

I. Introduction / Good morning / I had a very brief, somewhat clever introduction to today's sermon. I was going to note that:

A. Any journalist worthy of a press pass knows that when a dog bites a man it's not news. But when a man bites a dog it might be. Likewise, when a man (or a woman) eats a fish there is nothing to report. But when a fish eats a man – and then spits him out alive a couple days later – well, stop the presses. Consequently, when you ask people about the book of Jonah all they want to talk about is the fish. Which is tragic, because it's not really about the fish.

B. I was then going to note that the book of Jonah is about many things: judgment against evil, the offer of mercy, misguided nationalism, our efforts to avoid God and the missional outreach we are called to. It is also a foreshadowing of the parable of the Prodigal Son,¹ the parable of the Good Samaritan and of Christ's resurrection. And on top of all that, it's an amazing work of literature.

C. I was going to note that the Book of Jonah is many things before it's a story about a fish.² And then direct you to Jonah 1:1 and jump in.

II. I drafted that months ago. But the events of the last week – and there were many: a record number of COVID deaths, the Prosecuting Attorney's decision in Kenosha, consequential election results in Georgia, and then protests, violence and deaths in the capital – and perhaps some other things. The events of the week led me to believe my introduction was inappropriate – trite even. And it also struck me that all some of you would hear was my comments about misguided nationalism.

III. So let me say a few things before we jump into this book, which I think has been given to us for just such a time as this. I was not smart enough to plan to be in the Book of Jonah right now. But I think it is timely though disruptive.

IV. If you have been at Christ Church for any length of time you know that I do not exactly avoid controversial topics – I have preached on money, sex, racism, abortion, living together, judgment, hell, war, marijuana and politics. The last one I do not do often and when I do I do my best to argue avoid being partisan, which I feel modestly successful at.

A. The number of people who accused me of being a latte-drinking liberal and the number who said they always knew I was a right-wing ideologue were roughly the same.

B. And to my way of thinking, that makes sense, because as I read the Bible I find a handful of social, cultural and political issues being raised on both sides of our current political divide.

1. It seems to me that if we follow the Bible and the early church we are to be committed to racial justice and the poor, but also to the

understanding that sex is only for marriage and for nurturing family. The combination of those views do not fit neatly in either party.³

V. Look, my goal as a pastor is not to support a political party nor is it to find some Geneva-like middle ground to call people to. It is to help you follow Christ.

A. That involves opening this book, and noting the things Jesus teaches and says and things he does, such as calling people with radically different positions – such as a Tax Collector (i.e., someone who was working with the Roman Occupiers) and a zealot (someone who was trying to overthrow the Roman occupiers). Calling them together to be part of something holy and just and life-giving and glorious and eternal.

VI. I am not sure how he did - it. But, over the next two months we submit ourselves to Jonah, studying and praying – as always that we will be molded and shaped into his image.

VII. Let me say two more things as we start.

A. First, being sifted and shaped is not always a fun process, especially if you go into it more shaped by this culture or by a political party than by the Sermon on the Mount.

B. But take heart! I have been in conversations this week with people who are fearful, exhausted, resigned, and angry about all of the issues, and as a pastor I find myself saying is, God is bigger than all of this; and He will prevail.

1. We need to renew our strength in him.

2. And we need to keep some Gospel and historical perspective. Things have been far worse, and this week – in spite of all the sad things that happened, nothing of eternal significance has changed. I promise you that.

C. We have a long way to go. And some of what is in front of us is not fun. Indeed, after I reviewed my notes earlier today it occurred to me that almost all of you will be ticked off by something that I say, and that if Christ Church had a 25th amendment, I'd be removed from office before the Bears kick off.

D. And I do not like that, but we look to God's Word. as I've said several times, I stopped running for Homecoming King a long time ago. The Book of Jonah doesn't pull any punches. It critiques cultures that are evil; it critiques people who feel superior; it critiques the spokesman for God who refuses to extend mercy to people he doesn't like. It uses the spokesman of God as a case study for someone with huge Blindspots to their own hypocrisy.

E. Be warned: in Jonah we are called – YOU are called! - to love your enemy and to have your views shaped by the Gospel. That is disorienting.

VIII. Jonah 1:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai. In verse one we learn two things:

A. No. 1: First, that Jonah is a prophet. The phrase, “The Word of the Lord came” is code for his being a prophet.

1. Theologians refer to him as one of the minor prophets – not because his message is not as important as the messages found in the Major Prophets,⁴ but because the book he wrote is so short.

2. He was a prophet. He has his union card. And it’s a hard job. In the Old Testament there were three kinds of people God used: prophets, priests and kings, all three of which find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ.⁵ Jonah was a prophet, which means, he was expected to relay God’s message without modification.⁶

B. The second thing we learn about Jonah we deduce because the book does not tell us anything about him. This means we already know him, which means he is the same Jonah written about back in I Kings 14.⁷

1. During the reign of Jeroboam II, he had been sent to make some fun predictions about Israel winning a battle and expanding her borders.

2. Those who remember this would think of Jonah as a good, loyal, God-fearing Jew. A patriot.

IX. Moving on: The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai. V2: Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. This line is actually more shocking than the story about the fish. Every Jew living at the time Jonah is serving would say, “go where?”

A. Nineveh is the massive capital of the wicked, hated and feared Assyrians – Israel’s mortal enemy.

1. At the time Jonah is living, the Jews hate and fear the Assyrians. And for good reason. In the not-too-distant future, the Assyrians will overrun them. The Assyrians – who are brutal.⁸ The phrase “skinned alive” comes from them. One of their signature acts was to stack the skulls of their previous conquest outside the town they were laying siege to, so that those huddled inside the walls waiting out the siege would be demoralized. Not too many years after Jonah writes this, the Assyrians will overrun the entire Middle East, capturing and destroying ten of the twelve tribes of Israel.⁹

2. This is not a friendly rivalry. This is not Bears vs Packers. It’s truly life or death.

B. Now, often when I mention the Assyrians somebody who has Assyrian blood comes up to say, “Hey. I am Assyrian. You were attacking my people.” So, let me be proactive.

1. I have Saxon blood in me. The Saxons, a Germanic tribe, were barbarians and used to intimidate their enemies by stripping naked, covering themselves in blue paint and shrieking while they charged at the enemy.
2. Most of us have cleaned up our act just a bit. I mean no offense to any Assyrians today. I will not hold your heritage against you if you do not hold mine against me. The bigger point is, the Assyrians were Israel’s enemy, and Nineveh was their capital.

C. By the way, do note that the text says Nineveh was a “great city”:

1. This may refer to its size. In Jonah 3:3 we will learn that it took Jonah 3 days to walk around it, and in chapter 4 we’re told there were 120,000 children living in it. Given those numbers, it likely had a population of about 600K people.
2. Or “great” may refer to its power. One ancient description claims that Nineveh: 1) was surrounded by a wall wide enough for three chariots to side-by-side on top of it;¹⁰ 2) that every 200 feet there were towers that were 100’ tall (there were supposedly 1,500 of these towers); and 3) that the city was full of the wealth of decades of plunder.

D. It’s an impressively foreboding place. But do not miss the obvious. The unthinkable nature of Jonah’s assignment is not how dangerous it will be for Jonah to go there and tell them to repent given how ruthless they are or what a military strong hold it is.

1. It is a dangerous assignment. Sending an 8th century BC Hebrew prophet into Nineveh to preach against the city is like sending a Jew into Berlin in the 1940s to rail against the Nazi’s.¹¹ It’s not an assignment you expect to survive.

E. But that is not the shocking thing about this. That is not why a Jewish reader would gasp at verse 2. The shocking part of the assignment is the suggestion that he is expected to act on behalf of Israel’s enemy.

1. No one had been given this kind of an assignment before. If a Jew had come up with it, they would have been charged with treason.
2. God had never sent his prophets out to preach to other nations.¹² They’d always been given Jewish assignments. They spoke to other Jews about God’s love and call, not to other nations. There is a sense in which Jonah is the first missionary in the Bible.

F. And Jonah doesn't think much of it. He is not interested in helping Israel's enemy. He doesn't want to tell them to repent because he doesn't want them to repent. He wants them destroyed. As a Jewish nationalist, he does not like Gentiles in general or the Assyrians in particular. He considers the suggestion that he help them unthinkable,¹³ which brings us to verse 3.

X. V3: 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.

A. Jonah turns and runs. (MAP) He is supposed to go to Nineveh. He heads to Joppa instead, and there he buys a one-way ticket to Tarshish, which in that day was as far away as you could run. As this map suggests, it's as if you are told to go to Canada and instead you fly to Miami and boards a ship to New Zealand. He is told to go East, he goes west. He is told to travel by land; he goes by sea. He is told to go to a big city; he heads to the ends of the world.

XI. Have you ever done anything like that? Have you ever been given an assignment from God and decided no? You have thought it was too hard or just a generally bad idea, and so you decided to flee?

XII. More to the point, are you doing anything like that right now? Are you – in any way – avoiding the direction God has placed on your life? Are there people you hate and are unwilling to serve?

XIII. I am going to circle back to this question in a minute, because it's critical.

XIV. Let me set a bit more of the story in front of you. You likely know what happens next. V4 **The LORD sent** (the ESV uses the word "hurled" which sounds like he throws a spear at him). **The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 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.**

A. So, Jonah gets on a ship headed for New Zealand. God sends a bad storm. At some point the sailors are so frightened that they start pitching the cargo, which is among the last things they will do because that's essentially the same thing as throwing money overboard. This is clearly a bad storm.

XV. As a quick aside, do not make the mistake of assuming – from a passage like this – that all trials are the result of our sin. It is true that all sin will lead to trials. A storm of some sort will follow our bad behavior. Sin is stupid and self-destructive. It is acting against the grain of the universe. If we had perfect knowledge and a perfect heart, we would never choose to sin. But – as the book of Job makes clear – not all trials are the result of our sin.

XVI. We are told that Jonah has gone below and gone to sleep. He appears to be doing his best to avoid noticing. The captain wakes him and asks him to "Call on his god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

A. Do not miss the irony here. The pagans are the ones displaying faith and calling on the prophet to pray.

XVII. As we move further into the chapter, we read about how they determine that it is Jonah who is causing their problems. So they ask him – Jonah 1:8 - who he is and what he has done. **"Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." This terrified them**

A. At that time, people believed in many gods, but these gods were all regional. There was no god over everything. When Jonah says, "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" they suddenly wake up to how big this God is, and the fact that they cannot sail their way out of trouble.

XVIII. V 10: They knew Jonah was running away from God, because he had already told them. They now realize he cannot escape God's reach, and so, as **the sea is getting rougher and rougher, they ask him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "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."** Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the LORD, **"O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased."** Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. **But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish 3 days and three nights.**

XIX. Now, because I don't want to have fifty conversations about whether or not I think this really happened, let's pause here for a minute.

A. Some of you are thinking, fish stories are a category all their own - a unique literary genre based on lies and exaggerations. Fish grow in size long after they are caught, and especially if they are not caught. This is just another fish story.

B. Others say, I believe it is true because I heard about this happening in the Falkland Islands.¹⁴ There is a documented account of a whaling ship that lost a man overboard and then caught a whale and he was inside and, while he wasn't in great shape, he was still alive. Or, my grandfather caught a catfish down by the lock and dam back in the 1950s and it was huge and when they cut it open... you can fill in the rest

C. And still others say, "this is what the Bible says, so I believe it."

D. I'm actually not that interested in trying to prove that it could happen under normal circumstances. But I choose to believe it did for a couple of reasons.

1. First, I have made peace with the idea that there is a God of miracles. A God who is all powerful; a God who spoke the universe into existence; a God who can heal the sick and raise the dead. Consequently, the idea that God might rescue Jonah this way seems simple.

2. Second, the Book of Jonah is full of miracles and the fish is hardly the most amazing one. As we read on, you'll see: 1) we have a storm that suddenly ends; 2) a big plant that grows up overnight; 3) a worm that destroys it just as quickly; and 4) the biggest miracle of all: Nineveh is spared.

E. Look, I am willing to sign off on this one¹⁵ because: 1) it is described as a miracle; 2) it is not unbelievable to me that God could arrange it; 3) more significantly, Jesus vouches for the story in Matthew 12. When some Pharisees demand that Jesus perform a miracle to prove his claims, he responded: **A wicked & adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was 3 days & 3 nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be 3 days & 3 nights in the heart of the earth.**

F. Christ's endorsement of the events of Jonah – and the way this is all tied to the resurrection of Christ – means I do believe that it happened.

XX. But there are other things to focus on here besides the fish – namely the things Jonah gets wrong. They are opportunities for us to review our own life:

A. First, there is his nationalism, which will come under harsher review later in the book. He cannot believe God would be concerned for the well-being of those outside his tribe – especially since they are so evil.

1. Jonah has no ability to see his blind spots. He is certain his views are right. To be clear, the Assyrians are wicked. They are evil and they need to change. But Jonah is not interested in that. He wants God to think and act like he does – which means, he wants his enemies wiped out. Discussions about nationalism are very dicey today for all of the obvious reasons. I actually did not think of the book of Jonah carrying this message when I selected it. And, indeed, when I preached on it before, it did not come up. But as you will see, it's there. And so one of the first questions we have to ask ourselves is, in what ways has my identity been wrongly formed. Or in what ways do I need see God's love for others not like me?

B. Second, there is the issue of his flight. His brazen effort to avoid God's call. His belief that he knows better. God says, "do this." Jonah says, "Bad plan." And takes off running as far and as fast as he can. Is there any sense in which you are doing this? While I am here, let me briefly note two things:

1. First, it turns out that it is very hard to obey God when we disagree with his plan. Love my enemies? Are you kidding? Trusting that God

knows best is one of the very key challenges we face. It was the challenge confronting Adam and Eve and we really haven't moved on. Unaided by the Holy Spirit, we will always think we know best.

2. Secondly, one of the big ways I see people avoid God is by being so busy that they do not spend any time with him. They are too busy to hear from him, and too busy with their life (often working) to be available. For what it's worth, the Desert Fathers called this sloth. In their writings on the seven deadly sins, their claim was that one of the ways people are lazy is by being too busy to reflect on life and ask the big questions. Sure, sometimes sloth looks like sleeping in and watching Netflix. But it can also look like starting your day at five AM, working out five days a week and serving in a variety of civic leadership roles. There is more than one way to be guilty of sloth, just as there is more than one way to run from God. My question is, are you running?

C. Third: As I mentioned earlier, the Book of Jonah has parallels to the Prodigal Son. In that parable we have one son who runs from his Father – the God figure. This is what Jonah does in the first two chapters. Then we have another figure – the older son who doesn't run but is horrified by the mercy of God (which describes Jonah in the last two chapters).¹⁶ Do either of these describe you?

1. In the first two chapters, Jonah is the prodigal. In the last two chapters he is the older brother. Some of you are older brothers (or older sisters) who think you are doing well. The book of Jonah should scare you, but it doesn't. Let me suggest that:
2. We are all susceptible to one of these two responses: flight or pride. And if you think you are between the two – in the right spot - it's pride. Saying you have this dialed in makes you exactly like the Pharisee in the parable about the tax collector and the pharisee praying in the synagogue. Let's not overlook the fact that Jonah thinks He knows God well and He is wrong.
3. Let me also suggest that there is good news. It turns out – in a shocking way – that not only does God spare the Assyrians when they repent, he uses the self-righteous Jonah as well.

XXI. So here is your challenge. Read the Book of Jonah this afternoon. It's a short book. We'll be in it for a couple months. Read it in advance of your small group. Prayerfully read it with the mistakes Jonah made in mind, asking yourself, how am I like Jonah? It's a hard assignment, but be encouraged, God can use reluctant, small-minded, spiritually proud and frequently mean people like Jonah, which means he has used people like us in the past. We just do not want to end 2021 where we start. We want to grow – and as you will see this afternoon if you read Jonah, there is no indication in the Book of Jonah that he did.

¹ Tim Keller named his book on Jonah *The Prodigal Prophet*.

² When fiction writers add special effects, they frequently do so to add excitement or spectacle, but the writer here does not do so. The fish is only mentioned twice, and no details are given. It is reported as a simple fact. (Keller. p. 4).

³ Tim Keller, How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't: The historical Christian positions on social issues don't match up with contemporary political alignments., New York Times, Sept. 29, 2018

⁴ The Major Prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel.

⁵ And, as I have said before, being king was best. Being a priest was a distant second. But it was far superior to being a prophet.

⁶ For starters, the assignments often made them unpopular. It also tended to make him a bit odd and a loner. In general, prophets were odd people God kept on payroll for those times when things were getting out of hand.

⁷ There is some speculation that he was part of the famed school of prophets led by Elisha. Where he would have been trained by that great man of God in basic spiritual disciplines. And given a burden for seeing his nation obey God and enjoy the spiritual blessings that would follow. One legend suggests that he was the son of the widow of Zarephath – the boy Elijah raised from the dead.

⁸ Years later the prophet Nahum will be called upon to do exactly what Jonah is being called to do here. And in Nahum 3 he says the following: Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never w/o victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses & jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords & glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies w/o number, people stumbling over the corpses, all b/c of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution & peoples by her witchcraft.

⁹ Jonah is a prophet during the time of the divided kingdom. Remember, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, had twelve sons. They became the twelve tribes of Israel. They were united as a nation under David and prospered under David's son Solomon. But after Solomon's death they were split into two groups: the Northern ten tribes called Israel; and the Southern two tribes called Judah.

¹⁰ Patrick Fairbairn, *Jonah: His Life, Character, and Mission*, 22-24.

¹¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Can You Run Away from God?* P. 17.

¹² Some of the other prophets had messages for other nations (e.g., Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos all had oracles for pagan nations), but it was a small part of their work and they did not go there.

¹³ "It was even more shocking that the God of Israel would want to warn Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, of impending doom. Assyria was one of the cruelest and most violent empires of ancient times. Assyrian kings often recorded the results of their military victories, gloating of whole plains littered with corpses and of cities burned completely to the ground. The emperor Shalmaneser III is well known for depicting torture, dismembering, and decapitations of enemies in grisly detail on large stone relief panels. Assyrian history is "as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know." After capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm and hand so they could shake the victim's hand in mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones elevated on poles. They

pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls. They burned adolescents alive. Those who survived the destruction of their cities were fated to endure cruel and violent forms of slavery. The Assyrians have been called a "terrorist state." Tim Keller, Jonah, *The Prodigal Prophet*, p.10f.

¹⁴ A Whale of a Tale, Christianity Today, July 20, 1992, p. 53.

¹⁵ I've heard the reports about people surviving in a fish for a few days but generally try to avoid them. A few years ago, we took a family vacation to a friend's condo in Tahoe. Our days were filled with hiking and swimming and reading and sleeping. And one day it was devoted to white water rafting. Our guides' name was Brian. And Brian talked the entire seven miles we were heading down the river. Some of the time he was saying, "Look out for that rock!" Or, paddle! But most of the time he was telling us a story about Lake Tahoe – which is a very deep and cold and to hear him tell it, filled with bodies from the Mafia. He said Jacques Cousteau went down there and when he came up he refused to release the pictures he had taken, stating, "The world is not ready for what is down there."

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis comments on all of this in Mere Christianity when he writes: The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and back-biting, the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.