**SERMON Jonah 1, 3 & 4**

Introduction [2mins]

I want to begin the second week in our summer series, “Faces of Our Faith,” by thanking God that there exists in our scriptures a parable of someone like Jonah. I thank God that there's a story about someone who gets it wrong, like spectacularly wrong. Who literally runs in the opposite direction, who resents God’s mercy, who wants to see his enemies destroyed, who is hard-headed and prone to sulking when he doesn’t get his way. I thank God that there's a story about someone who has to deal with a mess of his own making and whose interaction with God never resolves.

I mentioned last week in the children’s talk that sometimes we feel as if the people in the Bible were superhuman, able to do things, trust and believe things that we could never. Jonah, however, is not one of those characters! Reading through his story this week I was recalling the lessons that I was taught as a child, like: there’s nowhere you can run where God won’t find you. If you do evil (like the Ninevites) you are destined for destruction. Or that Jonah’s reluctance to be obedient was justified in some way. I don’t even remember being taught the content, let alone the meaning of chapter 4. So, this week I want to invite you to hear the story of Jonah (almost in its entirety) because I believe that while those childhood lessons hold truth and value there is something much more relevant for us to wrestle with today.

But, before we launch in, please bow your heads and pray with me:

Dear God of imperfect and reluctant people, you are God of Jonah & you are God of us.

Open our ears and our hearts to receive this story and the lessons it holds for us in this time, and in this place. We know that though we are far removed from the original audience of this parable, we trust that you are able and willing to still speak through these ancient words and characters. We look to the Holy Spirit this morning, for help in entering the story of Jonah. May we be curious and open to what you have to teach us. Amen.

Scripture Jonah 1; 2:1,10; 3:1-4 [5mins]

**1 1**The Lord’s word came to Jonah, Amittai’s son: **2**“Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention.” **3**So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the Lord! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed there. He paid the fare and went aboard… **4**But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. **5**The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter. Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. **6**The ship’s officer came and said to him, “How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won’t perish.”

**7**Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, “Come on, let’s cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that’s happening to us.” They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. **8**So they said to him, “Tell us, since you’re the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What’s your country and of what people are you?” **9**He said to them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship the Lord/YHWH, the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land.” **10**Then the men were terrified and said to him, “What have you done?” (The men knew that Jonah was fleeing from the Lord, because he had told them.)

**11**They said to him, “What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?” (The sea was continuing to rage.) **12**He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it’s my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” **13**The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn’t manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. **14**So they [the sailors] called on the YHWH, saying, “Please, Lord, don’t let us perish on account of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for innocent blood! You are the Lord: whatever you want, you can do.”

**15**Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. **16**The men worshipped YHWH with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made solemn promises. **17**Meanwhile, the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

**2 1**Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish…**10**Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

**3 1**The Lord’s word came to Jonah a second time: **2**“Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” **3**And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord’s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days’ walk across.) **4**Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!”

ONE: May we hear the still-speaking God in these words:

**ALL: God is still speaking**

Sermon Pt 1 [10mins]

There are some people who are sure they know everything about you without even meeting you! In fact, they don’t ever need to meet you because their formula is simple: *If you’re like me then you’re good. If you’re not like me then you’re not to be trusted*. Religious people of course are not off the hook on this one, instead they adjust the formula a bit: *If you’re like me then God loves you. If you’re not like me then you will suffer God’s wrath,* unless you become like me. Now, it’s easy to see the prejudice baked into such a view when it is distilled down to this simplistic formula, but it’s much more difficult to recognize it when it goes largely unspoken, or it’s woven intricately into the way someone sees and understands the world, informing their choices and shaping their values.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been on the receiving end of such implicit bias, where someone believes that they know exactly who you are because of your sex, your gender identity, your sexuality (we are in Pride Month after all). Or because of your level of education, your profession, your zipcode or what car you drive (or don’t). Maybe you’ve had the misfortune of experiencing the pre-judgement of someone when they find out you have been divorced, see a therapist, or deal with mental health issues, or an invisible disability? Maybe you been judged on mistakes that you’ve made in the past, or maybe even on the actions of a family member or friend. Well, if you have…and I’ve a feeling most of us have at one time or another, then let me just say that those people were wrong! Just like Jonah was.

AND if we are willing to be brutally honest, *we* were wrong! Those times when we are the ones whose actions, thoughts and words betray our even best intentions, and reveal an internal prejudice about someone else, some other community or some place else.

Those of you who took part in the Anti-Racism Training and studies on White Supremacy this past year have faced the ugly and difficult truth that as white people we harbor implicit *racial* biases. If you have been involved in the Salaam Network and the Interfaith conversations over the past few years, you have likely grown in your awareness of Anti-Muslim sentiment in post-9/11 America, how Muslim-Americans have been profiled and treated with suspicion, assumed guilty and judged as a result of the abhorrent actions of an extremist minority. The uptick of attacks on Jewish neighborhoods, places of worship and cemeteries has revealed the strong Anti-Semitic prejudice latent in our country. More recently we have all noticed the rise in Anti-Asian discrimination and instances of assault, born out of this global health crisis and a deadly cocktail of fear and hatred, fueled by misinformation and a sense of entitlement.

The church in the US must first acknowledge the violence enacted against the Other. And then, must not only speak out against such hatred, but be tireless in the work of interrogating ourselves, thinking deeply what we preach and how we live it out. Because just like Jonah, whose prejudice was unseen until the Lord called him, our prejudice may well be lying dormant until the Lord calls us to stand up for someone different than us: LGBTQ+ people, for women’s rights, or for racial justice.

Now, Jonah’s biased and prejudiced view of the city of Nineveh and the people who live there rose to the surface when the Lord’s words came to him saying, “Get up and go to Nineveh…and cry out against it,” to which Jonah responds by getting up and fleeing in the opposite direction. God called Jonah to serve God by serving people who were different from him, people he didn’t think could be or should be saved. God sent Jonah to what would eventually become Iraq. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria during the time of Iron Age terrorists, who were guilty of horrific acts, including enslaving people. The early audience for this parable, this story, would have known all of this. They would have known that the Assyrians were responsible for breaking the back of Israel, destroying the Northern monarchy and sending her people in exile reducing them from 12 tribes to 1, with stranglers and refugees from a few more, trying to figure out how to be a people chosen by God without the majority of their land or resources. *And God wanted Jonah to go and preach to them!!!* Jonah wouldn’t even go and preach bad news to them!

Part of me thinks that Jonah would have leapt at the chance to preach bad news to his enemies. “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” over-turned, turned out, and turned upside down. I mean what else could it be…especially if you think God is only a God of judgment, or you think that for God justice equals judgment. What else could God have meant?

Sometimes we forget that God is also a God of love. The Womanist Hebrew scholar and preacher, Wil Gafney, points out that since Jonah has no love for the people of Nineveh, he can’t imagine that God loves them. People have a habit of painting *their* biases onto their portraits of God: gender biases, racial biases, sexist biases, family biases, religious biases. And all too often the folk doing that painting are religious leaders like Jonah. But, God is bigger than the stories we tell about God. God is more loving, more gracious, more merciful, more inclusive than any text can portray.

Now, deep down in his heart Jonah knew that God was not going to write-off an entire community of people because they were different, because some among them were violent, because their leadership was bent on perpetual war, consumption and destruction. Jonah knew that God was a faithful, loving God AND it bothered him. He didn’t want God to love the Assyrians like God loved him and his folk. He even says so in the end of the book.

Let’s jump into the text again, picking up in chapter 3 verses 5 and 10 and then onto chapter 4. Remember, Jonah has just gone a day’s walk into the city and preached the worst sermon ever: “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!”

Scripture Jonah 3:5,10; 4:1-11 [3mins]

**5**And the people of Nineveh *believed* God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

**10**God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it.

**4**But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry.

**2**He [Jonah] prayed to the Lord, “*Come on, Lord!* Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. **3**At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.”

**4**The Lord responded, “Is your anger a good thing?”

**5**But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city.

**6**Then the Lord God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. **7**But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. **8**Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, “It’s better for me to die than to live.”

**9**God said to Jonah, “Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?” Jonah said, “Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!” **10**But the Lord said, “You show concern for the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. **11**Yet for my part, can’t I show concern towards Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Let me say again:

ONE: May we heard the still-speaking God in these words:

**ALL: God is still speaking**

Sermon Pt 2 [5mins]

So there you have it, the story of Jonah. This parable has so many striking scenes of God’s anointing or appointing. A prophet who is immensely reluctant, soaked in fear and prejudice, anger and defiance; and then God appoints a storm, and a big fish, and a plant, and then finally appoints a worm. And all of these creatures and elements of the natural world are shown to be much more responsive to God’s call than Jonah himself. And then, of course, the people of Nineveh, the enemy of Israel, end up being much more responsive to God’s call to repentance through Jonah, than Jonah himself who considers God’s act of mercy as “utterly wrong” (chapter 4 verse 1).

Jonah in chapter 4, gives God a piece of his prejudiced mind…making explicit and external, all that bias that was previously implicit and internal. “I knew you would find some way to forgive them…and I didn’t wany any part of that…especially for them.” It drove Jonah crazy to come face to face with God’s limitless love. It drove Jonah crazy to encounter a God that stepped outside the neat box he had created for God. It drove Jonah into such a rage that he figured it was better to die than to witness his enemies be forgiven and spared destruction.

Jonah’s actions and words throughout this parable, reveal his theology, his thinking and understanding about God. He believes in a small God, with limited vision and a diminished capacity to love. He believes in a God the holds the same biases as he does, the same end goals, the same view of the world as we do. One of the central questions that this week’s “Face of Our Faith” raises is – *what does the theology of your life teach others about the kind of God you believe in?*

Ultimately, in the midst of Jonah’s final complaint to God, he lands on the inconvenient truth. Chapter 4 verse 2b: “I knew that you are gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishment.” Some commentators believe that the entire parable of Jonah was built up around this very verse. A creedal statement found about a dozen other times in various forms throughout the Bible (Exo 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Deu 7:8-10; Neh 9:17, 31; Pss 86:5, 15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Joe 2:13; Nah 1:3). A credo that recites the merciful character of YHWH embedded within a story of a human whose character is infused with prejudice. Chapters 1 and 2 portray Jonah trying to deny or ignore the gracious and merciful God. He attempts a physical flight (1:3 by running away); a psychological flight (1:5b by sleeping); and an existential flight (1:12, 15 by offering himself to be thrown overboard), but each time YHWH saves him. Chapter 3 shows Jonah capitulating to the gracious and merciful God, who subsequently spares Nineveh. Chapter 4 depicts angry Jonah berating YHWH for being merciful. YHWH then takes over, not to berate Jonah but to extend mercy to him. The storm, the fish, the plant, and even the worm all play a part in the divine lesson. Through them the gracious God does not allow Jonah to perish and counters his bigoted attitude with a wide and boundless mercy, a limitless love that extended even to include Jonah’s enemies.

Let me ask again: *what does the theology of your life teach others about the God you believe in?* Jonah goes to great lengths to avoid doing what God has called him to do. Does God want you to do something for someone else that you don’t want to do? Or someone you don’t want to do it for? Perhaps because you think they’re not worthy or your time and gifts, or God’s either? How far are you willing to go to run away and try to get away from God? God sent Jonah West, and he went East. But deep-down Jonah knows that God is not just chasing him for his own benefit, but for the good of a people he just can’t stand, and his prejudice consumes him so that even when God calls him a second time…giving him some opportunity for growth, he remains small, mean and bitter. He could become more like the God of love in that moment by showing care to those whom God cares for. God’s message was not necessarily a prediction of an inevitable future, but a warning to those loved by a God whose very character *is* mercy.

*What does the theology of your life teach others about the God you believe in?* Jonah, this week’s “Face of Our Faith,” resented the wideness in God’s mercy, the kindness in God’s justice. This week’s “Face of Our Faith” begrudged the broadness of God’s love and resisted the opportunity to grow. People of God, *what does the theology of your life teach others about the God you believe in?* What do your actions and inactions, your words and thoughts, your choices and values reveal about the God you worship?

Amen.