

Are you a Jonah?

The commitment theme this morning is “prayer”. We all have a pretty good idea of what prayer is – it's like picking up our phone or cellphone, and talking to someone – in this particular case, God. And just as there is sometimes poor reception, static on our phone lines, the need to change positions to get a better connection, a dead battery which needs recharging so it is with our communication with God. In reality, the interference in our communication with God is the condition of our heart. So this morning we are going to look at the prophet Jonah who had a heart condition and study his prayer life. Granted, when we think of the book of Jonah, prayer is not the first thing that pops into our mind but the book of Jonah is far more than a story about a big fish swallowing a wayward prophet. Let's examine it a little more closely.

Jonah 1:1,2 tell us *“Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying,² Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.”*

Jonah was a prophet to the northern Kingdom under King Jeroboam. In II Kings 14:25 we read that Jeroboam *“restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea,^[a] in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.”* Jonah was one of those rare prophets who got to preach good news rather than the usual gloom/doom of most of the prophets. And not only did he get to prophesy good news, it was actually fulfilled in his lifetime. This “good guy” image has direct impact on his response to God in the book of Jonah. When God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach “repent or die”, Jonah balked. This request might equivalent to God's asking us to travel to Syria to speak to ISIS or other terrorists groups giving them the message “repent or perish”.

For generations the Assyrians had been making fierce raids on the lands bordering the Mediterranean including Israel. Having refined the art of torture, they were known for their brutality. Jonah would much rather stay home and do nothing that might get in the way of the city of Ninevah being destroyed. The Assyrians were Israel's enemies. We can almost hear him thinking: you want me to go where? How does this fit in with my image? You want me to preach repentance to our enemies? I really don't want them to live. Seriously, God?

So in Jonah 1:3,4 we find Jonah heading as far away from Ninevah as he could possibly get³ *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.*

⁴*Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.*

We can picture the sailors panicking – tossing out whatever they can in an effort to lighten the ship praying to their pagan gods. And where is Jonah? He's down in the ship's hold sleeping. And the captain goes down finds Jonah sleeping, wakes him and wants to know “how can you sleep? You need to be praying to your God because maybe He will have compassion on us and save us.” Do you see the sharp contrast here? The pagans were all

praying and yet Jonah had no interest in calling out to His God whom he knew could help. He wanted to flee from God – not talk to Him.

Then the sailors cast lots to see which person on board had angered his god and caused the storm. No surprise to us that Jonah's name came up. They questioned him – who are you? What have you done? Who is your God? And when they learned that Jonah's God was the God of heaven, the God who made the sea and dry land, they were terrified. Meanwhile the sea is getting rougher and so they asked Jonah what they should do to make the sea calmer and he told them they needed to toss him overboard. The sailors tried to row ashore but the storm intensified and they finally threw Jonah overboard and this is what they prayed: Jonah 1:14 *"Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased."* When they tossed him over, the sea immediately became calm. The sailors feared the LORD, offered sacrifices to Him and made vows.

This scene fascinates me. The pagans who do not know God pray to Him for mercy and He hears their prayer. The sailors have done everything they could in their own power to calm the sea and when God who made heaven and earth calms the sea, they believe in Him. Jonah who knows the creator God and who should be begging for mercy and forgiveness does not pray. In fact he would rather be thrown overboard than to get down on his knees and pray for mercy/forgiveness.

We know that the LORD prepared a huge fish to swallow Jonah. I've always wanted to know at what point did Jonah pray. I know it's not important but I think that's something I want to ask Jonah in heaven. The point is that now Jonah is ready to pray. Jonah 2: 2*"In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. 7"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. 9 What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'* At the end of 3 days and 3 nights, the big fish spewed out Jonah.

Now when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, he obeys. It reminds me of a story my uncle tells about my brother. When my brother was young, he spent his summers in Nebraska on my grandparent's farm. Grandma told Paul to do something which he did not want to do. She gave him that grandmother "look" and he muttered under his breath "OK, I'll do it but you can't make me like it".

We have to wonder if Jonah's heart is really into the mission. Jonah 3:3 tells us that Nineveh was three days journey wide and Jonah went one day into the city (not even the heart of the city) and proclaimed his message "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. " We are given no evidence of tears in his eyes, no evidence of pleading for people to repent. And based on what we read in chapter 4, he didn't stay long enough to see what the effect

of his message had on the Ninevites. Jonah is the opposite of the prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah was hated by Israel for his repent or be punished message. They wanted to kill him. Jeremiah tried not speaking God's Word but couldn't. Jeremiah 20:9 says *"9 But if I say, 'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.' Yet God is not hindered in his saving work by an apathetic prophet or poor presentation. We read that the Ninevites believed God. There were no council meetings where they discussed what to do or brought Jonah in to ask intellectual questions about the existence of God, no sacred pilgrimages, no long prayers. They simply believed God. When Jonah's message reached the king, he proclaimed that people and livestock alike were to fast and to cover themselves with sackcloth and call urgently upon God, giving up their evil ways and maybe God would have compassion upon them and save them. And when God saw what they did and that they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not destroy them. God's word accomplished what God intended, which it always does. Isaiah 55:11 "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

This is the third time in this short book of Jonah that someone has cried out to God, and God has shown mercy. The pagan sailors cried out to him on the ship and they were saved. Jonah cried out to God from the belly of the fish and he was saved. Then Nineveh cried out to God, and they were saved. The surprising truth of Jonah is not so much that a big fish can swallow a man but that wicked people can be moved by God's word to repent and that God's mercy is available to anyone who believes – even those with blood on their hands.

I'd like to be able to tell you that the prophet Jonah's story has a happy ending and by that I mean of change of heart but we have arrived at chapter 4 – the part of the story that we usually skip because it we find it so inconvenient and perplexing. It appears that Jonah left the city before learning that there had been a city-wide revival. He built a booth from which he could watch to see what was going to happen to the city. We're surprised he is not happy about Nineveh's repenting of their sin, turning from their evil ways to God. He is just mad! Jonah 4: 1-2 *Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!*

3 "So, God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!" 4 God said, "What do you have to be angry about?" (Message)

His attitude reminds me of the prodigal's brother attitude when the prodigal returned. Remember the prodigal's brother – we don't talk about him much because he reminds us of ourselves sometimes. The prodigal returns home and the father is so excited that he orders the servants to kill a fatted calf and throw a party. The brother came in from working in the field and asked the servants what was happening. When he learned what his father had done, he was angry. Hadn't he been the one who stayed home, worked the farm for years, done all the father asked and his father had never thrown him a party. Can't we see ourselves here? I've worked in this church all these years and no one has ever celebrated my service, but just let someone be saved or someone new join the church and the church is excited!

Jonah would rather have died than go back to Israel to report that Nineveh had been saved. He would rather have died than relate to the Ninevites as fellow believers. He would rather have died than live in a world in which he did not get to decide who is and who isn't worthy of God's mercy. At this point God challenged Jonah to refuse to allow his anger go unexamined. Anger is a good barometer of something going on beneath the surface in our hearts. Jonah did not want to examine himself to find out what was going on in his heart. He did not want to change. So God in His sovereignty set up a scenario that would help Jonah to face up to his ugly inner reality – one that show the stark contrast between his heart and God's heart. God provided a leafy plant which grew up over Jonah's booth to give him shade, to save him from discomfort. And for the first time in this book, we see Jonah happy. However, his happiness was short lived because God sent a worm to attack the plant and it died. Then God sent a scorching east wind and the sun beat down so fiercely on Jonah's head that he was faint. And he asked God to let him die. God asked him again "do you have a right to be angry?" And Jonah's reply is "yes, I do – angry enough to die". And the Lord said, "You feel more pity for a plant which you did not plant or make grow, which grew in one night and died in a night. And why shouldn't I pity Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 that don't know their right hand from their left?"

We don't know the ending to Jonah's story and I think one of the reasons may be that God wants us to write our own ending to Jonah's story in our own lives. Perhaps God wants us to see Jonahisms in our own lives.

If I were to ask you right now how many of you think you are a Jonah, I'm guessing that 90% of you would say "No way, I'm not a Jonah". However, if we pull Jonah's actions forward to today, you might reach a different conclusion.

When God told Jonah to go to Ninevah, Jonah went as far in the opposite direction as he possibly could. Maybe God doesn't tell you to go to Ninevah but instead maybe He asks you to cross the street to tell a neighbor about God, or to come "hug" some of the community meal recipients. Maybe you don't say "no" but instead are passive aggressive simply ignoring what He wants you to do. Do you feel your neighbors or community meal recipients aren't worthy of hearing God's good news? Do you try to determine who should receive or not receive God's mercy? Are you a Jonah?

Does your addiction to drugs, or power, or money, or work, or gambling or any other thing threatened to destroy your health, or your marriage and family or your career? Are you more willing to be thrown overboard when you are finally confronted with a decision as to whether to continue to disobey God than you are willing to get down on your knees and ask for forgiveness and change direction? Are you a Jonah?

Do you care that your actions, like Jonah's, may cause others to lose their spiritual lives because you are sleeping during the storm while the lost are trying to do everything in their own power to be saved? Do you care that your Christian brothers/sisters around the world are being persecuted and martyred? Are you sleeping when your neighbors and the world around you need your love/compassion/prayers? Are you a Jonah?

And when you are at your rope's end or having hit bottom, do you ask for mercy but not forgiveness? Are you a Jonah?

When you **do** obey God, do you do it half heartedly? Have you lost the fire in your heart ? Have you lost your first love for God? Are you a Jonah?

And when you finally get around to praying to God honestly, are you angry with Him for being who He is and doing what His holiness, compassion, love, mercy demand? Is your heart so hard that He has to use you in spite of yourself? Do you miss God's blessings because of your hard heart? Are you a Jonah?

Do the creature comforts God gives you make you happy but God's mercy for those you deem not worthy makes you angry? Are you a Jonah?

What prevents us from having a vibrant relationship with God composed of an active prayer life and daily Scripture reading? We can see that in Jonah's case, Jonah needed a heart transplant. *Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* Are you a Jonah?

Our prayers need to be: Lord, make me less like Jonah and more like Jesus. Create in me a heart that quickly and gladly says yes to you -- A heart to love even my enemies as you do. Give me insight into my anger as well as into my joy so that I can hate what you hate and love what you love. Break my heart like your heart is broken for those who are perishing. Give me tears in my eyes like the tears in your eyes.

You see when our hearts are not like God's, we will be like Jonah – only praying when we need God's mercy or rescue or when we're angry that God doesn't do what we want Him to do.

Last week Preacher Kevin challenged us to become known as a house of prayer. This is only possible when we have a strong relationship with God. Your personal prayer life has a direct correlation to the church's prayer life because it's only through your prayers and mine for our church/community/world that we can become a house of prayer. And the strength of your personal spiritual life is dependent on your heart's condition.

What is the condition of your heart? Are you bored when you talk to God and read His Word? Do you feel a coldness or anger or bitterness when you pray/ read God's Word / attend church? Does the coldness/anger keep you from spending time with God? Or are you excited to read His Word and talk to Him? What prevents you from worshipping God whole heartedly? Do your personal concerns regarding finances, or family, or work crowd out your worship?

This morning if you feel the Spirit's touching your heart and asking you to give up that which keeps your heart a stone, please write the "stone" or "burden" on the slip of paper you were given this a.m. If on the other hand, your answer is "no", leave the paper blank. No one is going to read what you've written – it is strictly between you and God. In a few minutes we are going to give you an opportunity to come down to the altar and leave your stone/burden before God and, if you choose, have a time of prayer for yourself, your family, the church, and to also pick up a church prayer list. So while "Change My Heart, O God, is played, do a "heart" check.

Change My Heart, O God, to be played

We've come to the prayer portion of the service. I'd like Preacher Kevin and Mrs. Patricia to come down to the altar so that we may pray for them. In II Thessalonians 3:1 Paul writes "**3** As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. **2** And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. **3** But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. " I've asked the McFerrins to represent the congregation and pray over Preacher Kevin and Mrs. Patricia.