

Go Forth in Faith
Jonah 1:1-4, 13, 15-17, 2:10-3:5, 3:10-4:3
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jonah 1:1-4, 13, 15-17, 2:10-3:5, 3:10-4:3

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” But 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.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your

town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”

‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

This summer we’ve been talking about the Holy Spirit and about the call of the Spirit on our lives. You made suggestions, back in May, of Scripture passages, topics, and hymns. Thanks to the Spirit, it all mostly worked together. We’ve talked about how the Spirit calls us, and about the fact that, if you’re still alive, you’re not done.

We’ve talked about how we look at other people, and that we have a choice, between hate and love, between the swastika and the cross. Other people were made in the image of God, just like we were. All the other people. Of whatever race, gender, or nationality. Even ...*those people*. Whoever you just thought of when I said “*those people*.” Either we treat them like they bear the image of God, because they do, or we are defiling God’s image. No exceptions.

So now, ... so what?

Seriously, so what?

We stand here every Sunday and we say that we believe these things. Isn’t that enough?

I’m afraid not.

If we are still alive, then God still has work for us to do, and standing here in an echo chamber, all saying the same thing, doesn’t accomplish much.

So, what are we supposed to do about it?

Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations, teaching them what he had taught them.¹

Earlier, Jesus sent his followers out into the villages and towns to prepare the way for him to come. They went out with no bag, no extra sandals, and no back-up plan. They taught the people that the Kingdom of God had come near.

And they found that what they said had power. They could cure the sick and throw demons out of people. This was not because they themselves were so great, but because they bore God's word and they followed God's call.

We, too, bear God's word to the world. We, too, are following God's call, or trying to.

In a nation where some people think it is acceptable to march with torches and swastika flags, people of peace and love have some work to do. The last time the swastika was considered acceptable in the political sphere, two hundred thousand people murdered six million in cold blood while the world watched.²

If we are following God's call to us, then the story of Jonah is simultaneously an inspiration, and a warning. God called Jonah to take God's word to Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were the mighty empire of the time. They did not see their neighbors as being people like themselves, because their neighbors were weaker than they were, and thus deserved to be conquered.

Jonah did not want to take God's word to those people.

¹ Matthew 28:19-20.

² This number is so widely quoted as to defy need for citation, but https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust

At first glance, Jonah looks to be afraid of confrontation. He is told to travel Northeast to Nineveh, and instead he tries to travel as far as he can go West.³

We all know how well that worked out for him. The sailors throw him overboard, he is swallowed by the great fish, and three days later he's thrown back up on a beach, with God's words ringing in his ears.

“Nineveh!”

So, he goes, and he preaches God's word to Nineveh.

Nobody seriously confronts Jonah. No one, to the best of our knowledge, even questions what he has to say.

Jonah succeeds far beyond all rational expectation. This is one of the largest cities in the world at this time, and this foreigner, this representative of a conquered people, succeeds in getting them to change their ways. They fast and put on sackcloth, from the beggars in the street to the king.

Whereupon we see the real reason that Jonah didn't want to preach to Nineveh. Jonah is not afraid of the Assyrians. Nowhere in the book of Jonah does it say that he is afraid.

Jonah does not want to succeed!

The Assyrians have conquered the people of Israel, killing people, taking slaves, and destroying property. That was the deal when people were conquered in the ancient world. Just like conquered people and their gods taking revenge at their next opportunity.

³ Jonah starts in Jerusalem (inferred from that he gets a ship at Joppa, roughly in modern Tel Aviv). Nineveh is northeast of Jerusalem, right across the Tigris river from present-day Mosul, in Iraq (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineveh>). Tarshish, or Tartessos, is beyond the Strait of Gibraltar on the Atlantic coast of Spain (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarshish>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tartessos>).

God changes God's mind, and does not destroy Nineveh.

Jonah was looking forward to watching some high-quality smiting here, and he doesn't get it.

He is soooooo disappointed! He pouts like a three-year-old, and tells God that, if God is not going to destroy Nineveh, he would rather die than watch them be virtuous and happy.

My friends, ... my brothers and sisters, we are called to go forth into all nations and make disciples. In case you missed it a few weeks ago:

Racism is sin.

Antisemitism is sin.

Misogyny is sin.

Treating a human being as less than human is defiling the image of God in which that person was created.

Any human being.

This sin is part of the same fractal pattern as the violence in Charlottesville, and as the Holocaust. It has no place in the Kingdom of Heaven, in the world as God is remaking it.

That is true even when we do it.

Full stop. No exceptions.

It is sin whether it is expressed with torches and clubs, or with hiring policies and dress codes, or with gossip and snark.

That means that the mission field out there doesn't start at the water's edge. It starts right here in our neighborhood.

If, like Jonah, we hope more for God's vengeance on even the violent and dangerous than we do for their conversion, then the mission field doesn't even start at the walls of this building. It begins right here (tap heart). All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Being disciples of Jesus the Christ means that we are called to love God and to love our neighbors. Jonah loved God, or respected Him anyway, but he did not love his neighbors the Assyrians. In his case that kind of went with the message of doom that he was delivering, but we have been called to deliver a different message.

Jesus told anyone who would listen that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming near. He told them to love God and to love their neighbors. Then he told them that their neighbors included the people they hated most in the whole world.

God so loved the cosmos,⁴ remember, that's the original word, not even just "world," that he came down here and taught us how to live, and died for us. God raised him from the dead, and he reigns in Heaven. He asked God to forgive the people who were killing him as he made the request. He told his followers to love other people the way he loves us.⁵

I asked the question, "What do we do about it?"

We stop saying, "It's okay to demean other human beings." Or even, "It's none of my business."

What made the Holocaust possible was people saying, "It's none of my business."

We stop saying, "It's okay to tell that racist joke, or that sexist joke."

⁴ The Greek word usually translated "World" in John 3:16 is actually *cosmos*.

⁵ John 15:12.

We stop saying, “It’s okay that the halls of power are crowded with affluent white men who make decisions that help, well, mostly affluent white men.”

We say things like, “Hey, she’s a person, too, just like you are.”

We feed the hungry. We sit down with people whose lives are different from ours, and we really listen to them.

When it is time to vote, we think about not only our own interest, but the interest of the poor, the people without power and influence. And then we vote. Every election.

We show people what lives lived peacefully for others look like. We let others see the Spirit in action, in us.

We speak up when we see things happening that are wrong. This is where Jonah is an inspiration. He was not afraid to go to Nineveh – he was afraid that he would be more successful than he wanted to be.

The author Marianne Williamson said, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”⁶

My brothers and sisters, let me put your minds at rest. We are not that powerful in and of ourselves.

...

But neither was Jonah. Neither was Elijah, or Moses, or Saint Paul. The Holy Spirit did miracles through them.

⁶ Williamson, Marianne. 2012. *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*. Chapter 7, section 3, p. 190. This quote is often erroneously attributed to Nelson Mandela, in his inaugural address, but online transcripts prove that this is incorrect.

If we are paying attention, the Holy Spirit is present in and all around us. We've spoken this summer about how the Holy Spirit calls us into action in the world. We've spoken about how the Spirit sustains us through the sacraments, and protects us with the whole armor of God. We've spoken about how God's faithfulness is enough for us, even when our own faith fails, and how Jesus will never abandon us.

Every Sunday, I pray for you all at the end of the service. Let me repeat those words I use. "May the grace of God the Father, the love of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit rest upon you and rest in you, now and forever more."

May it be ever so.

AMEN.