



Jonah
The Sign of Jonah
Sunday, October 30, 2016
Courage Church, Detroit, MI.

Today is week three of our series studying the book of Jonah.

and for you parents in this place today, we lined it up so that in kids church this morning, they are teaching on the same passage of scripture. They are just getting the kid version of it, of course. But I would encourage you when you go home, to have conversations with your kids about what they are learning in kids church, our team down there is doing an amazing job...

Yesterday I was sitting with my oldest daughter, Milly, and I told her that I was teaching tomorrow on the story of "Jonah and the *whale*" - and asked her, "do you know that story?" and she said "I have heard it a hundred times... only daddy, its not a whale... I thought it was a fish."

and she is right... we have no real evidence that says it was or was not a whale that swallowed Jonah... we know that it was a "large fish" - so they are teaching good theology down there. My seven year old is schooling me on the bible.

So that is where we are today... the story of the fish.

It is the story that everyone learns in Sunday school... it is one of those stories that critics have skeptically laughed at for centuries saying:

“You believe that actually happened?”

Like... a fish... ate a man... and the man lived inside his belly. and then got spit out after three days...

and so they try and make you feel stupid, like you believe a fairy tale.

and so typically we begin to try and explain everything in terms of logic and reason, and in doing so, we leave out the ultimate truth... **that the God that we serve is the God of the impossible.** That He will do whatever it takes to get his servants attention. That he will do whatever it takes to reconcile people back to Him, even if it means having a giant fish swallow a wayward prophet.

and then of course we have the other side... who will argue night and day that every detail happened literally, which again, I do believe... but they will argue the literal reading until they are blue in the face as if the only thing that has any relevance in this story is the miracle of the man living inside the belly of a fish.

And they miss everything else that is happening here, and even more crucially, they are missing everything that this story points too.

So we are going to pick up today, basically right where Pastor Chilly left off last week. Which, if you remember, kind of the culmination of last week's message was that in the end, these pagan sailors get saved. They find God and they committed themselves to God. Which is absolutely bizarre when you read the story from that perspective... the “man of God” gets thrown into the ocean in the middle of a storm because of disobedience...

and the pagan men who didn't know anything about God, end up getting saved after they do something that they thought was going to “kill” the man of God.

We are beginning today in Jonah 1:15, and reading through Jonah chapter 2, and even into chapter 3 for two verses... here we go!

¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

A Great Fish Swallows Jonah

¹⁷ And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah's Prayer

2 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of *Sheol* I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³ For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy **temple**.’

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head

⁶ at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.

⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,

into your holy **temple**.

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will **sacrifice** to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

¹⁰ And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

3 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,
² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."

The title of today's message is: "The Sign of Jonah"

Lets Pray.

One thing that we have been saying in this series, and I don't think that it could be any more true than in the passage we are studying today, is that Jonah's story is your story.

It is my story.

it is the story of grace finding you, in the lowest places... in the broken places...

when you are lost. and hurt.
and cold.

It is the story of grace finding you, when you feel stuck.

and numb.

numb.

That is a word that I feel like we tend to neglect in the church, but it is so clearly the way that Jonah felt. and his story is so personal for so many of us... I have talked to so many people who feel this way right now...

Life has hit them like a ton of bricks, and they fought and they fought and they fought, and they are sick of fighting. So much so, they maybe they don't even know what they are fighting for, anymore.

THEY ARE NUMB!

But IT IS IN those moments, that it seems like we don't even know how to "feel" anymore, that God can reach in, and pick you back up. And breathe new life into you, and renew the mission that he has given you.

Guys, Jonah felt NOTHING for Nineveh. No hopefulness. No compassion. Just hatred. He was left numb by the way that the Assyrians had left Israel. He was hurt.

and he did not care what happened them... and because they were his assignment, at that point, he didn't even care what happened to himself.

As long as it didn't involve helping them.

and that is a scary line to walk but I know that some of us are walking it every day... because of anxiety... or because of resentment, because of bitterness... because of disappointment, and of things not happening in the way that you want them to, and in the timeframe that you thought they would.

Proverbs 13:12 says Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

and if that is you in this place today, and you feel like your hope is deferred, and you aren't even sure if you have it anymore... my prayer for you is that God would breathe life into your calling today... he would breathe hope into your destiny... that your longings will be fulfilled and you will find yourself in the center of your purpose.

that you would remember that you are chosen by the God of the universe for such a time as this, to make a Kingdom impact on a great city that from everything that I can tell, is an awful lot like the city we are studying in this series... its an awful lot like Nineveh, but we call it Detroit.

Okay, so a brief recap.

Jonah gets called by God to go preach to Nineveh. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were the worst enemies of the Israelites.

So because Jonah has nothing but hatred for this group of people who, in all fairness, had caused a lot of destruction to his people... but because of that, Jonah didn't go to Nineveh. Instead of making the 500 mile journey on land to Nineveh, he boarded a ship... or some translations will tell you that he actually *chartered* a ship, to take him 2000 miles in the other direction, to the paradise of Tarshish, which is in the Southern part of Spain.

So he gets on this boat filled with Pagan sailors who each have their own little gods that they worship... and runs. But we all know that you cant run from God forever... and so before long, a huge storm comes. And the sailors just freak out... but Jonah just sleeps through it. He is just sleeping.

So then of course, they get him, they yell at him for sleeping, and they figure out that he is the problem... then he tells them that the only way for them to stop the storm is to throw him overboard, and so they reluctantly do that...

and then God sends a giant fish to swallow Jonah and give him three days and three nights in the belly of the fish to think about what he had done. And about the way that he was running from God, and the way that he so arrogantly wanted judgment to fall on his enemies rather than go into the place that he had been called, and calling them to repentance.

and so it is in the belly of the fish, that he prays this prayer.

and like many passages in the bible, it all culminates right at the end of the prayer... and really the centerpiece of the entire story of Jonah, is the last two verses of this prayer, and particularly the last line:

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

9 But I with the voice of *thanksgiving*
will **sacrifice** to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord!

Okay... I am sure that if someone were to tell you, “the most important thing that you will ever learn in your entire life is found in the middle of the book of Jonah, in a prayer that Jonah prayed when he was in the belly of a giant fish” - you would probably think... whatever.

But it is. And if you can't grasp this concept, then you will never understand grace.

Salvation belongs to the Lord.

There is not one thing that matters so much, but is more forgotten in our world, than this.

You are not saved on account of what you have or have not done.

and this was a crucial point for Jonah to understand, because Jonah was a prophet! He was chosen by God, he literally got to speak for God... but he had this skewed perception of God that somehow caused him to believe that the grace that was shown by God in choosing Jonah, was not sufficient for the Ninevites. And so of course, God had to break Jonah of that perception.

Jonah's perception of them was “they deserve to burn because of what they have done. They are an evil, pagan city that has attacked and oppressed Israel, has taken over our land, has deported our Fathers, has forced their way on our people...”

and he wanted them to pay.

as if salvation was on account of what they have done. But let me tell you, if Salvation was on account what we have done, then Jonah would be just as guilty as Nineveh, and you and I would be too. We would all be dead in our tracks.

So because of the evil done in Nineveh, Jonah refused to preach there, and so he found himself in the depths of a fish finally remembering, “God is going to do what he is going to do! He is slow to anger, and is merciful, and kind and loving and all of the things that I (Jonah) am not.”

and it points to Jesus.

We can work and work and work and work and think that we are working our way to our salvation but ultimately it belongs to the Lord. It is of the Lord. It is BECAUSE of the Lord. And as long as you think that salvation is based on the merits of your life...

you will be just like Jonah. You will think that you deserve salvation because of all of the things that you do... and you will think that Nineveh deserves destruction because of what they did. Or even worse, because what they *are*.

Because that is human nature. Isn't it?

to label other people based on their pasts, or even based on the way that they currently seem to be living and the choices that they are making... and when *they* do something wrong, we say “it is WHO THEY ARE”

but when WE do something wrong, we say “it is WHAT WE DID.”

We identify ourselves as good people who maybe make mistakes sometimes, but we identify others as bad people when we recognize a sin in their life that maybe we don't understand... because we struggle with different things. and it is much more difficult to be gracious toward the things that we personally struggle with.

Do you see the difference?

But when you live your life knowing that salvation belongs to the Lord, then you live knowing that everything is grace.

and its then that you can view the world through the scope in which Paul declares... that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free. But Jonah didn't see people that way!

Jonah was a racist who thought that he had the right to will destruction on the people that God called him to reach.

and the only way to live with a worldview like that, is to be proud. It is to think that you are better than someone else, or that you deserve something, that someone else doesn't deserve... all things that are impossible if you truly grasp the grace of God.

That is Jonah. All day.

God tells him to go to a pagan, broken city... instead he gets on a boat heading for Tarshish, a paradise 2000 miles in the opposite direction. and to be fair to Jonah, his commission was rather unorthodox at the time. Most of the prophets went to Israel. Most of the prophecies were for Israel.

But Jonah was sent on a mission that required him to work against everything that he ever knew. He had to unlearn everything that he thought he knew. He was commanded to love a group of people that he literally hated. and he did what just about any other Israelite would have done...

He said no.

By getting on that boat to Tarshish, He literally was saying to God "they deserve to burn, and I deserve to go enjoy paradise."

But it is not until he finds himself in the belly of this fish, that he remembers, "I don't get to decide who God saves and who he doesn't. Salvation is of the Lord." and something profound happens.

In the book of Psalms, there are several types of Psalms.

There are "Praise and worship" Psalms, or often they are called "Hallelujah Psalms" - which are basically about how great God is... how creative he is... how vast and infinite he is and how amazing his creations are....

Then there are Psalms of thanks... or, Thanksgiving songs.

There are, what is known as "songs of lament" - which is a cry to God by a person or a group, with really deep feelings... Sorrow... desperation... sometimes even anger. There is even one kind of Psalm called an

imprecatory Psalm, which is basically a cry for judgement to fall on your enemies.

Jonah obviously was a fan of those, because nothing about Jonah wanted grace for the Ninevities, which is why he found himself there in the first place.

but, Normally, lament Psalms usually take place when there is suffering... when something is not going right... like you are, say, stuck in the belly of a fish.

Well, each line from Jonah's prayer inside the fish can be found, in almost an identical form, in various places throughout the Psalms. So this is nothing new that he is saying...

and guess what kind of Psalms they are?

Believe it or not, they are actually Psalms of *Thanksgiving*.

Almost the entire thing came from Psalms of Thanksgiving.

This prayer is not one of lament. It is one of of thankfulness.

Typically, Thanksgiving Psalms are RESPONSES to the songs of lament, being answered by God.

Which begs the question... what was answered, by God sending a great fish to swallow Jonah?

Because I will tell you this... God giving Jonah a second chance to go and preach to Nineveh wasn't an answer to Jonah's prayers. He would have rather died. The text literally says that Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh be saved. But when you start to read the words that he is speaking inside of this fish, its almost like in that moment, Jonah stopped looking to Nineveh... and started looking at himself.

and he is thanking God.

See, the fish rescued Jonah from the storm... but the storm rescued Jonah from Himself... and from his sin... and from his selfishness.

It wasn't until he was in the storm that realized that because of him, everyone on that boat was about to die, so for the first time in the story, he did something for someone else.

So I believe that the case could be made that: the storm is what saved him, not the fish.

Maybe it didn't save his life, but it saved his soul. It saved the core of who he is... it took a man that had become numb to others and it forced him to feel something on behalf of someone else.

The thing that threatened to take his life is the thing brought him back to the reality that the world is a whole lot bigger than just Jonah. And a lot more is at stake than just one man. And I can't help, when I think about my life, when I think of all the times that I got comfortable... or worse, the times that I let my heart grow cold to something that used to light it on fire...

It is almost always a storm that saves me.

It is a shaking. It is a failure. Its a wake up call.

and if you are in this place today and you feel like you are in a storm... the difference between you and Jonah right here and right now, is unlike Jonah, you don't have to face it alone. Everything about Courage Church is built around the fabric of people who do life together, even when it gets messy. We know that half to time we are Nineveh. We don't deserve the grace of God.. but if Jesus can die to give to us, then are a place that extends it.

But sometimes walking through storms means figuring out, "God, what are you saving *from*?"

and that can be a hard perspective to find, because sometimes when you are in the thick of it, all you see is the storm. All you see is the betrayal you feel, or the mistake that you made, or the problem you are up against...

But it is all part of the refinement process, and truthfully... sometimes its even more simple than that. Sometimes it is just God's way of rescuing you from going down a road that just isn't what is best for you.

We did an entire series on this, it was the series we just did... but I have learned to thank God for the storms. In my life, I used to really struggle with anxiety... I have talked in several sermons about it... I don't really deal with that anymore... because of storms that God has brought me through...

I have been through enough in this life to know that God holds the world in his hands... that he is in control, and I am not, and that he is going to do what he he going to do.

But Jonah tried to control not only his destiny... but the destiny of Nineveh. and it lands him in the belly of a fish.

Notice, in his poem inside the fish, what does he keep pointing back to?

The Holy temple.

What is it about the temple?

In the temple, is the mercy seat. The place the blood was sprinkled...

In the temple, are the sacrifices. The atonement for sins. Once again, the image returns, of Yom Kippur.

Two weeks ago, we kicked off the series by studying a little bit about Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is Hebrew for "The day of atonement" - it was the day that the sins of all of the people in Israel were dealt with, for the entire year. It was also the way regret was dealt with, as well as grudges and anything you held against someone else.

None of those things could be brought into the New Year. It all got left at Yom Kippur. It was a clean slate.

To this day, Yom Kippur is considered in Jewish Culture to be "the Holiest Day of the Year" - if there is one thing that is taken seriously, it is that. Atonement. Forgiveness. and moving on, forgetting what is behind you.

they just celebrated it a couple of weeks ago. But one of the traditions in their culture that seems a little strange at first, is this: every year on Yom Kippur, during their afternoon services, they gather everyone together and

they read the entire book of Jonah. So two weeks ago, we began looking at some of the correlations between Yom Kippur, and the book of Jonah.

and here is another.

Jonah found himself in the belly of the whale quoting Psalms about the grace of God knowing that grace had found him even when he literally did not want grace to come to Nineveh.

But Salvation belongs to the Lord, doesn't it?

Because this was a guy who spit in the face of God, and yet God still found him, and he still gave him another chance.

The sign of Jonah

Now, if you would turn your bibles with me to Matthew 12:38-41

“³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

This is huge.

I think so often we read through so many things and we don't give it much thought at all. But Jesus literally here just said that the ONLY sign that this generation will get... the only evidence that they actually may believe regarding Jesus will be this: the sign of Jonah.

You need to catch this... because Jesus is talking to the religious leaders here. The ones who knew all the stories... who knew the Torah, and the stories of the prophets. They knew all about Jonah... but what they didn't know, is all of the ways that Jonah points to Christ.

So Jesus says, that's your sign... just look at Jonah.

Who, like we just read, spent three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish... and just like that, the Son of man will spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

And when Jonah was given a chance at his own resurrection... a chance to live again, a chance to try again... to be faithful, to do what God asked him to do... though his heart still wasn't in it, this time he preached! He went to Nineveh.

and like Jesus said, Nineveh repented at his teaching.

But something greater than Jonah is here.

and if even Nineveh received grace, then of course God will be gracious toward our city... and if even Jonah received grace... then of course God is still willing to work through you and me despite all of the messes that we have made of our lives.

All of the things that we think make us unqualified... all of the times that we said no.

The sign of Jonah is a sign of resurrection, and of relentless grace shown to a wide range of characters in the story, and none of them deserved it,!!! but that is the beauty of grace, someone else paid. and you need to hear that this morning, Because none of us could afford it.

Let me show you... as we look at one more way that Jonah points to Jesus, and get get ready to close.

if you look in the New Testament, in Mark 4 starting in verse 35, (and you can read this later at home) - there is a fascinating account of Jesus getting on a boat with his disciples. Most of you have probably heard this story...

And, just like in the story of Jonah... a storm comes, and everyone on the boat freaks out. They all think that they are going to die. Because unless God himself calms this storm, then there is no hope.

And... just like in the story of Jonah... Jesus is down below, sleeping. So they have to go down, and wake him up... and basically ask him the same thing they ask Jonah... "How on earth can you sleep at a time like this?"

The accounts are almost identical... except for one detail. In Marks account of Jesus, Jesus comes up, rebukes the storm, it stops... then he rebukes the sailors for their lack of faith, to think that something so insignificant as a storm could put a stop to what God had called them to do in the first place.

But That is not what happens in Jonah. This is what happens in Jonah:

Jonah 1:11-12 “Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, **“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you.”**”

Jonah tells the sailors, that in order for them to live, he has to die.

He has to be the sacrifice.

and the sailors, so reluctantly and fearful, eventually do it. Because according to Jonah, it was the only way.

and now many years later we have Jesus... telling all of the doubters that the stories they grew up hearing all point to him. The story that they sit together and read on Yom Kippur every year, points to him. It is not just a myth, it is a foreshadowing.

because Jonah was right... it was the only way. The only way for you and I to be saved, is Jesus had to die. He had to die on the cross for our sins, in our place.

It is his life, for ours.

Jonah is a narrative foreshadowing of the cost by which grace has been made available, and it is a foreshadowing Of the resurrection of Hope, and of a God who is so persistent in his love for the city, that even when everyone else rules it out, and says that its over... He is still working.

So I want to talk to two different types of people this morning.

The ones in this place that feel like Jonah, and the ones in this place that feel like Nineveh. and I will explain that in a minute.

Maybe you feel like Jonah. Numb. Lost. Like you have run so far from your calling you aren't sure if you will ever find your way back...

I promise you, God is big enough to do whatever it takes to give you another chance. He is the God of second chances, and third chances, and 50th chances. He is the God that says not only should you forgive 7 times, but 70x7 times, and all on the same day. And in that same way, he forgives you... and he loves you... and he is willing to pursue you in the same way that he pursued Jonah if he has to... absolutely relentlessly.

It is easy to grow callous to the places we are called. It is easy to forget why we are here in the first place... and it is easy to quit. To go the other direction entirely.

But let me encourage you, that just like how Jonah knew that the only way to save the sailors was to sacrifice himself, Jesus laid his life down for the very people that he has called you to reach.

He already did the heavy lifting. If you are running... stop running.

If you are calloused... lay it at the feet of Jesus and let your heart be healed of whatever is keeping you from your calling... that is keeping you from your destiny. When we do our response song, come to the altar. Or kneel where you are. It doesn't matter where you go, if God can find Jonah by sending a fish, then he can meet you in your seat... but something about the altar, to me, just is a bit of a public sign that says, "God... I am not running!"

We all know that it is true... Jonah's story is our story. We all run from God. We all have those moments when our pride gets so big that we think we know better than God. We would never say it like that, but we do.

or maybe you feel like Nineveh, surrounded by Jonah's. Surrounded by people who have condemned you instead of loved you... and You feel like for every mistake that you ever made, there was a christian there to point it out to you, and tell you what you did wrong and tell you all the reasons why you deserve whatever is coming to you.... can I just encourage you this morning, that grace is bigger than that.

Even when the people who are supposed to represent God have ruled you out... God is still working in your life. He still believes in you.

Even if your family has given up... and it feels like the church has given up on you... and they make you feel like God has given up on you... If God would have pity on Nineveh because he wasn't finished with them yet... then why would he not have pity on you?

The story of Jonah is the story of a man of God, who had to get shook to his core, because he forgot what grace looked like. Because he ruled people out, and felt like they were too far gone to ever be saved.

and if your experience with Christians, and with people who should be representing Jesus, has been a bunch of people who acted like Jonah, can I ask you today for your forgiveness on behalf of the sometimes misguided church? and can I encourage you to give the church of Jesus Christ another chance.

We are ALL about second chances here, because Jesus is all about second chances. We are all about living life together, in the messiness of it all. We DON'T know it all... WE DON'T!

but we know that the bible tells us that "love covers a multitude of sins," so we start there. and the rest is worked out in community.

I am so proud of you Courage Church. For the way that you loved our community yesterday, and this week leading up to our Halloween event. I am so proud to be a part of a place that lives a love that meets people right where they are.