

# Not Them, Lord!

TEXT: Jonah 1:1-17

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 21, 2024*

There are many sermons that can come from any Bible passage you pick; but throughout this year I will invite you to put on your choosing glasses and look at each week's story through that lens. What are the choices made in the story? Why were they made? And what can we learn about our own lives and choices light of their decisions? "A Time for Choosing" is our theme for 2024.

My hope is that such a focus for a full year will enhance our own ability to choose both wisely and well. During Lent we'll explore the choices Jesus makes. For the weeks between now and then, we'll look at stories where the main characters made less than stellar choices and see how that worked out for them and for others. Which kicks off today with the story of Jonah.

Just in the last 15 minutes, we've heard almost every verse of the first half of the book that bears his name. The first chapter was the Scripture reading Joyce read and the second chapter was our morning prayer. The only verse you didn't hear is at the end of chapter two, and I left it out because that verse wasn't part of the prayer. That final verse of chapter two closes out the first part of the story: "And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." Lovely image to start your day.

For most people, if they are familiar with the story of Jonah at all, chapter one and the last line of chapter two is what they know, perhaps with the epilogue that, after that fishy experience, Jonah finally agrees to do what God asked of him. It's generally presented as a story about obedience to God, especially when taught to children in Sunday School.

I think obedience is a secondary theme in the book, but we're often lucky to even get there. Every time I've led a Bible study about the book of Jonah, at least one person derails even that secondary lesson by questioning fish and whale anatomy and whether it's possible for God to perform miracles. The only lesson to be learned from that debate is that taking the Bible literally is not helpful to Christian discourse.

The book of Jonah is not a lesson in ichthyology, and, while Jonah's disobedience does kick off the story, it's not really a story about obedience either. To see that clearly, we need to look more closely at the choices made in the book, from start to finish. What do the characters do and, more importantly, why do they do it.

The two main characters in the story are God and Jonah, with supporting roles played by some shipmates, a king and his people, and a giant fish. God is on stage first, making the first choice in the story. God chooses Jonah for a job: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Why did God choose Jonah for this job? Let's see what we know.

We know next to nothing about Jonah as a person. The only other place he's mentioned in the Old Testament is in 2 Kings 14:25 where he's identified only as a prophet, who once delivered a helpful message from God, in the court of King Jeroboam. That places Jonah and his story somewhere in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Jonah is also mentioned by Jesus, in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke, but the reference Jesus makes is to the symbolism of the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the fish, not anything about Jonah himself. Was Jonah a real person? Hard to say, but for the truth the story is trying to tell, it doesn't matter. Neither does it matter whether he was actually swallowed by a giant fish or a whale or an exceptionally-large goldfish. Believe what you want about all that. It's not material to the lesson of the book, and if you get stuck fighting about what is factual, you'll miss the fuller truth.

Suffice it to say that Jonah is not some famous prophet in Israel before this story and the passing mention of him in 2 Kings indicates that he carried out his prophetic duties faithfully but not remarkably. That leaves us with the question, "Why did God pick Jonah for this job?"

God's choice is especially puzzling because sending someone to confront the wickedness of Nineveh is an enormous task that seems more fitting for an Elijah-level prophet. We know quite a bit about ancient Nineveh.

Today, the ruins of Nineveh are in Iraq, on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, across from Mosul. Thanks to 2 Kings, we've already placed this story in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a time when Nineveh was a huge city of about 125,000 people, making it one of the four largest cities in the world at that time.

By the close of the 8th century, Nineveh had become the capital of the Assyrian empire, which boasted the most powerful military in the ancient world. Some believe that the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, were not in Babylon at all but were further north, in Nineveh. So, when God calls Nineveh, "that great city," in verse 1, it truly was.

As part of Assyria, Nineveh was in enemy territory for Jonah and the Israelites. We know from history both inside and outside the Bible that, in 722 BCE, Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel and demolished 10 of Israel's 12 tribes. And there were tensions and incursions before that full-on invasion. At the outset of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Homer was writing the *Odyssey*, Mesopotamia was developing music notation, the Chinese were hard at work making a steam-propelled cart, and the Egyptians were enhancing their sundials. And what was Assyria working on? Metal wheels for their chariots.

So, God's initial choice to send Jonah to convert an enemy city of 125,000 people with the most powerful military in the world is the prophetic version of sending the coffee boy. But, as we'll see across this year, God isn't always looking for those with the greatest resume, and so Jonah enters the chat. How does Jonah respond when he hears what God wants him to do?

The very next line says, "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish." This is *Jonah's* first choice in the book. So, for our purposes, the question here is why did Jonah run?

I thought there might be some insight to be gained from learning more about the city of Tarshish, where is where the ship Jonah gets on is heading. If there is something relevant, I couldn't find it. The potential locations for ancient Tarshish are all over the place, but all of them are quite far from both Israel and Nineveh, so Jonah wasn't just taking a less-conventional route to fulfill God's call.

We do know ancient Tarshish was central to the trade in metals; especially silver but also tin, gold, and iron. Their trading ships were almost synonymous with the city, and Israel—especially in the days of King Solomon—was a trading partner of theirs. Jonah's choice of boarding a ship to Tarshish might be as simple as knowing the city was not an enemy, was located far away, and had sea-worthy vessels.

But why not go to Nineveh? We learn in chapter one that the city is wicked, but telling the wicked to repent is usually in a prophet's job description. That's their jam. Why is Jonah on the run? Was he afraid of entering hostile territory or being seen as a traitor to his own people? Did he, like so many other prophets in the Bible, consider himself unworthy of the call? Chapter one is totally silent on his motives for running.

On the ship to Tarshish Jonah and the crew make some further choices. Once the sailors learn that Jonah is running from his god and that the storm is Jonah's fault, they're really distressed. Jonah tells them to just toss him overboard, but they don't want blood on their hands and instead try to row back to shore.

But that only made the storm worse. So, they pleaded with God not to hold them responsible for Jonah's death, and they threw him into the sea. The storm stopped. The sailors, who up until that point had been praying to other gods, change allegiance, and make sacrifices and vows to Jonah's God instead.

But Jonah is in the water and the ball is now in God's court. God could have let him drown and said, "Good riddance." But God opts to try for an attitude adjustment instead. God sends the fish and Jonah gets three days in a decidedly unpleasant environment to fully examine his life's choices. So ends chapter one.

Chapter two, gives us no new information on why Jonah ran from the call to go to Nineveh. But in his fish-belly prayer, which we used as our prayer this morning, it seems like Jonah is still on Team God, so God gives the fish indigestion and out comes Jonah on the beach. But Jonah's prayer doesn't even mention Nineveh or the call to

help them that landed him in this predicament in the first place. It's not an "I'm so sorry for disobeying you, I won't do it again" prayer. It's a "You are great and wonderful and won't you please get me out of this fish" prayer.

In chapter three, God repeats the call, asking Jonah to go to Nineveh. If I were Jonah's boss, I would have at least changed the assignment, if not given him a pink slip. Maybe going from obscurity to saving the largest city in the world was too big of a jump. Maybe a smaller city in a neutral town would be a better match. But that was not God's decision. God decided that it was Jonah who was required for the Nineveh job and re-issues the assignment.

This time, Jonah accepts, and if the story ended with chapter three, we'd have a story of one of the greatest prophetic achievements in Scripture. Jonah goes to Nineveh; and not only do we have no indication of hostility, the city flips on a dime. We're told that all of them, "from the greatest to the least," repent, and the king puts out a proclamation to that effect. God accepts their repentance and doesn't destroy Nineveh after all. It's the way Abraham hoped the story of Sodom and Gomorrah might have turned out.

If the story ended with chapter three, it would be an amazing tale of grace and redemption. From the sailors on the ship to the king and people of Nineveh, all are both physically saved and spiritually converted; Jonah steps up to the biggest challenge of his life and saves the largest city in the world from destruction without a drop of bloodshed, redeeming himself after his disobedience. How cool is that.

Unfortunately, there is a fourth chapter to the book. And it's here in chapter four that we finally hear from Jonah about why he ran from the assignment in the first place and, perhaps, why God chose him not once, but twice, despite Jonah's poor performance on the first try.

The whole scenario becomes clear in just four verses—the last verse of chapter three and the first three verses of chapter four. Here's the final verse of chapter three, immediately following Nineveh's repentance:

"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

Remembering that the original texts have no chapter or verse breaks, here are the first three verses of chapter four:

"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, 'Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'"

Those four verses right there are the key to it all. Jonah wasn't afraid to go to an enemy city. Neither did he think himself unworthy of the calling. Jonah was simply incapable of loving his enemy and was mad that God didn't adopt Jonah's enemies as God's own. Jonah ran because he *wanted* the destruction of Nineveh. He *wanted* their dead bodies floating down the Tigris River. He *wanted* their city engulfed in flames.

But he knew who he was dealing with—the God of Israel; a God "slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." For those who keep insisting that the God of the Old Testament is nasty and violent, that doesn't describe the God Jonah had pledged himself to serve. He knew God would spare the city if they changed their ways, which is exactly why he refused the call to warn them of the danger they were in.

God arm-twisted him—or whale-twisted him—into going, and now Jonah is absolutely furious that they listened and God saved them. He's so mad about the salvation of his enemies that he would rather die than live with the knowledge that he had a hand in sparing the city.

And now we see what may have motivated *God's* choices. The God who would save Nineveh has—all this time—also been trying to save Jonah. To save him from his hate; to free him from himself. But it's not easy.

God follows up, "Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks him.

Jonah doesn't answer. Instead, he heads to the east of Nineveh, makes himself a shady shelter and pouts. But God is exactly as Jonah has described, and God goes to Jonah's little lean-to and makes a lovely big-leafed plant grow up to provide more shade for Jonah. This is desert country after all. Jonah is very happy and grateful for the plant.

But, while God is gracious and kind, God is not a doormat. The plant is just temporary. The next morning, God sends a worm to eat the plant, and it dies just as quickly as it grew. Then God shows up in a hot, scorching wind, and Jonah is back repeating his line from the day before “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

God responds to this, much as he did to the first time Jonah said it, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

This time Jonah does respond, “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

And then comes the moral of the story; spoken in the form of a question by God to his petulant prophet. These are the very last lines of both chapter four and the book:

“But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?’”

Jonah is not a book primarily about obedience to God’s commands. It’s a book about learning to see even your enemies as worthy of God’s care and concern. Jonah is the only character in the whole story who refuses any change whatsoever. The people on the ship switch gods after seeing the power of Jonah’s god in the storm. The largest city in the world repents in an instant, which makes God pivot to save rather than destroy them. Even the giant fish has second thoughts and barfs up Jonah on the shore.

But Jonah’s heart is a stone. He changes some behavior in order to save himself from further maritime disasters; but there is no inner change in him at all. He starts the story by trying to avoid any help to his enemies and ends up pouting in the hot sun, wishing he were dead, because God had the audacity to love and save those who Jonah wanted obliterated. God keeps coming back and giving Jonah more chances to see and understand and change. Jonah remains unmoved to the bitter end.

Jonah doesn’t get a chance in the book to respond to God’s final question in the story. The question is left to hang in the air and travel through the millennia to us. We get mad at the slightest inconvenience to ourselves, we pray to God for safety and protection, while hoping that our enemies will be left to die. We’re mad when someone saves them; we try to avoid having any role in their aid, no matter how dire their circumstances.

If given the chance we will gladly level their homes and cities, fill the river at our border with razor wire, let the toxins fill the air closest to them, poison their drinking water, burn their grain and salt their fields, leave them to drown in the flood. We will pass laws to forbid feeding their hungry, giving water to their thirsty, or providing shelter from the ravages of weather. We run from God’s call even to convert them from enemies to allies. Nope. Not them, Lord. I’d rather die.

We may have enemies for very real and understandable reasons. Maybe Jonah had some horrific experience with Assyria’s metal chariot wheels; we’re not told how his hate came to be so all-consuming. The story doesn’t focus there. God is not asking Jonah to go live in Nineveh and invite them to dinner at his house. But God is asking Jonah to realize that God’s compassion goes where our own sometimes can’t; and, that in God’s eyes even if not in our own, every living thing in Nineveh, human and animal alike, are sacred and therefore worthy of basic dignity, care, and the grace of God.

“Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Loving our enemies is perhaps the biggest challenge God asks of us. Even a lifetime might not get us there. But the first step in that direction is to at least allow God to love them; to acknowledge that, yes, God should have concern for the great city of Nineveh, even though we may wish that wasn’t the case; that God can rescue them without incurring our wrath.

That’s not the whole journey, it’s just a step. It’s the choice to allow our enemies at God’s table, even if they still are not welcome at ours. Jonah couldn’t go even that far. Can we?

Amen.