



September 8-9, 2018
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Reckless Love: Jonah
His Fear
Jonah 1:1-3

WELCOME to "Welcome Home" weekend at Chapel Hill. If you are members or regulars, welcome home! If you are visitors, we welcome you to what we HOPE will be your church home. I'll just warn you that you won't find food trucks and bouncy houses here every weekend. But what you WILL find is a warm welcome, great music, helpful teaching and...most of all...we hope you will discover a God who loves you and wants to have a relationship with you and your family.

If you ARE new, my name is Mark Toone and I'm the Senior Pastor here. I was gone for a part of the summer, dealing with some health issues. I'm grateful to say that I am 100%! All systems are go! So thanks for your prayers and your encouragement.

And thanks to my great team for their very effective leadership in my absence. In fact, I have some very encouraging news to share with you. This summer, our weekend attendance, NOT including our Ravi Zacharias weekend, has averaged 21% higher, year over year. Saturday evening worship attendance—(in case you didn't know, we have a 6:30 Saturday night service...helpful to remember on Seahawks Sundays!)...that service is up 49% year over year.

Numbers aren't everything...but they are something. Because every number represents a person who is loved by God. If you are one of those new persons...welcome! We are so glad you are here...and I hope you will come back again and again.

This evening/morning we turn to very familiar story. About someone who tries to run away from who he was created to be, gets swallowed up by a great fish and then, turns his life around. Who am I talking about? Pinocchio! Just kidding...although the story of Pinocchio is based upon this Bible character. What is his name?

Nearly everyone is familiar with the fish part of Jonah's story. But really, that's the least important part. The MOST important theme of this short book is God's incredible love and grace for all the world...even that part of the world WE don't think deserves his love and grace. A love so extravagant, it seems reckless. That's what Jonah thought!

Last weekend Cyndi and I were on a road trip with Bakersfield friends that took us by Magic Mountain. Magic Mountain has more roller coasters than any other theme park in the world. The last one I rode... was called Viper. Viper starts with a drop that is so steep...and so fast...and so long... you begin to wonder if you will ever come back up again.

The opening verses of Jonah describe a man who is going down, down, down away from the Lord. Our devotional this week deals with the first 3 verses but I'm going to take us a little farther so you can get a sense of Jonah's death spiral. And I'd like some audience participation. Put your hands up like the brave souls on Viper....and then, every time you hear the word "down"...drop them a little bit. Follow my lead.

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." But Jonah rose 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 the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jonah is never described as a "prophet" in this book, but the opening words spill the beans: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah..." Throughout the Old Testament, that phrase describes the work of a prophet; a spokesman for God. And we KNOW Jonah was a prophet because he is mentioned elsewhere as a prophet in the court of King Jeroboam. It was Jonah's JOB to listen to what God said...and then pass it on.

But for a change, that's NOT what Jonah does. In fact, the storyline of this little book can be summarized by the first words of verses 2-3. God says to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh..." "But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish." "Rise and go." But Jonah "rose and fled." Where was Jonah called to GO? Nineveh. Nineveh was the spectacular capital of the Assyrian kingdom. Archaeologists have uncovered it? on the banks of the Tigris River in modern day Iraq near the city of Mosul; it was 550 miles northeast of Jerusalem. "Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city," said the Lord to Jonah.

Jonah arose, all right...but he rose to flee. To where? Tarshish. In case we miss it, "Tarshish" is mentioned three times in one verse! We don't know exactly where Tarshish was. Some believe it was a port town west of Gibraltar. But since the word Tarshish means, "open sea," others believe it simply meant the vast Mediterranean. Either way, Jonah's intentions were clear. God wanted him to go here (POINT WITH ME)... and instead, he headed HERE... the exact opposite direction.

Now...why did a guy who made his living listening to God and passing on that message...why this time did he run the opposite direction? Well...we get a hint in verse 2: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their EVIL has come up before me." That word "evil" appears 9 times in this book to describe Nineveh. It could also be translated, "wicked." WICKED is a very strong word, isn't it? When was the last time you described someone as "wicked?" But that's not too strong a word for Nineveh. It really was the wicked capital of a wicked kingdom; a kingdom that rose to power by terrorizing its enemies in the most gruesome ways possible.

Ancient Assyrian records brag of the live dismemberment of their enemies, "often leaving one hand attached so they could shake it before the person died." They would force the friends of those who had been executed to form a parade of heads, carrying them on elevated poles. "They boasted of their practice of stretching live prisoners with ropes so that they could be skinned alive" and then displaying those human skins on city walls. In recent years, we have been horrified to watch the videotaped beheadings carried out by ISIS against their enemies, intended to terrorize the world. The Assyrians were the ISIS of their time. On steroids.¹

You might recall that our daughter Rachel was planning on being ordained as a missionary to Kenya. Kenya is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women. I cannot tell you how relieved I was when the Kenyan visa did not come through and Rachel accepted a call to serve Montreat College in North Carolina. When people sympathize with us about how far away she is, we have one standard reply: "It's not Kenya!" We are relieved, honestly, that that wasn't her call.

¹ NIV Commentary, Jonah; James Bruckner; pp 28-29.
Sermon Notes

But it was Jonah's call. "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it for their evil has come up before me." Arise...and go. But Jonah rose...and fled. To Tarshish. And we discover that Jonah isn't just running away...he's going down. Down, down, down, down... Away from the presence of the Lord...down to Joppa...down to the ship... down into the hold...down onto his bed...down into a fast sleep. It is the language of death. The language of the grave. When we run away from the Lord...it is always down...always away from life and into death.

And the irony is, as "down" as we try to go...even when we scrape bottom... God is still there. Pursuing us. Refusing to let us go. Remember Psalm 139. "Where shall I go from your Spirit or where shall I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." David teaches us that there is NO place we can go where we are beyond the reach of God's hand. God's grace pursues us right into the depths...because he loves us. Because he loves you!

Jonah is about to discover that reckless love. That grace. Not only for him...but also for the sailors on that ship and...incredibly, even for the people of Nineveh. God's not willing to give up despite the wickedness he finds in Nineveh. God's not willing to give up despite the wickedness he finds in the idolatrous sailors. God's not willing to give up despite the wickedness...and the fear...and the arrogance...he finds in Jonah. And God's not willing to give up despite the wickedness he finds in you!

In fact, there is a clue to this struggle between the one who would flee and the one who pursues in verse 1. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai." "Jonah" means dove. In the Old Testament, the dove wasn't always a positive metaphor. The prophet Hosea described the people of Israel as a dove who was "silly and senseless." But "son of Amittai" means "son of my faithfulness." Even though Jonah is the Dove who is silly and senseless and whiny and tries to fly away....he is even more the son of a faithful God. Who will not let him go. A God who will take him down ...before Jonah takes himself down completely.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amitai. You realize, right, that God still speaks? To us? Through his Bible. Through trusted Christian friends. But sometimes through an inner voice that calls us to something that seems terrifying. How many here today have a sense that God is calling you to something that frightens you...and your instinct is to run. Maybe you've been sleeping with your boyfriend and God is calling you to purity. Maybe you've been sleeping with your mistress and God is calling you to fidelity. Maybe you've been sleeping with a bottle and God is calling you to sobriety. Maybe you have been asleep at the switch and God is calling you to activity! Or maybe like Jonah, God is calling you to speak to someone... invite them to church...or Alpha...or Celebrate Recovery. But you are afraid of how they might respond. So you'd rather fly away like a silly bird from the faithful God who calls you and won't let you go.

And you realize, right, that sometimes God uses what seems like hard and stormy circumstances to stop us in our tracks; to call us back to himself? Not always; sometimes bad stuff just happens. But sometimes God sees us running from him and uses painful circumstances to stop us dead in our tracks and turn us around! To pull us out of our death spiral away from God...and back up to himself; to his love, his call, his purpose.

Our family used to love eating at Hunan Gardens (no longer there) and, for dessert, we would walk across the parking lot to Baskin and Robbins (ALSO no longer there....so sad! I miss Jamocha Almond Fudge!) One evening as we came out of the restaurant, four-year-old Rachel got excited for ice cream and started running toward Baskin and Robbins... and right across the flow of traffic. Nana Carol saw what she was about to do but could not reach her. So Nana did something brilliant. She took her huge Grandma purse...and hurled it at Rachel. It was a strike! She knocked Rachel right off her feet...and might have saved her from the car that was just pulling into the parking lot.

Rachel started crying and yelled, "Nana, why'd you do that?" Of course, Nana did that because if Rachel had continued running away from her, it might have had tragic results. What seemed cruel at the time was really an act of saving love.

But there's more to the story. My mom threw her purse so hard that she actually fell face down in the process! Everyone was so focused on taking care of Rachel that we didn't notice mom had gone down. She was pretty shaken up by the fall...but she would have done anything to save her beloved granddaughter.

Jonah...the silly, senseless, whiny dove...was trying to run away from his faithful God. Next week, we discover how God knocked him down...in order to save him. But really...this story looks ahead to the story of Jesus who came to earth in pursuit of his children who were in a death spiral. In saving us, it was Jesus who was taken down. Jesus who was laid low. Jesus whose death on the cross "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom..." of God. He finds us when we are headed down, down, down...and calls us up, up, up. From death. To life.

So...are you running from God? Avoiding his call? Are you frightened? Are you caught in a death spiral of your own? You might as well give up, you silly bird! Your faithful God is in hot pursuit.