

# The Reluctant Missionary

Jonah  
Preached August 9, 2009  
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**Introduction of the Service.** Welcome to worship at First-Centenary. Today we begin a two-week emphasis on outreach and missions.

This morning you are invited to join in a journey with Jonah, the reluctant missionary. The book of Jonah is divided into four sections with each having a defined movement in the story. Our service will follow those four movements making this a unique experience.

Many people have debated what type of literature the book of Jonah is – historical narrative, a parable, a fable, midrash, satire, etc. (Once in a literature class a student debated her professor concerning this issue. She insisted it was a historical fact. He insisted it was a fable. Finally she said, “When I get to heaven, I am going to ask Jonah. The professor responded, “What if Jonah did not go to heaven?” She quickly replied, “Then you can ask him.”)

Well the debate continues. Because of its distinctiveness, it is difficult to determine. Yet despite this debate over its genre, it conveys powerful messages about the nature of God and human beings like you and me and God's mission for his people.

I invite you join in with your mind and your heart in full participation in this journey of worship.

**The tumult of praise.** (Use text 1:1-16 as call to worship)

Do you know what Jonah's name means? “Dove of Faithfulness.” When we read the story, we find the name to be ironic. The main character should be named “Hawk of Rebellion.”

God's call came to Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria which was located along the northern portion of the Tigris River (modern Iraq). Nineveh's relationship to Israel during much of the OT period was hostile. Jonah did not want to go so he fled in the opposite

direction to take a ship that was headed west on the Mediterranean Sea.

Jonah was not the only biblical character who resisted God's call to serve in a particular mission. Moses, when called to lead the Hebrews from Egypt, told God he lacked the verbal skills to fulfill the task. Elijah fled deep into the wilderness when his life was threatened by Jezebel. Jeremiah responded to God's call with resistance saying he was too young to serve.

During our recent trip to Costa Rica, the bishop of the Methodist Church Luis Palomo shared with our team the efforts that have been made to educate the clergy in order that they might understand their identity as Methodists. He shared about the efforts over the past 15 years through their seminary. He felt it had been important for them to develop a different model than the residential model we use in the US. He said they feared that pastors who left the rural settings, where the need was so great, to come and to study in an urban setting may not want to return. So the church developed short-term training of a week each month for pastors to gather. The fears expressed by the CR Bishop are realized often in our nation among UM clergy who are resistant to serve in certain areas.

Have you ever felt like Jonah? Have you resisted doing what you sensed God wanted you to do? Have you ever run in the other direction?

Jonah's decision to flee from God proved what the psalmist had discovered - *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there* (139:7-8). None, not even the rebellious hawks, can escape God's presence.

As often is the case, others were caught in the wake of Jonah's interaction and struggle with God. Once the ship was well out to sea, a great storm struck that threatened not only Jonah but also the mariners and their goods. The story demonstrates there is this connectedness we share with others who may seem unconnected yet are impacted by what is going on around us in our encounters with God.

The mariners saw that they were in peril, so they began to take progressive actions to save their ship and crew. They threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship, hoping the increased buoyancy would keep them afloat. When the storm grew fiercer, they began to pray to their gods and they urged Jonah to pray to his god. Then they cast lots to determine who was responsible for the storm. When the lot fell on Jonah, they asked him what they should do. He urged them to throw him overboard.

They did not want him to drown so they attempted to row to shore but to no avail. So they cried to the Lord for mercy and threw Jonah into the sea. The chaos reacted and grew calm. The sailors turned and worshiped the Lord.

These mariners proved to be more faithful than the “faithful dove.” They prayed to God for help and worshiped the Lord. They even interceded for Jonah, asking God to have mercy on him.

Let us now worship the God who called Jonah and would not allow him to escape his presence, heard the prayers of sailors and showed them mercy.

**A whale of a mess, I must confess.**  
(Use 2:2-9 as confession)

The psalm of Jonah is a poem that gives us vivid images of his condition and sometimes ours. I have tagged this portion as “*A Whale of a Mess, I must Confess.*”

Three days in a fish's belly will have a profound impact on a person's attitude. With seaweed as hair and darkness closing in, life hangs on the edge. Yet in the midst of this dark night of the soul, Jonah remembered the Lord and called out to him.

Times of confession and calling on God often arise out of the dark nights of the soul. At times we may feel as though we are in the whale's belly – sickness has invaded our home, news has come that has shaken our security (job loss, investments have fallen, the threat of suit looms nearby), one we love has died or things have gone awry. Darkness seems to be creeping closer and closer to our hearts. We often wonder if these times have come because of our failures. Or are we caught in some greater struggle

we do not understand? Regardless of the cause, we feel its overwhelming impact.

But as people of faith, we too can remember the Lord. We too can pray and seek God's face and deliverance. It is a time for confession, prayer and thanksgiving. We are now acting these out in this time of worship.

### The successful Mission?

(The children's sermon – Mary Grey)

### Contrasting the Sender and the Sent.

Read the text – 3:10-4:11

The last episode of Jonah brings us to a frightening and sobering encounter with the contrast between the *Sender* (God) and the one *Sent*. Here the one sent becomes larger than a character named Jonah. The sent becomes all who know and follow God. The sent is both individuals, such as you and me as well as the corporate body of the Hebrews and now the Church.

Here we find the wonderful nature of God expressed by Jonah when he grew so hot with anger that God was not going to destroy Nineveh because they had repented – *that is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.*

God is love – grace-filled and merciful. These thoughts about the nature of God are not new to any of us. We celebrate and affirm God's love and grace. But here in the story of Jonah, we see these are not merely directed toward the "chosen" or "us" but they are universal. Phoenician sailors who worship other gods experience God's grace. Wicked repentant Ninevites taste God's mercy.

In N. T. Wright's book *Justification*, Wright argues that God has always had a one-and-only plan to be carried out by his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham. That plan is to redeem all of creation and take care of sin once-and-for-all. God's people were to carry the Abrahamic blessing to all people. It was not only for them but for the whole world. Unfortunately, as a people they fell short but Jesus fulfilled the plan. Now in Christ, we are grafted into that plan. As

Christians, we are agents of God's mission of love and blessing to the world.

Many believe that Jonah is a message to ancient Israel concerning their failure to carry out God's mission to the world. For Jonah, there was this underlying issue that he did not want God showing mercy on Nineveh. Why preach to them? Is this a message to Israel that they had become focused on themselves instead of on the world God sought to redeem? The message of Jonah was a wake-up call for them and for us.

Jonah affirmed that God was slow to anger – God was willing to give Nineveh opportunity even after the height of their evil had risen to God's attention. God was willing to call a prophet to go to them and to give them 40 days to turn around. (Aren't you thankful that God is "slow to anger?")

Contrast God's anger with Jonah. When Jonah discerned that God was not going to execute his plan to annihilate Nineveh, he became boiling mad. When the vine that had given him shelter died because it was attacked by a worm, again he was truly upset. *(By the way, biblical scholars have debated what type of plant is mentioned here because the Hebrew words is used only here. I know what it was - kudzu – Only kudzu could grow that rapidly. Don't you wish Jonah had understood how kudzu would threaten the world, he would have cultivated the worm so as to control the plant?)*

Let's move back from that aside – Clearly the *Sender* was slow to anger while the *sent* was quick to anger.

Perhaps what is most troubling about the contrast between God and Jonah in this last episode is God's great steadfast love and Jonah's misguided love.

God knew the value of sailors and Ninevites. They were important and God demonstrated his love toward them. God even demonstrated his love toward a reluctant missionary who fled from his duties and seem to have a death wish on his life.

But when we look at Jonah we do not see that level of compassion. He apparently did not want the Ninevites to be spared. I suspect had the story been

written differently and God had destroyed the city, Jonah would have been pleased.

Two actions characterize Jonah's struggle to love. After his initial reaction to God's deciding not to punish Nineveh and expressing his anger, Jonah went to a hill overlooking the city, built a booth and waited to see what would happen. What was he waiting to see. He knew God was not going to destroy the city. I suspect he was waiting to see if after some time, the people would return to their wicked ways. Perhaps he thought their "repentance" was out of expediency and once the clouds past, they would return to their old ways. If that happened, he could point a finger at God and ridicule his compassion.

The last encounter Jonah had with God related to the vine that had grown up and withered. He was angry about it. God confronted him saying that he was more "concerned" about the withered plant than he was about the people of Nineveh, particularly the innocent children. Jonah thought more a plant that gave him comfort than he did about people.

I believe you would agree there are huge contrasts between God and Jonah. God's grace and love are profound yet his servant who he sends to carry out his purposes has some huge issues. The reluctant missionary at points seems hardly kin to the Lord.

What seems so amazing in this part of the story is God's interaction with Jonah. God rescues the fleeing missionary by having him swallowed by a whale. In the end of the story, God confronts Jonah, not by telling him what he should or should not do or think. Rather God asks him questions – "Is it right for you to be angry?" "You are so concerned about the vine withering, should I (God) not be concerned for this great city and its 120,000 children?"

God's actions toward the prophet are directed at nurturing and making him think. Understand this; God wants to transform and to redeem the messenger.

### Our confrontation.

How are we to relate to this great story? How are we to focus our concerns and actions?

God's great plan is universal – Our Lord wants to redeem all of creation – all people, not just you and me and people like us. God wants each of us to be his agents in this ministry of redemption and love. Even though each of us and the church has issues, God still seeks to use us and to redeem us. Dare we submit and do what God wants us to do?