

Jonah 1:1-17 // The Reluctant Prophet

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[0 : 00] So, our first reading is Jonah chapter 1, which is on page 928 of the Church Bible. After we've read Jonah 1, we'll turn to Mark chapter 4, verses 35 to 41, but we will start with Jonah chapter 1.

So, Jonah chapter 1. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.

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.

Then the Lord sent 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 gods, 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. The captain went to him and said, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your gods. Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.

[1 : 27] Then the soldiers said to each other, Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity. They cast lots, and the lots fell on Jonah. 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? He answered, I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

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. 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? 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 out to the Lord, Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life.

[2 : 34] Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, 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. Our second reading is from Mark chapter 4, which is page 1006 in the Church Bibles.

So I'm reading Mark chapter 4, verses 35 to 41. That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, Let us go over to the other side.

Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, Teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, rebuked the winds, and said to the waves, Quiet, be still.

[3 : 46] Then the wind died down, and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified, and asked each other, Who is this?

Even the wind and the waves obey him. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks very much, Robbie.

If you kept a finger in Jonah 1, that would be really helpful to turn back there. It's page 928. We had 22 sermons in Revelation.

So four weeks now in Jonah. Let's ask for God's help. You can find an outline in the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful. And let's pray so that we ask God to help us as we turn to his word.

Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word now, we pray that you will speak to each one of us. We trust that your word is not the words of men, but that they were carried along by your Holy Spirit. [5 : 01] And so we pray that you will give us ears to hear your voice, that you'll be at work so that we receive your word tonight. Not just as head knowledge, but as the spiritual bread of life that we need as hungry souls.

Would we see Jesus and respond rightly in our hearts to you? For his name's sake. Amen. So Jonah, a brilliant little book.

Four weeks we've got in it. And my appeal to you is, please will you come every week? Because it's a short book, but it does tell a story that's very carefully pulled together.

So that one thing I'm going to try and do tonight is not spoil the story. I mean, obviously you can read on. But we're going to try and let each chapter speak for itself.

And tonight, just as we get into it, it's good just to do a couple of, a little bit of myth-busting about Jonah. First of all, if I ask you to complete the sentence, sing out loud.

[6 : 04] Let's have a go. Jonah and the... There we go. Okay. Someone went rogue over there. But generally, whale, of course, that's what we all think.

And if we were to ask people out there who never, ever go near a Bible, what do you know about Jonah? I think quite a lot of people would say, oh, there's some guy Jonah who got swallowed by a whale, isn't there?

Maybe it's in the Bible. I don't know. So, yeah, this is our myth-busting first off. This is not a story about a whale. We're not even told that there was a whale, actually.

We're told there is a great fish. And there are 48 verses in the book of Jonah. How many of them are about the fish? I think it's three.

The fish is not even a main character here. So, it's not about a whale. Secondly, Jonah is not a naive fairy tale. I think that's good for us to acknowledge.

[7 : 04] He is a historical figure. We know from 2 Kings 16 that he prophesied in support of a king of Israel, Jeroboam II. He became king of Israel in 781 BC.

And this extremely carefully crafted story is helpfully structured to make some really important points, not just for kids, but for anyone, for adults, children.

There are six scenes. And then there's an epilogue. And I've shown on the sheets, you can just see, if you turn there, the six scenes. And how carefully there are two sets of three arranged to record the events and make a powerful point.

You can see there that scene one matches with scene four, scene two with scene five, scene three with scene six. And we're looking at scenes one and two tonight. Now, one of the things that moves people to think maybe this is just a myth, maybe it's a fairy tale, is that Jonah does get swallowed by a great fish.

And maybe in our minds we're thinking of Disney's Pinocchio, where Geppetto gets swallowed by a huge whale. And Pinocchio has to go and find him. And then they build a fire in the whale.

[8 : 20] And then the whale, I think it's, I think the fire makes the whale sneeze and blasts them onto shore. So maybe we picture Jonah a bit like this.

Or we picture him writing chapter two a bit like this. You know, he's inside this enormous chasm of a whale. But the event may have looked very different to that.

Last month, Adrian Simancas was in the news, a kayaker who was swallowed by a humpback whale. I don't know if you saw that. The next thing he knew, he said he just felt it was very squidgy and slimy all around him.

And he was inside a whale. Then he was spat out. He came back to the surface. And when we read Jonah, one of the big ideas is that the God of the Bible is the creator of everything.

He made the sun. He made the planets. And he raised Jesus from the dead, never to die again.

Then, creating a huge fish and sending it to do his bidding and rescue a drowning prophet, that's not even a difficult thing for the living God to do.

[9 : 27] So as we come to Jonah as God's word, profitable for us, it's worth just asking as we come to chapter one, When was the last time that you found yourself questioning God's will?

Questioning what God is doing? Doubting his goodness? Doubting his wisdom? Doubting that you can trust him so that you obey him? When was the last time that you felt like that with the Lord?

Tonight we're going to meet a prophet who is doing just that. A prophet who can see what God's going to do and he disagrees profoundly with God. More than that, who by chapter four, we'll find

out is feeling really angry with God.

Uncontrollably furious. So we can be helped by Jonah chapter one if we've ever found God's revealed will in the Bible, in his commands, or his will in our lives, if we've ever found that perplexing, confusing, more than that, maybe even infuriating for us.

So we've got three points and our first one is, Westwood Ho, a prophet runs away from his calling. Let's pick things up again in verse one. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

[10:57] Now this makes Jonah a unique prophet of the different prophets we have in the scriptures. When God raised up prophets, he sent them to his people, the Israelites, the nation who he'd established in the promised land.

And he'd set up a relationship with them based on binding promises called a covenant. Now by this time, 780 BC, God's kingdom in the promised land has divided.

There are only two and a half tribes that have remained loyal to Jerusalem. That's sometimes called the southern kingdom or Judah. And the remaining tribes of Israel, of the 12 tribes, have broken off and formed the northern kingdom, which is called Israel.

Israel. And Jonah is in that northern kingdom as a prophet. And the prophets, their general role when we read the Bible and we find the prophets, is they were the covenant enforcers for God. So they came to these people with whom God already had established a relationship, and they urged them to be faithful. They encouraged them. They rebuked them and called them to repent if they'd strayed from faithfulness to God.

[12:04] But Jonah here, uniquely among the prophets here, is called to leave that prophetic ministry in the northern kingdom of Israel behind and go to a people who don't know the Lord, Nineveh.

Why? Well, Nineveh is a very prominent ancient city. There's an artist's impression of it. We see from chapter 4 that its population at the time was 120,000 people.

So in the ancient world, that is colossal. That is a magnificent city, a city of staggering greatness. It was the capital of Assyria.

And the Assyrians, we'll get to know more about them in the next couple of weeks, they were basically a terrorist state. They were horribly, grotesquely evil in how they treated their enemies. And we learn in verse 1 that that evil of the Assyrians, of the Ninevites, has come up against God. And so it's to them that Jonah is sent to proclaim against them that God's judgment is coming.

[13:10] So that's the instruction. It's a journey northeast from where Jonah lives, by land, 500 miles. And Jonah's response is in verse 3, So we've got a map here.

And I don't know if you can quite see that, but Joppa is over on the right-hand side of that map, on the coast of the Promised Land. And you can see, to go to Nineveh, you travel 500 miles northeast. And to get on a ship to Tarshish, that is like the furthest a ship would be going. Because no one's ever gone further, I don't think, at that moment in history.

This is like, Jonah's going, I want a one-way ticket as far away from Nineveh as it's conceivable to go. And he ends up on the ship to Tarshish. Jonah is told to go up to Nineveh.

We're told he goes down to Joppa. And all through the chapter, you'll notice, he keeps going down and down and down. Then look out for that. God's saying, go east. Jonah's like, thank you, I'm off west.

[14:23] As far west as a boat can go. Now, why is that? Well, we're going to find out in chapter 4. Stick with us. You can read it tonight, if you like. After Roots Plus.

But for tonight, we can already pick up that when God wants to warn a people that his judgment is coming, he is being gracious.

Of course, what he could do is just send his judgment to a people who stand under that. But he sends a prophet rather than simply destroying a city when he's feeling compassionate for those people.

It's a compassionate warning. And God has sent Jonah on a mission trip out of compassion. That's wrapped up in verse 2.

And we might think we're right on board with that. We love that idea. We love compassion. And we might think we would love everyone to turn back to God and be forgiven and enjoy equal status with every Christian who's ever lived in God's eyes.

[15:31] God delighting in them. God forgiving them. God saying, your past is wiped clean. We love that. But as we reflect on Jonah together in these weeks, God will be asking us to consider whether we really do share God's compassion for the lost sinners all around us, for all of them.

Has that really taken hold of how we live our lives, how we use our talents and our time, how we pray proportionately, what we pray for?

Has it taken hold of our life together as a church? Such that it reshapes the life, our corporate life together. We're reshaped around the mission of God to call wicked people, ungodly people, people who've shaken their fists at God and his people.

God wants to call them back to him. Well, Jonah is not having that. He says, no, I'm done with that. And whenever we disobey God's commands in our life or his call on our life, it kind of shows us what we really think of God.

Jonah is absolutely clear that God is real and he disobeys God. Why is that? Well, he doubts God's goodness, God's wisdom, God's justice.

[16:49] So he runs away. And any of us could have situations in life where we do that. Maybe you're here tonight and you're aware that that is what you're doing with God.

You might feel unwilling to turn to God because you've got doubts about his goodness, his wisdom, his justice.

Or any of us might be here and there's an area in your life where you are convicted that God wants you to do something or wants you to give something up and you're not willing to do that for him.

So you're on the run. You're on the run from God in an area of your life. It's a clash of wills. That's Jonah chapter one.

It helps us ask tonight, can you have a different agenda to God and win? So we turn to our second point. Our first scene was Westwood Hall. Jonah, a prophet running from God.

[17:48] Second scene, what have you done? The sailors in a terrifying storm. Let's pick things up again. Verse four. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

So God directs the forces of nature towards this little ship. It literally says he hurled a wind. It's a great image, isn't it, of God just picking up some wind and hurling it at this little ship on the Mediterranean Sea.

Still today, the sea can be a terrifying place. Under natural conditions today in the eastern med, you can get storms where waves go up to 13 meters high. This is a small ship.

This is the ancient world. They didn't build big ships. And who knows how much worse things were that day when the living God wants to pointedly reveal to Jonah and these seasoned sailors that you can't hide from him.

The sailors are in terror and it's every man to his prayer mat in verse five. All the sailors were afraid and each cried to his own God.

[19:00] And it's already pretty desperate. Economic disaster, look. They hurled the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. And at this moment, you wouldn't have been very popular for making this point on the boat, but already, God has brought this storm for good purposes.

These pagan sailors, they're going to face great loss. At the moment, they're in trauma, aren't they, that their lives could be lost. But they're actually on a voyage of discovery here, graciously.

And the first absolutely key truth that they learn on this trip is there is only one true God. Picture them in verse five. They've each got their little statuettes, little carved statues representing pagan gods.

They've each got them out of their luggage and they're bowing down frantically to them. And none of that's going to do them any good. Why? Because all those gods are a fiction.

So where's Jonah? Well, he's given up, hasn't he? Halfway through verse five. But Jonah had gone down below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

[20:11] He's gone down to Joppa. Now he's crawled down into the depths of the boat. And he's sleeping the sleep of despair, the sleep of a man who has nothing left to do but sleep.

He's done with it. And in that moment, we do have a picture of the world when God's people are silent about the truth about God.

This is what Nineveh's like at that moment without a prophet because he's not gone. The sailors here, they can't call on the living God because they haven't heard of him because Jonah's not told them.

And the captain is singularly unimpressed in verse six. He comes to Jonah and he says, how can you sleep? And I just wonder if that is quite everything the captain said at that moment. This may be a kind of a censored version but the charge is get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.

[21 : 13] And then you can see how clueless the sailors are in verse eight because they ask a series of questions for Jonah. Who is responsible for this? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from?

What's your country? From what people are you? And now they get introduced to the God who is really there in verse nine. As Jonah answers them, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

Well before, the men were really afraid of the storm. Now it is even worse. Verse 10. This terrified them and they asked, what have you done?

They knew he was running away from the Lord because he'd already told them so. It's actually very funny, isn't it? The shipmen were clueless about God in verse five. They were clueless about Jonah in verse seven but there is one thing they can piece together.

If Jonah's God, our God, the God who is there, made the sea, what kind of an idiot thinks you can avoid him by a trip on the sea?

[22 : 20] What have you done? What have you done? It reminded me of this week of that guy in the North Sea whose ship has been arrested because his ship collided with another ship that was at anchor. What have you done?

What were you thinking? This is not a thought through plan, Jonah. And now, they are sweating bullets. I thought of that phrase actually. That phrase came into my mind preparing this because the phrase sweating bullets, which means terrified, it's the name of a song by a band called Megadeth, if you remember them, from their album called Countdown to Extinction.

And I thought maybe that could be a soundtrack for the men in the boat right now. Countdown to Extinction. But look, the sailors here, they've learnt this really important truth. Throw away your little statuettes.

The God of the Bible is the only God who is there. And that's a very controversial truth today, isn't it? I have this argument with my dentist. I was there last week. Every time I go, he says to me, he knows I'm a pastor, Martin, good to see you.

How is your church going? And then he waits till he's put all these instruments in my mouth and I can't say anything. And it's always the same speech.

[23 : 34] He says, Martin, I'm so glad you're helping people find a path. Every religion is a path. They're all paths up the same mountain.

And if you help people find that path, that's right for them. And everyone needs to find the right path for themselves. And I'm there. Oh! And it sounds so humble, doesn't it, to say that.

I don't want to condemn other religions. Everyone's got their own path. But it's actually an arrogant thing to say. When my dentist is saying, you Christians with your pastor, it's lovely you found your path.

If only you could see that the Hindus have got a different path and the Muslims have got a different path and they're all heading up the same mountain. Well, where is my dentist? He's in a helicopter on top of the mountain looking down at everyone else saying, if only they could see what I could see, then they could all just get along well.

Of course, it doesn't make any sense. And we see here in Jonah chapter 1, it's not a new thing to have different religions around saying very different things about who God is and what God is like and how you approach Him and how you get right with Him.

[24 : 47] And these pagan sailors were clueless, but Jonah speaks truth to them about God. And God, through the storm, has forced Jonah's hand to reveal through Jonah that there's one creator God.

So what can these sailors do now to be safe? That's our third point. We've heard westward ho, then what have you done? And now it's man overboard. The Lord is the one you should fear. We'll pick things up at verse 11 where it's getting even worse.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked Jonah, 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's my fault that this great storm has come upon you. And these sailors, they just come across so well, don't they? I mean, they're just great guys. They're desperate not to do that. And they try again to roll back to shore and they can't do it and they cry out to God and they say, please Lord, don't hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. They can't think what else to do. And verse 15, then they took Jonah and they threw him overboard and the raging sea grew calm. [25 : 58] And they've learned the next great life lesson from the storm. Not just the Lord is the creator, but the Lord is unavoidably powerful. He hurls wind at them.

He creates a storm. In verse 7, he even controls the lots as they cast them so that they'll know that it's Jonah who is responsible. He then calms the storm supernaturally and in verse 17, he provides the huge fish to swallow Jonah to bring him back safely from the depths of the ocean so that the mariner's response to God is the only appropriate one.

Verse 16, at this the men greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. It's a right response.

It's the same response Jonah gives in chapter 2, verse 9, as a prophet of God. And notice how extraordinary God's power is in this chapter that when his prophet, who he wants to use as his chosen instrument to go to Nineveh, disobeys him, God can use that disobedience to save a group of pagan sailors on a boat west across the sea.

That's a big God who can do that kind of thing. And the question for you and me tonight is do you really fear God? Jonah said in verse 9 that he did.

[27 : 23] It's hidden in our translation but where he says, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land, literally he says, I'm a Hebrew and I fear the Lord. I fear the Lord. Do you really, Jonah?

Jonah? What does he mean by that? Well outwardly he's a religious man. People would have looked at him and thought they'd have seen him in the equivalent of church on a Sunday. But God could point to him buying his ticket to Tarshish getting on a boat and say, do you really fear me, Jonah?

Of course he doesn't fear God. Just as from time to time in any of our lives there could be an area where Jesus could shine a spotlight and say, do you really fear me?

As Christians we don't fear God in a way that means we're frightened of him that we would run away from him or hide from him or try and compete against him.

Psalms 2 describes appropriate fear of God for his people as rejoice with trembling at God. We approach God as we're encouraged to but we're still trembling.

[28 : 28] We have trembling gratitude. Reassured by his promises but knowing our place before the awesome creator. And in the Christian life when we fear God rightly when our view of him is bigger we can stop fearing other things.

That's a big theme in the New Testament letter 1 Peter written to Christians who had persecution to fear. Peter says, live out your time here as strangers in reverent fear.

In other words, fear God. He says when he's speaking about the threats people are making against them for being followers of Jesus Peter writes, do not fear what they fear.

Do not be frightened but in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. See what he's saying? A bigger view of who Jesus is liberates us from being afraid of whatever you're facing this week.

He's so much bigger than that. But that fear should be something that grips us with this deep sense of reverence and awe at who God really is.

[29 : 36] How can we tell if we're not fearing God as we should? Well often it will show itself as it did in Jonah's life that we find ourselves ignoring his commands or we find ourselves judging his word.

Like Jonah we would be running away from God's will because we we're not sure we trust God's goodness, God's wisdom, God's justice. And Jonah 1 reminds us you and I we don't mess with God.

He is the uncreated creator. He made the land that you're sitting on and I'm standing on. It's only by his will that your heart has carried on beating today.

It's only by his will that you'll take the next breath you're about to take. If he wanted to he could open a sinkhole right now and we would all fall into it and die. But we heard in our second Bible reading from Mark 4 that Jesus' first followers saw the God of Jonah chapter 1 in the boat with them.

They were in a furious sea storm. Like Jonah's sailors they were terrified as their boat was nearly consumed. Remarkably like Jonah they find Jesus asleep in the stern and they wake him and they say don't you care if we drown?

[30 : 59] But when Jesus gets up the comparisons with Jonah stop. Instead of saying you'll have to throw me in and God will calm the storm Jesus just speaks because here is the Lord himself in the boat able to control the wind and the waves.

So in Jonah 1 the sailors were scared of the storm and then they become more fearful of Jonah's God and in Mark chapter 4 the disciples who were afraid of the storm are even more fearful of Jesus.

But through Jesus the God who we should fear is also a God we can know with deep reassurance. We tremble before him but we know that when we fear him rightly we have nothing else to fear. Let's pray together. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Almighty God we praise you that we can approach you boldly thanks to the grace of your gospel without being frightened. Help us not to allow your grace to us your mercy to lead us to a view of you that is too casual that is too small. Rather by your spirit at work in our lives may we live this week conscious of your power your authority over all creation that we would live lives of obedient trust and revere Christ as Lord for his name's sake.

[32 : 38] Amen. Well Greg and the band are going to come up let's sing in response to God's word. Amen. Thank you.