

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / October 3, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Everybody in the Game Series
God's Amazing Commitment (Jonah 1:1-3:2)

Introduction: Jonah shows God's amazing commitment

Good morning. As we continue our service sermon series, I want to thank everyone serving with our Children's Ministry. Jesus considers children so important that He says, "Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me." So thank you for serving, welcoming Jesus as you welcome kids! As we all look to grow as servants this morning, let's ask for God's help in prayer...

This morning I'm eager to talk with you about the book of Jonah. For Jonah's story has much to say about God's amazing commitment to reaching people.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Jonah, chapter 1, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Jonah served as a prophet when Jeroboam II was king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, over 750 years before Jesus was born (*2 Kings 14*). In the generation before Jonah, the Assyrians attacked Israel and forced Israel pay tribute to them for years, so Assyria is Israel's big enemy. And because of Israel's rebellion against God for generations by the time of Jonah, prophets like Hosea and Amos are warning that if Israel continues in evil, God will eventually give Israel over to their enemies from Assyria (*Hosea 11:5*).

You would not want to be given over to Assyria. They were a shockingly brutal people, their kings bragging about things like flaying the skin of their defeated enemies.

Teaching: God's amazing commitment to reaching flawed people

God's power and compassion impact the sailors – And now here in Jonah chapter 1, God calls Jonah to go serve these brutal Assyrians. Verse 1: **(1-2)**

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. So in verse 2 God calls Jonah to go preach to the heart of this ruthless empire. This is not only a dangerous assignment, but even if the Assyrians

miraculously respond well to Jonah's ministry, he'll still be considered a traitor by his fellow Israelites who hate the Assyrians.

But unlike the Israelites, God has compassionate concern even for the violent people of Nineveh. So today, you're never going to meet a person who doesn't matter to God. No matter what they've done wrong, no matter what their views on politics or sexuality or COVID, no matter what their race or nationality, God has compassionate concern for everyone. But Jonah does not share God's concern for the Assyrians, and is having none of God's challenging call, as verse 3 shows. **(3)**

³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Many in the Scriptures who get callings to serve God aren't initially excited, as those assignments often require great faith. But Jonah does more than complain or raise objections, Jonah literally flees from God. Nineveh is to the east, and here in verse 3 Jonah gets on a ship sailing west to Tarshish.

But rather than rush to judge Jonah, let's consider instead if there are any ways we're running from God's call to service. Perhaps by making excuses to God, like that we're not gifted enough, or experienced enough, or spiritual enough to really serve Him. Or that we're too busy or too tired or too unappreciated for our past service to serve God today. Let's see how God responds to Jonah's attempt to escape serving God in verse 4. **(4-6)**.

⁴ Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶ The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."

In disobedience, Jonah heads "down": down to Joppa in verse 3, now down below deck in verse 5. So God graciously sends a storm to get Jonah's attention. Ironically, the sailors, who don't know the LORD, respond to His work. As God hurls a storm, the sailors hurl cargo into the sea and fearfully cry out to their gods. Even the inanimate ship is responding to God's storm, threatening to break up.

As God works, and the sea, ship, and sailors respond, Jonah, God's prophet, is unresponsive, in a deep sleep below deck. In the Hebrew that Jonah was originally written in, the captain's words in verse 6 match God's. As God told Jonah in verse 2 "arise and call" against Nineveh, now Jonah awakes to the unbelieving captain urgently telling him in the Hebrew to "arise and call" to God, strangely familiar words. Then in verse 7 God keeps seeking to wake up His prophet. **(7-8)**

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

As they cast lots to see who bears responsibility for the storm, it "just so happens" that the lot falls on Jonah. These sailors believe in multiple gods and in these verses they urgently seek answers from Jonah about why they're all in danger of drowning. So Jonah provides insight starting in verse 9. **(9-11)**

⁹ He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.). ¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

Jonah tells the sailors that his God made the sea and is the God of heaven, so the sailors realize there's no higher god to appeal to; they must deal with Jonah's God. Ironically, the sailors grasp the seriousness of Jonah's disobedience more than he does. In verse 5, as God brings the storm, the sailors are afraid, but now as they hear of Jonah's disobedience to God, they are very afraid.

There's also another irony in these verses that sadly many of us can relate to. Jonah, who is currently disobeying God, tells the sailors in verse 9, "I worship the LORD." As the sailors ask this so-called worshipper who doesn't do what God says, what they the sailors must do, verse 12 shares... **(12-15)**

¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." ¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried

out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.”¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

In verse 4 God hurls a great storm, in verse 5 the sailors hurl the cargo, and now in verse 15, Jonah is hurled into the sea. In contrast to Jonah’s callous indifference to the Ninevites, these sailors show compassionate concern for Jonah, despite Jonah getting them into this terrifying mess. The sailors try to save Jonah, only throwing Jonah overboard reluctantly, as a very last resort, when they think it’s God’s will.

In addition to the sailor’s compassion, they’re also a foil to Jonah in another way, as they actually worship God in verse 16. **(16)**

¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

At the beginning of the storm, the sailors feared it and cried out to their gods. Then in the middle, in verse 10, they greatly feared because of Jonah’s disobedience to God. Now here in verse 16 they greatly fear the LORD and worship Him in reverence. We see God’s amazing grace and power to work good. Despite Jonah’s disobedience, God compassionately works to help these sailors start a relationship with Him.

God’s power and compassion impact Jonah – And through the storm God also goes to great lengths to awaken Jonah to God’s power and compassion. Imagine being Jonah here. You know you’ve messed up, and you’ve just been thrown overboard to drown for your disobedience... but then God compassionately provides in verse 17. **(17)**

¹⁷ Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Talk about an object lesson showing God’s power. In biblical poetry the sea is sometimes described as a place of chaotic forces, but even here in a sea monster God is in control. There’s nowhere on earth that Jonah can flee from God and His purposes.

Now some have a hard time believing that Jonah miraculously lived in a huge fish for three days. But if you believe God is real and working, it’s not hard to get from there to God being able to control the waves and a fish. And when Jesus talks about Jonah in the gospels, it

sure seems to me like Jesus is talking as if Jonah is a real, historical person, not an allegorical character illustrating a spiritual lesson.

But whatever you think about the miracle of the great fish, let's not focus there. Let's focus on our great God. For the greatest miracle we've seen is not God's big fish, it's God's amazing compassion.

In Jonah chapter 1 we see the amazing lengths that God will go to show mercy. Mercy to disobedient, hardhearted Jonah, and to the ignorant sailors, and to the violent Assyrians, as God keeps working in and through His flawed prophet. And through these experiences, God even teaches Jonah lessons to help him serve the Ninevites.

Professor Sinclair Ferguson says this about Jonah being thrown in the sea. The measure of 'grace' which the sailors show Jonah in trying to save Jonah despite his guilt should have shamed Jonah into longing for grace for all those who had never received it, like the Ninevites. But now, thrown into the sea, the lesson was being taught 'for real'. Now it was Jonah who needed grace. Now Jonah felt barred from God's presence, as the Ninevites were soon to feel. Now Jonah felt the absence of God, as the Ninevites would also. Jonah was coming to see something of his own spiritual bankruptcy, as the Ninevites would. Chapter 1 and 2 was Jonah's supreme equipping for the task. God was fitting Jonah uniquely for service in Nineveh."¹

I wonder if any of us have been through, or are going through, a storm that somehow relates to some way that God wants us to serve. A storm could be God's gracious discipline for our disobedience, like in Jonah's case. Or the storm could just be the result of living as broken people in a broken world.

But either way, in the discomfort, disruption, and agony of the storm, God wants to work redemptively in your life and through your life in service to others.

God can redeem a storm by using it as a wake-up call that refocuses you on your relationship with and service to Him, as God does with Jonah. God can graciously redeem a storm by teaching you important spiritual lessons, about brokenness, grace, compassion, like God does with Jonah.

Having been brought through the storm, in chapter 2 Jonah responds to God's power and compassion with a prayer of thanksgiving. Verse 1 of chapter 2: **(1-6)**

2 ¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said:

¹ *Man Overboard: The Story of Jonah*, 35. My wording is a close paraphrase to Sinclair's quote.

“In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

³ You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

⁴ I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’

⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.

This prayer is Jonah giving thanksgiving to God for being delivered from drowning. Back in chapter 1, Jonah goes down to Joppa, and then down below deck on the ship, and then down into the sea. Here in chapter 2, Jonah is cast down into the depths in verse 3 and sinks down in verse 6.

But after going down, down, down, down, down, the end of verse 6 says, “But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.” When Jonah can sink no lower, God brings him upward, graciously delivering Jonah from death at sea.

And Jonah, having experienced God’s compassion and deliverance, responds with grateful praise starting in verse 7. Look there with me. **(7-9)**

⁷ “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

⁸ “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.

⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”

In these verses Jonah finally catches up with the sailors. As the sailors worship God and offer a sacrifice and make vows in chapter 1, so Jonah now vows to make a sacrifice with public praise to God.

God recalls a flawed prophet to reach a flawed people – Jonah ends his praise in verse 9 by saying, “Salvation comes from the LORD.” We thank God for that. Though Jonah, and us in the

church, fall short in many ways, God stays committed to reaching flawed people with His sovereign power and compassionate mercy.

God often reaches flawed people through other flawed people, like us, and Jonah, as God recalls His flawed prophet to reach the flawed Ninevites in verse 10. **(2:10-3:2)**

¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. ³ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

So God delivers Jonah back on dry land... through fish vomit. Through God's messy deliverance, Jonah is now in a better place. So perhaps you've gone through something messy, and God has brought you out with new insights and capacity to serve Him.

But we'll see next Sunday that the tension is not resolved between God and Jonah. Jonah is now more grateful for God's gracious deliverance in his life. And Jonah now understands that he must follow God's call to Nineveh, but Jonah's still not happy about it. Jonah likes God's compassion for himself, but dislikes God's commitment to extend compassion to the Ninevites.

Next Step and Lord's Supper

Now a Jonah commentary I read noted how for many, once the question of miracle or no miracle with the fish is answered, their conversation about Jonah is over. But as we take a next step with Jesus this morning, that Jonah commentary gives us a much better question to consider at this point in the story. “What does Jonah's expulsion from the fish mean?”²

As we reflect on that question, I invite the Worship Team to come up now. They're going to play, and then we'll take the Lord's Supper together.

Because of God's amazing commitment to reaching flawed people, everyone is invited to the Lord's Supper. But you must respond to God's invitation by trusting that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead to make a place for you at God's table.

All who have responded to God's gracious invitation through faith in Jesus are welcome to eat the bread and drink the cup, here and at home, as the Deacons see if anyone needs a bread and cup.

² James Bruckner, *NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*.

As they do, we wonder, what does Jonah's expulsion from the fish mean? It's a question that leads to other questions. Like, why is God going to such lengths to reach the Ninevites, a wicked, brutal people who even celebrate flaying their enemies' skin?

And a question for each of us, who does God want me to show compassion to? Someone who's hurt me? Refugees at our border? A student or coworker who doesn't yet know of God's love?

Jonah's expulsion from the fish also makes us wonder, why is God going to such lengths to reach and recall into service a prophet like Jonah? One who detests the people God calls him to serve, doesn't want to share of God's compassion, and only obeys God once it's compulsory.

And having seen God still keep working through Jonah, another question arises for us. Why have I wrongly believed that my struggles disqualify me from sharing about God? Do I really think my excuses and my failings excuse me from serving God by serving others?

And we ponder these questions, we may eventually ask, isn't it amazing how God still wants to use us to bless people even after we fail Him? And isn't it amazing how God will take a reluctant, only half-in kind of person, and still work with that?

Let's reflect on these questions as the Worship Team plays... **Song**

As we reflect on Jonah and on Jesus here at the Lord's Supper, we ask...

Bread – Isn't it amazing that Jesus' body was broken for us, and that Jesus faced the ultimate storm of God's judgment for us? Let's eat this bread that represents Jesus' broken body in amazement.

Cup – And isn't it amazing that Jesus' blood was spilled for us, and that Jesus spent 3 days, not in a fish, but in the grave, only to arise to save not just one city, like Nineveh, but people from around the world? So let's drink the cup in amazement.

Thank you Jesus! Let's pray...

Dismissal – Isn't it amazing that as we dismiss now, God wants to work through us this week to serve people and share Jesus? Amen.