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Jonah
"Jonah Tries to Run Away from God"

What a story we have for today's message! It's one of the most memorable gripping, and subtly important stories in the Old Testament. There's so much we can do with today's text. Indeed, when I took a look at the heading the Bible translators had put in the first chapter of the book I just had to laugh. It says, "Jonah Tries to Run Away from God." Emphasis on *tries*. Here's the guy, after all, that gets the commission from God to go to preach to the Ninevites who live to the east, and instead flees on a ship going west. Here's the guy who is tossed overboard in the storm, is swallowed by a fish and lives in its belly for three days before being spit back on the land again.

The idea that you can try to run from God makes a great sermon, and the fish tale is what we zero in on when we first think of this book, isn't it? We think of ways that God has moved in our lives to set our feet on one path or another after we've wandered astray. We remember times that we've wandered far from God's plan for our lives, only to be brought back. That's good news folks! That's evidence of God's grace. God's grace is a free gift of God's love. God's grace doesn't give up on us. God's grace is relentless. God's grace gives us second chances. God's grace sets our feet back on the right path when we've fallen from it, fled from it on a ship going westward, when we should be going eastward. It happened to Jonah, it can happen to us.

But part of the reason why we're doing this sermon series this summer is to go back and revisit the "Sunday School Favorites," and look at them in a new way. We're trying to go deeper. And to do that, we need to do change our focus away from the giant fish, and look closely at both the beginning and the end of this story.

The beginning, chapter 1, verse 1: "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a

ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD." Jonah fled from God's call. Why? He fled because God asked him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of one of the greatest nations of its day - Assyria. Here's why that is critically important, for in Jonah's day there were two Jewish kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In the book of 2 Kings we hear of the story of the downfall of Israel. Over the course of many years, the Assyrians came for them. They pillaged their cities. They captured the Israelites and they exiled them. They destroyed their homes, their towns, and left them destitute. Let's be clear, to Jonah and the Israelites, the Assyrians were the bad guys. Not just minor bad guys either, they were the baddest of bad, the vilest of the vile. It didn't get any worse than the Assyrians.

And, here we learn in today's text that God wanted Jonah to go to the capital of Assyria, Nineveh, to preach repentance to them, and offer them a chance to mend their ways. Imagine if God called you to pack your bags, grab your Bible, and head to the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, in order to preach the Gospel and forgiveness. The place where being caught with a bible means imprisonment, where taking a picture of the wrong thing, or speaking to the wrong person means jail. This is dangerous stuff. Maybe you'd catch a ship going the opposite direction as well? No doubt Jonah feared for his life! So he packs his bag for a port as far from Nineveh as he could get. But we know that big storm intervened, Jonah is swallowed by the fish for three days, he prays, and is spat back out on the ground to continue his mission. A big fish has a way of changing your mind about things doesn't it?

After being vomited up by the big fish, Jonah gets a second chance on his mission. God recommissions him to go to Nineveh to preach repentance to them. To his amazement, something wonderful happens, "So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes." (3: 3-6)

Basically Jonah trots into the city, gives one of the shortest sermons in whole of scripture, and sees the greatest result you can imagine. The king orders every man, woman, child, and animal to cover themselves in sackcloth and to cry out to God for mercy, and verse 10 tells us, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

And you'd think that Jonah would be overjoyed, right? Here's the best preacher ever, in the history of the Old or New Testament, who gave the most effective sermon ever delivered – you'd think he'd be giddy with joy? Right? But he's not, and here's where the text really takes off and things get very interesting. Let's pick up with chapter 4:

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴ And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

Jonah Is Reproved

9 But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty

thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

Doesn't he just simultaneously confound and amuse you at the same time, this Jonah character? He's just like us! Instead of being happy that the Ninevites are spared and 120,000 people are spared God's wrath, he's bitter and resentful. And when he sulks, his motivations and his true spirit are exposed. He wasn't running from God because he was scared of the Ninevites. He wasn't running for fear of his own life. He was running, because, as he says it himself in verse 4:2, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." *He knew that if he preached repentance, and if, by some miracle, the Ninevites believed, God would actually spare them!*

No doubt Jonah was thinking: How could God do that? How could God spare the Ninevites? They didn't deserve to be spared. They had done nothing to deserve God's mercy. They were the bad guys, the murderers, the pillagers, the slavers, the captors, the victors. How did they deserve God's mercy?

He was so offended by God's mercy for the Ninevites, that he pleaded with God, in verse 4: 3 "And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." Then he slinks out of the city to a nearby hillside to watch and to sulk.

But God's not done with Jonah, he sends a bush, a gourd really, to grow up over Jonah, offering him shade. Jonah is happy about this, then, when God sends a "sultry east wind, and the sun," to beat down on the gourd, killing it and making Jonah miserable, he's so despondent over this, that he's again complaining, "it is better for me to die than to live."

This leads God to scold Jonah for his stubborn refusal to accept the display of mercy for the Ninevites. When it's all said and done we're left scratching our heads whether Jonah ever really accepted God's decision to show mercy.

So, what's the deal here? Why is this important? Because, what we see in Jonah is what we see in us. Because the point of this story is still there for us. It's easy to get distracted by the wonderful tale of the big fish and miss the larger point. And that larger point is that the true meaning of the book of Jonah is about forgiveness. It's begging the big question, both then and now – is it possible to

forgive someone who has done you grievous wrong? Is it possible to move on when someone has done terrible harm to you, to pick up your pieces and to get on with life? Is it possible that God's will may be to show mercy to them and provide for them a prosperous future?

The key verse of this whole book, and the one takeaway we can have from all of this, is the sentence from Jonah's mouth, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." God is a God of mercy, of forgiveness. This is the radical truth of God's relentless love that pursues us when we flee in ships bound for far countries. This is the truth of God's relentless love that allows the vilest enemy the chance to repent of their ways and seek God's mercy. This is the truth of God's relentless love that offers us that same chance, to turn from our broken ways, seek God's mercy and be forgiven.

This offer isn't just for us. It wasn't just for the Israelites. It wasn't just for Jonah. It's the good news for all of humanity. God's word is mighty to save. It has the power to change the world. And for Jonah, who could not surrender the hate and resentment towards the Assyrians in his heart, this was offensive. And we are confronted by that same challenge. Does the truth that God's mercy is for all humanity, even our most hated ones, good news? Or is it offensive? And if it's offensive, if we cannot stomach the idea that God might show mercy to our favorite villains who we cherish nurturing hatred towards in our hearts, look out. Because God just might call us to go to Nineveh.

Alleluia and Amen.