

THE MINOR PROPHETS – THIS IS OUR GOD

A Great Big God – Jonah

We're in a series on the Minor Prophets. I'm grateful to Seidel who kicked us off a couple of weeks ago, by speaking on Amos. If you've studied the programme, you might have noticed we're not going through the books in the order they appear in the Old Testament. The first minor prophet in the Bible is Hosea, and we spent some time with him earlier in the year. The next minor prophet is Joel, but today I'm going to speak from Jonah!

We will cover all of the other minor prophets, but in a different order than the biblical order. The order we're going to be following in this series revolves around to whom the books were written. So, we go with firstly the books written to Israel, particularly Hosea and Amos – which we've already done. Next, the ones written to Assyria: Jonah and Nahum. Next, the ones written to Judah: Micha, Joel, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Obadiah, and then the ones written to what we'll call a better Israel, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi. And I am hoping we'll see more of one about whom we say: 'This is our God'

This is a challenging series. It's challenging because, as Seidel pointed out, it's hard to do just one talk on each of these prophets. It's challenging because these are ancient texts, written to people very different from us, living in a very different time to us... who understood the world, God and their places as God's people, very differently to the way we might understand these things. But we come to these books because this is the Bible God is happy for us to have, and because we believe that, in and through the pages of this book, God is present.

So, today, Jonah.

Some people read the book of Jonah believing it's a story that actually took place in history. They come to it as a story of real events. Others read the book of Jonah as a parable. As a parable, the events described in the book are not actual historical events, but a story to make a point. If you were to ask me if the book is describing actual historical events or is more like a parable, my answer would be this: 'It doesn't matter, because it's true!'

Ultimately this is a book about truth and about God.

Today, there are two stories in the book of Jonah to inspire us, challenge us, and see this is our God.

Story number 1. Jonah

Jonah 1 v 1 -2

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Jonah is a prophet and he is a prophet in Israel. In 2 Kings 14 v 25, Jonah prophesies to king Jeroboam that God will give him back the northern border of Israel from the Arameans, and its territory on the east of the river Jordan. When Jeroboam is successful, Jonah is celebrated.

Jonah is steeped in Israel – it’s history and its people, and it appears from 2Kings, that God has used Jonah to prophesy to Jeroboam that God will restore what Israel has lost.

Perhaps another way of saying that is to say that God had used Jonah to remind the people of Israel that he is ‘for’ them. And that captures Jonah’s world view, and the world view of the people of Israel at that time. God is ‘for’ his people, and his people are the people of Israel. For Jonah and for Israel, the chosen people of God doesn’t included anybody else. God is ‘for’ Israel.

In some ways, the opening words God speaks to Jonah confirm what Jonah already believes. God says to Jonah: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh...’ God says the city of Nineveh is great! In its time Nineveh was a large city – the city walls were eight miles in circumference, in that sense, Nineveh was a great city.

Nineveh, though, for Jonah was the symbol of Assyrian power. Assyria was the powerful nation of the age. Assyria was ruthless in conquering its surrounding nations. Assyria had invented new, more barbaric ways to kill their enemies and show other nations who was in charge. Assyria treated its own people with staggering cruelty: people had their ears, noses and lips cut off for relatively minor offences. People who committed capital offences were usually skewered on poles and left to die slowly on the city walls.

And their enemies...Assyria pioneered mass deportation. Assyria skinned their captives alive and made mountains of severed heads. In that sense great, really meant terrible.

God says to Jonah: ‘Go to Nineveh and preach against it because they are wicked!’ Jonah knew that. Israel knew that!

For Jonah and Israel, Nineveh was the symbol of something else too: Assyria was a threat to Israel. Assyria was a threat to the people of God – and therefore, a threat to everything God has said and done. Oh... and as an aside, while Jonah (who is from the Northern Kingdom of Judah) is told to go to Nineveh and preach to them.... A prophet called Amos (who is from the southern kingdom of Judah) is told to prophesy in Israel! God, it seems, wants to challenge both the people of God and their enemies.

Jonah, we are told, ran away, went to the port of Joppa and paid for a one-way ticket to Tarshish – and who can blame him! Go to Nineveh and preach against it, that great city with all it symbolises, or go to Tarshish. It is, of course, easy for us to rush to a judgement of Jonah because we know what Jonah doesn't – we have the whole story. Or, just maybe, that is the point. Jonah somehow, in some way, also knows the end of the story.

Perhaps, somewhere deep in his heart, Jonah knew all along how this story would turn out. He was told to go to Nineveh and preach against it, but perhaps he also knew that if Nineveh and its people were to listen to him and turn to God, God would do the unthinkable.

Its easy to think that Jonah ran in completely the opposite direction to the one God had told him to go, because Nineveh was a very threatening city and Jonah feared for his life. And maybe there's a lot of truth in that. But, perhaps, he ran because he really, far more deeply, didn't like what God might do. Actually, it went against everything he believed. Israel was God's people. Nineveh was an idolatrous, sin ridden city that stood against Israel and against God.

Jonah believed, Jonah's theology, limited God to God's covenant people. Jonah opts to go to Tarshish – which was about a year's journey in the opposite direction. Jonah, it seems, is not in a hurry to embrace what God is really like.

Fast forward to Jonah chapter four. Nineveh repents, God forgives, Jonah is not happy. Jonah is cross with God because God did what Jonah had feared all along – he relented.

God, it appears, changed his mind – you can understand that however you want to. Jonah wanted God to destroy Nineveh – that's why he ran to Tarshish. In his own words:

Jonah 4 v 2

² 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.

Jonah builds a shelter from which he can watch the destruction of Nineveh because he refuses to believe God would forgive the Assyrians. Chapter four is a conversation between Jonah and God in which Jonah simply refuses to extend God’s grace towards the lives of others. Jonah is happy when God extends his grace to his own people – the people God chose – Israel. But Jonah complains when God chooses to extend his grace to those outside the borders of Israel, people Jonah doesn’t like, who do not do things God’s way.

In truth, part of what’s going on here is that Jonah is himself symbolic of the nation of Israel, the people of God. It’s not just Jonah who doesn’t like it – its what’s going on in Israel too.

As far as we know, by the end of the story of Jonah, he is still angry with God. Maybe, Jonah, the bringer of God’s grace to Nineveh, needs God’s grace just as much as Nineveh does. And maybe, the truth be told, so does Israel, the people of God.

Story number 2

God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh, because his heart is for them and he wants to rescue them from their wickedness. He watches as Jonah makes a dash for Joppa, buys an expensive ticket for Tarshish, and gets on a boat. Jonah attempts to hide in the boat, even to the point of falling asleep in a massive storm.

Jonah, in his desire to avoid God’s call, has forgotten that there is no place he can hide from God, there is no place where he is outside God’s presence, or his love. But Jonah is stubborn, so God gets creative. A violent storm frightens the sailors who seek the help of their gods to no avail. So, Jonah fronts up to the truth and tells the sailors to throw him overboard. Reluctantly they do, and when the storm immediately stops, they have a worship time, thanking Jonah’s God for saving their lives.

God chuckles, that even while running away, Jonah manages to show them his grace and love – although Jonah probably doesn’t see it that way!

God is not done – even if Jonah thinks he is. Summoning some rather extravagant transport, God rescues Jonah from the sea. Jonah has a change of heart, so God reminds him of the task. ‘Go to Nineveh and proclaim my message!’

God has not given up on Jonah or Nineveh. When Nineveh, its king and its people hear and respond to his message, God extends his grace to them. Jonah is really, really upset that God would do such a thing, but, even when Jonah is watching and waiting for the destruction of Nineveh and its people, God extends his kindness to him: he gives Jonah a leafy plant to give him shade.

In story number 1, Jonah’s story, only some people deserve God’s grace and love. In story number 2, God’s story, God does everything he can to extend his grace and love to all people.

In story number 1, Jonah’s story, God is only ‘for’ his people. In story number 2, God’s story, God is ‘for’ all people, even the enemies of God’s people.

In story number 1, Jonah’s story, it is the people of God who resist God’s grace and love. In story number 2, God’s story, it is the enemies of God’s people who accept God’s grace and love.

In some ways the book of Jonah ends unresolved. At the end of the book, Jonah is still angry with God, because God extends his grace to people he does not think deserve it. What would have been great, would have been for the book to have Jonah chapter five. But maybe there’s a good reason there is no Jonah chapter five. And maybe that’s because ending with chapter four, the writer is inviting us to write Jonah chapter five.

Maybe that’s exactly what we’re invited to do, and maybe the challenge for us is simply this: will we write chapter five continuing in story number 1, or will we write chapter five continuing in story number 2. And maybe God says: ‘You decide!’

Preached and Live streamed at Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 24th September 2023, by Rev. Ian Phillips.