people.

Whenever I was asked about what was going on, I would tell them about the exciting things at church - like the start of the Spanish speaking ministry Manuel is leading - and I'd somehow manage to mention that my daughter is getting married.

Did I mention that Erin is getting married? Not that her wedding is the only thing going on these days...

As of this morning, we are four weeks away from Easter Sunday. On the last weekend of March we'll hold a very meaningful Good Friday service, we'll rise early for a joyous outdoors sunrise celebration on Sunday in the Chapel in the Woods, and we'll gather here at 9:30 and 11:00 to worship a resurrected Savior.

The events we will observe over that weekend remind us of the historical heart of our faith.

The essential message of Christianity is that Jesus died on a Roman cross and then rose from the dead on the third day to offer salvation to everyone who believes in Him for eternal life.

If before this morning you have not received the gift of eternal life Jesus died and rose again to give you, it is my hope that you will place your trust in Him today; that you will see God's love poured out on you in Jesus, trust Him and Him alone for your forgiveness, and know what it is to be a son or a daughter of God.

And if you have received that wonderful gift of grace from God - rejoice! Give thanks to God and have rest in your spirit knowing that your eternity is secure, having been saved by God's power!

And...

As I have been unable to keep quiet about the upcoming wedding of my daughter because that's a big part of what's happening in my life, we who have believed in Jesus and have received the gift of eternal life are invited and commissioned and privileged to share that Good News with the people in our world.

God's heart is for people to come to know Him - and His Plan A for seeing to it that people hear, His strategic initiative for getting the word out, is us.

This call to us to share and spread the Gospel is a major biblical theme and we will see it today and on the Sundays to come.

This morning we're turning to the most evangelistically pointed book of the Old Testament. It is the highly engaging and completely entertaining (and thoroughly convicting) book of Jonah.¹

Jonah: "Go to Nineveh?! Forget It!" (chapter 1)

The Word of the Lord to Jonah (vv. 1-2)

Jonah and his times²

This little book was written about twenty-eight hundred years ago. Jeroboam II was the king of Israel and Jonah was God's prophet.

At the time Jonah lived, Israel was experiencing an economic revival and a spiritual meltdown.

Jeroboam II was not leading the nation into spiritual vitality, but he was leading into prosperity, comfort, and affluence.

Things were going really well on all fronts - except the spiritual - and the only real threat to Israel's national security was the Assyrian Empire. And Assyria's capitol city was Nineveh.³

Nineveh and her times/crimes

Archaeologists tell us that Nineveh was the largest city in the world in Jonah's day.

It was located about five hundred miles northeast of Palestine and was a cultural center for politics, architecture and the arts, education, and music.⁴

However, while Assyria was culturally advanced, she was best known for gross immorality and barbaric cruelty. Her army struck fear into the hearts of every people in the Ancient Near East, including the Jews. That's important background to know as we move now to the prophecy of Jonah.

The first words of Jonah's book are not, "Once upon a time..." They are word typical of a prophetic work - **[1] The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai...** And those first words are followed by words that would have repulsed any Jew of Jonah's day.

The command of God to Jonah (v. 2)

[2] "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."

Nineveh's sin has offended God. Her sin was like a slap in God's face. And He's going to deal with it by sending His prophet, Jonah, with a message of judgment.⁵

There is a problem, though. The problem is that Jonah wants nothing to do with this assignment. God told Jonah to get up and go. And, sure enough, Jonah got up and went.

Jonah's Flight from God's Assignment and Presence (v. 3)

[3] But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

¹ Jonah as an archetype for the nation as his name means "dove" a tender term God sometimes used to refer to Israel (Hosea 7:11). But, this is not a normal prophetic book, and there is not a typical prophetic message included. The whole book is a narrative prophecy to Israel.

² The prophets were active during the time of the kings of Israel and Judah, roughly from the 9th-5th centuries BC. Prophets usually served the dual role of "foretelling" (prediction) and "forthtelling" (preaching).

³ Assyria is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 10. Through the centuries Assyria's influence and power ebbed and flowed. The Assyria that threatened Israel during Jonah's is usually called *neo-Assyria*.

⁴ Assyria was ruled by Shalmaneser IV, a relatively weak King - good news for Israel.

⁵ This is the only record of a prophet of God being explicitly sent to a heathen nation. As such, Jonah is the most powerful missionary book in the Old Testament. Here God makes clear that He has always been concerned for the whole world.

God said, “Go east, young man” and Jonah headed due west across the Mediterranean to present-day Spain (Tarshish).

Of course Jonah’s flight from God was illogical (You don’t flee from an omnipresent God!), but it was understandable. He had no interest in taking God’s message to the Assyrians.⁶

Jonah hated the Ninevites. So, he stuck out his prophetic tongue at God and said, “NO!”

But, Jonah was about to learn an important lesson about life with God. You can run, but you can’t hide.

You Can Run. You Can’t Hide (vv. 4-14)

Stormy weather (v. 4)

The ship Jonah boarded for his Mediterranean cruise was probably a large, multi-decked Phoenician ship. In those days, Phoenician sailors were the world’s best mariners. But even these sailors weren’t up to what was about to come their way.

[4] The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up⁷.

This storm was sudden and severe - and it was caused by Jonah’s disobedience.

These sea-hardened sailors instinctively did everything they could think of to survive.

The storm caused by disobedience (vv. 5-7)

[5a] Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

They each turned to his favorite god, the god he turned to when times got tough. But that’s NOT what the prophet of the true God did. No, Jonah was not there with the others crying out to god/God.

[5b]...Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

Jonah ignored his God. But God wasn’t about to ignore Jonah. God didn’t throw His hands up and say, “I’m finished with you, Jonah!” No, this storm is the Hound of Heaven *passionately* pursuing His disobedient prophet.

The ship’s captain searched for and found Jonah and begged him to join their prayer meeting up top. He told Jonah, ***[6b] “Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”***

But the sea’s ragings only grew more violent. The sailors began to discern that this storm was supernatural in origin. So they cast lots (like drawing straws) to find out on whose account this storm had hit.

We’re not at all surprised that the lot fell to Jonah. But when it did, the sailors were frantic to find out what he had done to put them all in such danger.

Jonah’s testimony (vv. 8-9)

[8] Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

To these questions, Jonah answered, ***[9] “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”***

And we think, “Good for you, Jonah.” That’s a great statement of faith. Theologically correct. Accurate. But let’s not elevate Jonah to sainthood quite yet.

⁶ See Genesis 12 and the covenant God made with Abraham where he was commanded to “*be a blessing.*”

⁷ A literal translation of verse 4 reads, “*the ship thought itself about to break up.*”

The sailors fight to save Jonah's life! (vv. 10-14)

The sailors had been praying to false gods. Now they are instantly more concerned to *not upset* the one God who made the sea and all that is in it - SEEING THAT THEY WERE ON THE HIGH SEAS!

They **[10a]...became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**

They knew that Jonah's God had to be appeased to make the sea calm down, so they asked him, **[11] "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"**

And in what might be the only positive glimpse of Jonah in the whole book, he told them, **[12] "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."**

But the sailors didn't want to throw Jonah into the sea! They placed great stock in human life⁸ and **[13]...rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.**

They were torn between not wanting to kill Jonah because he was a person, not wanting to offend Jonah's God by killing His prophet, and not wanting to perish in the sea, themselves.

But they finally saw that they really had no choice but to toss Jonah overboard

[14] Then they called on the LORD (The pagan sailors refer to Him as "Yahweh," Jonah's God) **and said, "We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased."**

⁸ Something that can't be said of Jonah, given his reluctance to go to Nineveh.

And if this was the storm caused by disobedience, it is also the storm that obedience quieted.

Salvation on the High Seas (vv. 15-17)

The sailors, saved by the God of all grace (vv. 15-16)

[15] So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. [16] Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.⁹

Rarely has a prophet of God had such stunning success in evangelism. And it was all a result of Jonah's sin. It was a completely unintentional and accidental success!

And what of Jonah? Of course, the sailors believed that they were ending Jonah's life. And, of course, God had other plans.

Jonah, "saved" by a whale (v. 17)¹⁰

[17] And the LORD appointed a great fish¹¹ to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

God miraculously delivered Jonah by appointing this "great fish" (most likely a sperm whale). And Jonah went to school during the time that he was in the belly of the fish. He learned.

⁹ This being the first of two evangelistic successes recorded in the book of Jonah.

¹⁰ Different explanations have been suggested for this part of the story: (a). Jonah was picked up by a ship with a fish as a figurehead; (b). Jonah rode in the carcass of a dead whale; (c). He dreamed the whole thing; (d). He made up the story as a fable with a lesson to teach. However, there is nothing in the story to suggest that this is anything other than a telling of an actual event. And there have been documented stories of men being swallowed by whales and living to tell about it. Moreover, Jesus used the story of Jonah's experience as an illustration of His own literal time in the belly of the earth before His resurrection, giving even more credence to the idea that we are reading history in Jonah, not allegory.

¹¹The Hebrew word used here is "dag" and can be translated "fish" "whale" or "monster of the deep." The best guess is that this was a sperm whale.

He has already learned that you can run, but you can't hide from God. Now, he learns something of the goodness of God for having saved him from death, and he learns that God can be VERY persuasive.

At the end of this first chapter of Jonah's prophecy, Jonah finds himself safe, if pretty yukked up, on the inside of a whale. I, for one, am grateful that we are not told what it was like in there.

It was no doubt a miserable experience. But this swallowing was, in fact, a great deliverance.

So, while he was there in the belly of the whale, Jonah had time to reflect. He thought. He prayed. And, the prayer he prayed is recorded in the second chapter of the book, for our benefit.

This is not a somber, sober, sad prayer. No - it is a prayer of thanksgiving and praise.¹²

Our VERY Persuasive God (chapter 2)

***[1] Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, [2] and he said,
"I called out of my distress to the LORD,
And He answered me.
I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;¹³
You heard my voice.
[3] For You had cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the current engulfed me.
All Your breakers and billows passed over me.
[4] So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight.
Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple.'
[5] Water encompassed me to the point of death.
The great deep engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.***

¹² Many of the lines of this prayer are lifted from the Psalms, showing that Jonah was a student of the Bible.

¹³ He describes himself as being in *Sheol*, the place of the dead, a hyperbole for a near-death experience.

***[6] I descended to the roots of the mountains.
The earth with its bars was around me forever,
But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.
[7] While I was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD;
And my prayer came to You,
Into Your holy temple.
[8] Those who regard vain idols
Forsake their faithfulness,
[9] But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the LORD."***

Jonah had believed that he would be able to flee from God's presence and from God's assignment. Then, he had this "whale of an experience" that proved God was not so easily escaped. When he also realized that God's action had saved his life, he vowed a vow.

That last phrase, "***What I have vowed I will pay***" is Jonah's promise that he will fulfill the word of the Lord. He will go to Nineveh. And the Bible says that "***THEN***" the whale deposited Jonah rather indelicately on the shore.

***[10] THEN the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited
Jonah up onto the dry land.***

Now, this miracle of the three days and three nights in the belly of the whale is what many people have a hard time swallowing. But what follows is, without question, the greatest miracle in the book.

Revival in Nineveh (chapter 3)

The God of the Second Chance (vv. 1-2)

[3:1] Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, [2] "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."

Our God is the God of the Second Chance. The second message to Jonah was somewhat shorter than the first message. It was a bit less personal. But it was crystal clear.

And this time, having been re-commissioned, Jonah did what the Lord told him to do.

Jonah, the (reluctantly) Obedient Prophet (vv. 3-4)

[3] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.¹⁴

Try to put yourself in Jonah's sandals. You have left for a journey of months, traveling the five hundred miles from the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea to the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire.

What are you thinking?

Well, given that Assyria posed a very real threat to your own beloved nation and that Nineveh was a really, really wicked city, you might be thinking, "I can't believe I am doing this!"? along with "I can't believe God has forced me to do this!"?

You might even be resentful toward God for having you travel this road, bitter about having to go to Nineveh.

But Jonah went, just as the Lord commanded him. And as soon as he arrived in Nineveh, he did some reconnaissance.

He walked through the city for a full day (3:4) before he preached. And what do you imagine Jonah saw as he went through the city?

I think he would have seen evidence of sin. He would have seen lots and lots of wooden and stone idols, directing people to worship false gods.

He would have seen evidence of immorality and poverty and violent crime and injustice.

Maybe there were gangs roaming the streets and graffiti on building walls.

At the end of his one-day tour of the city, he went from street corner to street corner, proclaiming God's message to Nineveh. It was history's shortest sermon. It was neither user-friendly nor politically correct.

[4] "Od arbi'im yom va Nineveh hehphaket!" ("Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.")

He just lays it out there. No apologies or soft-pedaling. This is God's prophetic word to Nineveh. Destruction is decreed.

However, when the citizens of Nineveh heard the words Jonah had to say, they responded, unbelievably, by believing - and eat your heart out, Billy Graham!

Nineveh - NINEVEH! - Believes (vv. 5-9)

[5] Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. [6] When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. [7] He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. [8] But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence (violence being the national sin of Assyria) which is in his hands."

¹⁴ I am not sure if that means that the metropolitan area of Nineveh was about 60 miles in circumference, but that is certainly possible. If so, that would make Nineveh roughly the size of the area within San Antonio's Loop 410.

The confession of their sin was not some vague, general apology for maybe having done something naughty. No, they confessed sins of which they had truly been guilty.

Clearly, the King of Assyria was hoping that God's wrath would be turned away. He was hoping that Nineveh would *not* be destroyed, and that they would get to taste, not judgment, but mercy.

In fact, that is just what he said: **[9] “Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?”**

And, gloriously, when they turned to God, God's anger WAS turned away!

The Amazing Grace of a Merciful God (v. 10)

[10] When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.¹⁵

And THAT is the summit, the peak of the book. It doesn't get any better than this.

It proves that God doesn't delight in the *destruction* of the wicked, but in the *turning* of the wicked. He is a gracious and loving God who would much rather extend forgiveness to a broken sinner than hurl judgment against a hardened sinner.

And, this would be a wonderfully satisfying place to end the book. The End.

But as much as I'd like to close my Bible and end in prayer, we're not done. Jonah's book isn't over. There is more to see. In fact, the punchline of the book is just ahead.

¹⁵ Warnings become prophecy when people stay hardened. Warnings become Gospel when people believe. Jonah thought that he was preaching a prediction. But God mercifully turned his message of judgment into grace when the Ninevites turned to God.

An Unsettling Epilogue (chapter 4)

Jonah - DISPLEASED at the Mercy of God! (vv. 1-4)

[4:1] But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry.

If this is the first time through Jonah, you might have assumed that God's prophet would be thrilled to see people come to know the Lord, believing in God, and turning from their sin. He was not thrilled.

Jonah was extremely unhappy over the salvation of the Ninevites. Remember. He hated the Ninevites. For his whole life he had looked toward the east, dreading the day that a horde of Assyrians would come barreling across the plains to attack Israel.

So, for the first time in the book, Jonah now prays.

[2] He prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this, I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. [3] Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” [4] The LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”

And now there is this giant wall between God and Jonah. God expected Jonah to repent of his anger and Jonah was waiting for God to apologize for not destroying Nineveh.

God breaks the impasse with a curious use of trivialities.

What it Takes to Please/Displease Jonah (vv. 5-9)

Jonah is finally happy! (vv. 5-6)

[5] Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

I picture Jonah positioning himself on a hill overlooking the city around the time that the forty days he mentioned in his sermon would have expired. I think he was waiting to see if there might be a Sodom-and Gomorrah-like display of fire and brimstone.

And so, with Jonah sitting under a hastily constructed lean-to, God went to work teaching His prophet a lesson.

[6] So the LORD God appointed a plant¹⁶ and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

God starts off pampering Jonah. And here, pampered, Jonah is happy for the first and only time in the book.

But God wasn't really interested in Jonah's comfort. He really wasn't. He pampered His prophet for a purpose. And the pampering ends as quickly as it began.

What it takes to take away Jonah's joy.... (vv. 7-9)

With the plant shading him, everything was fine, but ***[7]...God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered.***

Then, God added to Jonah's misery. ***[8] When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."¹⁷***

¹⁶ The plant was a *gigiyon*, an unusually fast growing gourd-like plant, but supernaturally fast growing here.

¹⁷ There is plenty of irony in the little book of Jonah. One of the most amusing ironies is that our models for faithfulness and obedience to God are virtually everyone and everything - except God's prophet!

- The **storm** raged when the Lord hurled it on the sea.
- The **heathen sailors** believed when they saw God's power.
- The **ship** went where the Lord blew it.
- The **whale** swallowed Jonah on command.
- The **Ninevites** repented at Jonah's preaching.

Jonah is really miserable, now. He is physically at the end of his rope. And now, with Jonah fully absorbed in his pain, God speaks.

[9] Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

And here is God's final response to Jonah.

A Final, Reflective Glimpse at the Great Heart of God (vv. 10-11)

[10] Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight."

And Jonah's thinking, *"Right, Lord. That plant was important to me. It brought me relief. It helped me."*

So listen as God exposes His heart to Jonah and to us.

[11] "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand¹⁸, as well as many animals?"

-
- The **plant** grew when appointed, the **worm** burrowed when appointed, and the **wind** blew when appointed.

The only character in the whole story who disobeyed was Jonah. And he disobeyed because he didn't value what God valued.

¹⁸ God was willing to spare Sodom for ten righteous people. How much more Nineveh with 120,000 innocent children. This probably represents some 600,000 human inhabitants.

Conclusion:

And the book ends with this amazing tension. We are left wondering what Jonah will do.

God valued people - even wicked, violent, and cruel people who had lived badly. He valued them so highly that He went to great lengths to send these wicked people a message by deploying His prophet.

So, will Jonah repent of his hard-heartedness and embrace God's embrace of those who are far from God? Or will he remain cold, more concerned for his own comfort than for the people God loves?

Four weeks out from Easter, this is a question that comes straight from Jonah to me, too. And to you. And to us.

Any of us could be guilty of twenty-first century Jonah-ism. And Jonah-ism might take any number of forms. It could look like:

- a refusal to share the message of Jesus with someone or with some group, even if the door is wide open.
- disinterest in sharing Jesus because of personal inconvenience or because of personal distaste.
- NOT valuing someone who is far from God the way God values them.

We all agree that God so loved people who sin - people like us *and* people who are still far from God - that He sent Jesus to live and to die and to live again so that misbehavers could be saved. God so loved these misbehavers that He has deployed us - who have already tasted His grace - to spread the Good News.

So...

Imagine you are given an assignment to write Jonah, chapter 5. I know. There is no Jonah 5. But what if you were given the chance to write an alternative ending to this book; one that goes past Jonah sitting on a hill, neck stiff and heart hard, hoping for Nineveh's destruction.

Here's how my Jonah 5 would read.

[1] And when Jonah saw the joy of the Ninevites and the love of God for them, he repented of his hatred, ran down to the city and joined their salvation celebration. [2] And on his way back to Israel, Jonah stopped off in Babylon to share the good news of God's love with them, too.

If your "Good News is for sharing story" has more about it of the biblical Jonah then you would want it to, I believe that God is inviting you to take up a pen and start writing the next chapter of your life with a different pen.

It may mean repentance. It may involve identifying Ninevites in your life. And it certainly will include an exciting decision before God to do an about face in your pursuit of Tarshish and to lovingly share Jesus with the people God so desperately loves.