

### “What Kind of God Do You Want?”

Who is Jonah? If you were to answer that question, perhaps you'd start by saying something like, “he's the guy who was swallowed by a huge fish.” And, of course, that's right. Jonah spent 3 days inside a great fish before it released him onto the shore. And if someone knows anything about the Bible's account of Jonah, that's probably it: that he was once swallowed by a fish.

You are probably also aware that there is much more to Jonah than just that single incident. As famous an incident as it is, there were many important things that happened to Jonah both before that and after that, things that answer our question, “Who is Jonah?” As we explore some of those events, and especially focus on our sermon text for today, we're led to ask a question not about Jonah, but a question for Jonah. Jonah, what kind of God do you want? And we'll also find that to be a valuable question to ask ourselves.

First, let's back up before the fish incident and see how Jonah got to that point. In the first verse of the book that bears his name, we learn about Jonah that God called him to be a prophet. To be a prophet is to receive God's Word in order to share it with others. While we know from elsewhere in Scripture that Jonah prophesied in Israel, in this book the focus is on a specific mission that God gave him. The mission was to go to Nineveh, the capitol city of the Assyrians, and to preach against the wickedness of the people there. I guess if we think of the book of Jonah as a series of snapshots or a photo album, that's our first picture: God speaking to him and calling him to Nineveh.

The next snapshot, however, is not flattering at all. In this picture we see Jonah boarding a boat, not to head to Nineveh, but in fact to go in the opposite direction. We heard more about Jonah's plan already in our sermon text, and we'll talk about that in a bit. Needless to say, his plan didn't work out the way he expected. A storm battered the boat, surprising and overwhelming the sailors. They concluded that there must be some supernatural force against them, and Jonah explained that there was. He informed them that he was running away from God. And to deal with the storm and Jonah's actions, they threw him overboard.

We've already mentioned the next picture from this trip. It's Jonah, not drowning in the ocean, but safely in the belly of the fish that swallowed him. This is a picture of relief. For all that Jonah knew, he could have died from being cast off the ship into the stormy seas. But he didn't. God rescued him. He had this fish snatch him from his watery tomb to keep him safe. If you look closely at this picture, you see Jonah praying. He thanks God for the rescue and for safety. And then, when the time is right, the fish leaves Jonah on the shore.

What happens after the fish is our sermon text, our First Lesson this morning. God repeated his call to Jonah, and this time Jonah obeyed. He went to Nineveh and he preached as God commanded. The next snapshot in our Jonah photo album may have looked something like the cover of our worship folder. Jonah preached. Perhaps here and there he gathered a crowd. Perhaps he simply shared the Word with anyone he came across. It would have taken three days to make his way through the whole city preaching, but as it turned out, he didn't need to. The word of Jonah and his message spread rapidly so that on that very day, everyone in the city heard it. Everyone. From the lowliest to the king on his throne.

And they didn't just hear it. They responded. Jonah brought them a warning that God had given them 40 days before he would overthrow the city. They heeded the warning. They acknowledged their wickedness. The king joined the people in proclaiming a fast in the hopes that perhaps God would relent and not bring about the destruction that he had warned.

In other words, God's message had exactly the outcome that he had intended. The people realized their sinfulness before God and relied on his mercy. They repented. And God acted in mercy toward them. He did not carry out the judgment he had warned them about.

It's at this point that we look at one of the most interesting pictures from our Jonah photo album. This one shows Jonah pouting. He was not happy when he realized what had happened and that God had relented from the destruction. Jonah wanted to sit up on a hill and watch the city of Nineveh be destroyed, much like many of us could have watched our Fourth of July fireworks last night. Those were his enemies and the enemies of his people. They were enemies of God's people. They were, by their own admission, wicked. They would have deserved what they got.

And when they didn't get it, Jonah whined and complained. He even went so far as to ask God to let him die rather than to keep on living in the same world with the people of Nineveh. And then he fills us in on his flight away from Nineveh in the first place. Jonah ran away because he knew that if he went and preached and the people repented, God wouldn't destroy them. He knew that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. And Jonah didn't like it.

Which prompts our question: What kind of a God do you want, Jonah? Clearly not the kind that God is, at least not in this case. Jonah wanted a God who agreed with his own assessment, who worked on his timetable. Jonah wanted a God as petty and vengeful as he was. Jonah wanted a God who understood that he, Jonah, had it all figured out.

But the problem was Jonah couldn't have a God like that. If he did, Jonah would have stood no chance. Jonah had already clearly demonstrated his character. He had refused to listen to God's direct command. Perhaps Jonah's biggest error was to think that he was somehow more deserving of God's love than the people of Nineveh. He wasn't. Like them, Jonah was sinful, wicked. He relied completely on God's grace and mercy, his patience and his love, the same love he begrudged the people of Nineveh. Fortunately for him, Jonah did not have the kind of God he wanted, at least in that moment. He had a **"gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."** That's the sort of God that patiently led Jonah to see the error of his ways and inspired him to serve.

That's the sort of God that we have, too, because he is the only God. And we rely on that fact every bit as much as Jonah did, and as the people of Nineveh did. Remembering that ought to constantly inspire us to serve and love him.

But that doesn't always happen, does it? We frequently enough experience episodes like Jonah's, where we might well ponder the question: What kind of a God do you want? One way this happens for us is when we take God's blessings for granted. The impression grows in our mind that we are somehow better than the others around us. We point to our church attendance and our offerings, our children, our jobs, the work we do within the church and the way we serve. And doesn't that list start to sound something like Paul's in our Second Lesson (2 Corinthians 11:21-30)? Instead, as he did, we ought to boast in our weakness because then we rely on God's compassion.

And it's not always hatred that keeps us from serving God the way he invites us to. It often today seems like apathy is at least as dangerous. We look at others around us. We see the sin, often in very public ways. And we turn away and find something else to worry about. And maybe part of it is that we've bought into this idea so popular in our culture that to love someone means to let them do whatever they want. That's not the case. God called Jonah to preach repentance. He invites us likewise to share his Word, both to condemn sin and to reveal our Savior. He doesn't expect us to turn away as others walk the road that we know leads them to hell.

What kind of God do you want? How about a God that loves you in spite of who you are and in spite of what you've done? How about a God who would sacrifice himself for your good. How about a God whose Son walked in your world, suffered for your sins, and died your death? How about a **"gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."** That is the God who has revealed himself to us in his Word, and that is the God we serve with our lives.

The Text: Jonah 3:3–4:4 (NIV84)

<sup>3</sup>Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. <sup>4</sup>On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” <sup>5</sup>The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup>Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup>But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

**4** But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord, “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup>Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

<sup>4</sup>But the Lord replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”