

I. Set Up

A. Today we return to Jonah, chapter 1, where pastor Mike pushes on Jonah's answer to the sailor's frantic question. It is one of the biggest questions of all time. One that seldom gets the reflection it needs.

II. Intro

A. There is a theory in which I am who I think, you think, I am. (2x). That is to say, my identity is shaped by the group's perception.

1. No doubt there is some truth in all of this. My sense of your sense of me does shape me – if only to make mad or happy.

2. This line of thinking is common in discussions about self-esteem.

B. Today we take up a related point. Not self-esteem per se, but self-identity. Not how I feel about myself, but how I understand myself.

C. And what I am going to argue – based on Jonah 1:8-10 – is that it is critical that I learn to see myself as God does. That I adjust my understanding of myself to line up with the things He says are defining.

III. We took a one week break from Jonah, but we are back. To make sure you are back in the flow of things, let me remind you of the basics:

A. Jonah is a prophet – which means he was called by God to deliver messages to people.

1. Priests stand between God and people representing people to God – they act a bit like defense attorneys.

2. Prophets stand between God and people representing God to people. Sometimes it's good news. Not that often. Mostly they play the part of a prosecuting attorney, only they are not charging a single person with wrongdoing, they are charging a whole nation.

B. Jonah – a Jew living in Israel - was called by God to prophesy against the Assyrians, Israel's enemy. He is to tell them that their lifestyle, culture, warring habits, rampaging, looting and pillaging must stop. Enough is enough. He is about to render judgment, which will be their end.

C. Jonah does not want to do this, because he wants God to judge the Assyrians. Jonah – as a Jew – wants the Assyrians wiped out.

D. So, when God tells him to go North and East to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians and tell them to repent. Jonah goes South and West in a mad dash to flee from God.

E. But God sends a storm to get his attention. It's bad. The sailors seem to think that this storm is uniquely bad – supernaturally bad – and that they are going to die. They also come to the conclusion that the source of their problems is Jonah.

F. In previous sermons I have noted that:

1. The book is dripping with irony, because the pagans that Jonah feels superior to, are more thoughtful and spiritually attuned than he is.

2. And that the book is an amazing work of literature.

G. We now come to the sailor's interrogation of Jonah – which frames a very important question.

IV. Jonah 1:8: **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?”**

A. In short, “Who are you?”

B. This is one of the big questions. As I have noted before, we all have a worldview – a set of “pre-reflective commitments.” A set of glasses through which we see the world, which shapes how we see everything.

C. This set of assumptions frames our understanding of ultimate issues.

D. Different philosophers frame the discussion of worldview differently. I have five questions, some use seven. Different terms get bandied about. But basically, everyone notes that we base our life on our answers to these questions:

1. What – or who – matters most? What is of ultimate importance? Who is God? What should shape me?

2. Who am I? What am I? A divine being? The temporary pinnacle of the evolutionary processes? An eternal being with a soul? A hairless ape?

3. Where did I come from and what happens when I die? Is this life all there is? Is what you see all you get, or do I live on?

4. What is expected of me? What is the purpose of life? What does a good life look like? If I am going to live forever – and my forever is shaped by how I live here – what am I supposed to be doing?

5. How do I know what I know? Where do I go for the right answers to the first four questions?

V. Please understand.

A. You have answers to these questions. Everyone does. They may not be any good. They may not be right. You may not have given them much conscious thought. As a result, they may be half-baked and internally inconsistent.

B. It's likely that you do not consistently live out those beliefs – in fact, as Christians in one sense we cannot. We fall short of what we believe to be the ideal. There is a sense in which the charge that we are hypocrites is fair.

1. In another sense, our understanding about who we are includes the fact that we are broken and cannot live up to the standards we only highly valued and greatly loved, but also deeply fallen.

2. The Christian understanding of who we are is quite sober minded. We are fatally flawed people who do not need a teacher or moral guide, we need a savior. We do not need just a little help, we are basically helpless.

C. But we are all philosophers and theologians. We all have some beliefs about who we are and what matters. About what is expected of us.

D. Everything I just said I have said before. The new point for today is to note that we are living during a moment of change and confusion as it relates to who we are. And so, it's important that you give it some thought, because how we understand our identity is important.

VI. Back to the text. Note: the sailors ask a handful of questions - **What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?** – which highlight a couple things we are layered.

- A. If you ask me, “Who are you?” the right answer may be any one of a number of things.
  1. If I am stepping up to the counter at the pharmacy, it is, “Mike Woodruff,” or perhaps, “I’m Sheri Woodruff’s husband. I am picking up a prescription for her.”
  2. If I am meeting a new neighbor the answer is, “I’m Mike. My wife and I live in the yellow house down the street.
  3. Or, when you show up at a parent-teacher conference you are someone’s Dad or Mom.
  4. At any given moment, we can be described in a number of different ways.
- B. The sailors start by asking what he does. This is about occupation or calling.
- C. The second question they ask is: where do you come from? It is digging at identity based on where we started life – perhaps where we feel most at home.
- D. There is a question asking him to identify his people. This seems to be asking about social aspects: family, ethnic group, political party, that kind of thing.
- E. Other questions could be asked – which suggests that our identity is layered.
- F. And which raises a significant question: which identity is the most important? What reflects your deepest understanding of yourself.
- G. And – is that identity the identity that is supposed to be the most important?

VII. Now, please notice what is going on in our text. When you read this in context, it’s clear that the sailors are asking a variety of questions for a specific and very urgent reason.

- A. They are not making small talk. To their way of thinking, they need to figure out who he is so they know who he worships so they know who he offended so they can try to figure out what to do.
- B. This discussion was taking place 400 to 500 years before Christ. At that time, most people worshipped gods based on where they had been born or what they did professionally. Who you were and who you worshipped were two sides of the same coin.
- C. We do not believe in the pantheon of gods popular at the time:
  1. Mercury the god of commerce, Venus the god of beauty, Mars the god of war.
  2. Some people do not believe in any god at all.
- D. But do not make the mistake of thinking that our identity is not tied up in who or what we worship. It is.
- E. We do worship – we cannot help but worship. We are wired to worship, to seek meaning, we celebrate things that are amazing.
- F. The Bible tells us that we were made in the image of God. Which means we are meant to reflect. We were not meant to be alone.
- G. The Bible never instructs us to worship. It is a given that we will worship. What the Bible does is instructs us to worship God. Likewise, the Bible never instructs us to love, it coaches us to order our loves, focusing on God first.

- H. The sailors were not wrong in their assessment. We all get an identity from something. The big question is, what?
1. What defines you?
  2. What gives you value?
  3. From what do you gain your worth?
- I. There is a sense in which asking, “Who you are?” means we need to establish “Whose we are?”
- J. We need to be asking, who or what is controlling me, motivating me, giving me my sense of identity?
- VIII. Jonah’s answer tells us a few things about Jonah that explain a lot about what is going on.
- A. You already know that the book is short and if you’ve been paying attention, you know that it is quite a masterful piece of literature – the symmetry alone should persuade us that a lot of thought went into the design.
- B. So, in light of that, notice Jonah’s answer. The sailors pump him with questions:
1. **“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?”**
  2. **He answered – V9 - “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”**
- C. The claim to being a Hebrew is unique. In Israel at that time, it could either be an ethnic or a national claim.
1. Today there are Israelis who are not Jews. And there are Jews who are not Israelis. But this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we are on the other side of the Middle Ages and the development of the modern nation state. Back then, being a Jew – a Hebrew – was both an ethnic and a national claim.
  2. This is an amazing gift. If Jonah had only identified himself ethnically, and I said: if your identity is formed more by your ethnicity than your faith, you are doing it wrong.” That was going to get me sideways with some. Which I get.
    - a) *Since George Floyd I have been in a lot more conversations about race, and one of the things I have learned is that my ethnicity is not very important to me because I am part of the majority ethnicity. So I do not see some of what is going on.*
    - b) *So I understand that my perspective on this is my perspective.*
    - c) *But I do have concerns about the way identity politics is rolling out. And I am aware that when I head down this path I am making some people mad.*
  3. At the same time, if Jonah had identified himself not by ethnicity but by nationality, and I criticized that, my email would fill up from another group.
  4. The good news is, it is both and so I can say: while there are good things to be said and celebrated about both ethnicity and origin, if they come ahead of your identity in Christ or if they limit who you love, you are making the same mistake that Jonah made. And it’s a big, big mistake.

- D. If nothing else, the Book of Jonah is demanding that our identity is fundamentally shaped by God and his love, and that we must extend our love beyond the boundaries of race and country.
- E. Jonah is not doing that. Although the question about “national ethnicity” comes last, it’s the first question he answers, which suggests that it is most important. This suggests that his identity is more grounded in being a Hebrew than of being a child of God.
- F.
- G. He is not alone in this. Some people tack their faith on as a bit of secondary matter. I’m Irish so of course I am Catholic. Or, I’m Norwegian so of course I am Lutheran.
- H. Other people’s identity is shaped more by other things:
1. By their job
  2. By their sports team
  3. By their appearance
  4. By their net worth.
  5. By the stuff they have – cars and clothes.
- IX. Remember, I said our identity is multi-faceted and layered. It’s not wrong to be shaped by where you were born or what you do. But we need to be alert to the fact that a lot of people’s faith is not doing the primary work of identity formation.
- A. Their love of God has not gone deep enough to impact their heart or their money. It has not gone deep enough to be the single most important thing about them. Which is why, some Christians can be racists, or greedy materialists or people addicted to gaining the approval of others, or whatever.
- B. Where does your identity rest? What defines you? If the sailors on the ship headed to Tarshish were shaking you and asking, “Who are you?” What would you say first?
- X. In his treatment on this passage, Tim Keller uses Peter’s shifting identity to drive the point home.
- A. He notes that Jonah comes across as very unaware of who he is – in particular, of what a jerk he is being. He is bigoted, self-absorbed and foolish. From there, Keller says, “that reminds me of... Peter.”
- B. Peter, who has a close relationship with Jesus and brags about it. And who acts as if he is all in. When Jesus says persecution is coming, Peter says, “Even if everyone else flees, I will not.” At which point Jesus says, “actually, you will deny me three times in the next 12 hours.”
- C. He goes on to argue that Peter’s problem was that his identity was rooted in his commitment to Jesus, not in His understanding of Jesus’s commitment to Him.
1. He goes on to note that when your identity is grounded in your performance, you really need to think you are better than you are.
- XI. Men and women, this book asks a big question. Who are you?
- A. What is the most important, shaping, defining thing about you.

XII. The Book of Jonah is making it clear that Jonah – a prophet of God – was quite messed up. Indeed, as this book unfolds we are going to see how broken Jonah was, and how much he needed the very mercy he was trying to deny to the Ninevites.