

“Like Me” Jonah Series / Sermon 6: “Patterns of Love” / March 8, 2020

Key Texts: Jonah 1.1-16

Key Words: Sacrifice, Storm, Throw me in, Love, Pagans, Righteous anger, Wild, Uncivilized, Hound of Heaven

Summary: In these verses we see three patterns of love: the quite inadequate love of Jonah, the stronger love of the sailors, and the perfect love of our wild and uncivilized God. Don't miss the Jonah story as a love story!

(Video Bumper) Sometimes a sacrifice isn't really a sacrifice, right? Ever play that game? In fact, that may be what Jonah is doing in our story, making a sacrifice that wasn't really a sacrifice. We'll see. Anyway, for a lot of Jesus followers this is Lent, during which time some Jesus followers deny themselves something (preferably, something good) as a preparation for Easter. Now, if we actually practiced that here at CapCity, what would you be willing to sacrifice for God, really? I hope your answers are a little more God-honoring than ours. We'll get back to that ...

I guess we all have our stories. And I'll bet some of you can tell quite a few stories about how scary it was, or how close you came ... to dying. I've had a few close calls. Here's one, just a little connected to the Jonah story. Years ago, I was white-water rafting on the Youghiogheny River up in Pennsylvania. I'd been on the water quite a bit, so they gave me a one-man duck. And I was doing fine, lining up the boat for a rapid, when I got hit from the side by an out of control raft piloted by a bunch of kids. It turned me sideways as I hit the rapid. And, when I got to the bottom of the falls I leaned the wrong way and it flipped me into what is called a hydraulic. The water kind of spins and holds you down, under the water. It was actually beating me against the rocks on the bottom, kind of tore up my leg. Sometimes it's not easy to swim out of the hydraulic, so finally I was able to push off the bottom with my feet and escape sideways through the hydraulic. I came up spitting and gasping. I'm pretty sure that was the closest I've ever come to drowning. I heard someone say once that drowning isn't a bad way to go. I'm not sure I'd agree.

So ... it would take a whole lot for me to tell some guys to throw me out of the boat in the middle of a perfect storm. And that's where we are in the Jonah story. And listen, we won't “get” this part of the story if we only listen with our heads; we'll only get this part of the story if we listen with our hearts, and our emotions. And whether you are a Jesus follower or not, this part of the story is pretty challenging. So here it is.

This guy Jonah was a prophet; which means, God would sometimes give him messages somehow to convey to his people. And, if there really is a God, that kind of thing wouldn't be too hard for him. Anyway, God gave this prophet, Jonah, a message to convey to Israel's most bitter enemy, which was weird. And Jonah is like, “No way, God! I'm not going; I'm not doing it!” And instead of heading northeast, towards Nineveh, he jumps on a boat and starts heading west, the other way. And instead of just letting Jonah go, and sending someone else, God decides to smack Jonah upside the head. Did you ever watch NCIS? This is Gibbs smacking DiNozzo on the back of the head. So, God sends this storm that threatens to swamp the boat. And ... if there really is a God, that kind of thing wouldn't be too hard for him.

Anyway, the sailors were desperate to keep their boat afloat. And they knew there was something about this storm; it was ... unnatural. And they figured someone must have made one of the “gods” angry. So they cast lots, hoping the “gods” would help them ID the offending party, and the lots pointed to Jonah. So they start firing at Jonah: “Who the heck are you?! What have you done?! Who is your God?!” We talked about that stuff last week. And Jonah says, “I am a Hebrew, and I

worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land (obviously).” (Jonah 1.9) And the first part was true, the being a Hebrew part. I’m not so sure about the second part. Because, if Jonah really did “worship” that God as his “Lord,” he probably wouldn’t be dissing him by heading towards Nineveh.

Anyway, that’s where I’m going to pick up the story this morning. Verses 10 & 11. It says, “The sailors were terrified when they heard this (you know, the “I am a Hebrew, and I worship Yahweh, the God who made the sea and the land” part), for he had already told them he was running away from the Lord.” So they ask Jonah two questions, great questions. Question #1: “Why?! Why did you do it?” Hebrew scholars will tell you that their question is kind of like, “Are you brain dead!? Are you a total, freaking moron?!” Because, they kind of feel like they are in a rowboat with a guy who is asking God to send a lightning bolt to strike him dead. They are about to be ... “collateral damage,” the expendables. “Why did you do it?!” And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him question #2: “What should we do to you to stop this storm?” You see, they didn’t know much if anything about this Yahweh, this God who actually did seem to own the land and the sea. But they were getting a glimpse of his power. Now, if it had been one of their own gods, like a Baal or an Asherah, or as sailors, maybe a Poseidon or a Neptune, they might have some idea about what to do with this so-called prophet of God. But how would this “Yahweh,” this apparently terrifyingly powerful God respond?

And Jonah says – this is pretty weird – he says, “Throw me into the sea, and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault.” (Jonah 1.12) And they are like, “What!?” Did you see the movie, “The Perfect Storm”? George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg. Jonah says, “Just throw me into something like that, and it will calm ...” Really?!

Now ... is it, maybe, the first inkling that this Jonah starts caring for someone other than himself? “Throw me overboard, and ... at least you’ll make it.” “This storm isn’t on you, it’s on me. And it looks like I’m hosed either way. So, throw me in.” Maybe. Maybe this is the first hint of selflessness.

Or maybe ... maybe ... Jonah just wanted to die. There are times when dying doesn’t sound that bad, we think. Guilt can do that to you. A man can be carrying so much guilt and shame that it’s crushing him, killing him. So how do you think a prophet of God is going to feel when he is open rebellion against his God, the God of heaven, the God of both land and sea? Maybe Jonah knows that he deserves to die. So he’s like, “Just throw me in!”

Or maybe Jonah wanted to die for a different reason. This ... “God” ... was trying to force him to do something he literally hated. God says, “Go preach to the most brutal, evil people ... ever.” And Jonah is like, “No, God! They don’t deserve grace, they deserve hell! I’d rather die than do what you want me to do!” Kind of the ultimate “sticking it to God,” right? Ever felt anything akin to that. You know what God wants you to do, and we flat out hate the idea, so we dig in our heels and refuse? We live that way, sometimes.

Or maybe it’s not about dying. Maybe Jonah thinks if they throw him in he’ll make it to shore. Especially if the sea does grow calm. I mean, the sailors have been throwing stuff overboard to lighten the boat. Maybe he can latch on to something that floats and make it to shore. Or maybe if the storm does stop, maybe they’ll let me back in the boat.

At least ... at least Jonah is honest enough to admit the storm was on him. A guess, maybe. Guilt, maybe. A nudge from God, maybe. And at least, maybe, for the first time in the story Jonah is thinking of someone other than himself. And that's a start.

But the sailors aren't sure. Here's what it says, verse 13: "Instead (of throwing Jonah overboard), the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land. (They didn't want to mess with this ... "prophet of God.") But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they couldn't make it." Now, I don't know if they were conflicted? I hope they were! I mean, if someone told you to kill them, for whatever reason, I would hope you would look for an alternative! They are looking at murder, right! And even these pagans knew that murder was wrong! Even in their pagan world a man deserved a trial first.

And what if ... what if Jonah was yanking their chain? I mean, he had given them no other evidence that he cared about them at all. And, Jonah had identified himself as a prophet of Yahweh, the God of the land and the sea, the one who sent the storm. So, what if killing God's prophet actually made God even madder? What would you do?

So, it looks like they weren't too far from shore ... probably hugging the coast as they were heading west. So, instead of keelhauling the jerk, they start rowing for the shore, probably trying to get Jonah off their boat as fast as possible without killing him. But it doesn't work. Have you been on a boat in a real storm?

So, verse 14, they start praying. Good idea! And this time they're not praying to their wannabe gods, they're praying to Yahweh. It says, "Then they cried out to the Lord (literally, to Yahweh), Jonah's God. ("Yahweh") "O Lord," they pleaded, "don't make us die for this man's sin. And don't hold us responsible for his death. O Lord, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons." "So, we're not trying to diss you, God! He says he's your prophet, so we're just going to do what he says!"

"Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and ... and ... the storm stopped at once!" (Jonah 1.15) Which, if you think about it, ... was even scarier than the storm. I'm serious! What would you feel like if you realized you were in the presence of someone infinitely powerful ... and he was not ... tame? Because, ours is not a tame God, is he?

Well, it rocked their world. Verse 16: "The sailors were awestruck (awestruck) by the Lord's great power (no kidding!), and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him." Because ... how stupid would you have to be ... not to?

And that's as far as we'll take the story this morning. So ... so let's talk about love. Really ... let's talk about love. There are three characters in this part of the story: There's Jonah, there's the sailors, and there's God. Let's talk about the "love" of each one. Patterns of love ... sort of.

First, Jonah. Jonah doesn't do too well in this part of the story. In fact, Jonah doesn't do too well in any part of the story of ... Jonah. Which is one of the remarkable features of so many Bible stories. Those who wrote the Bible don't sanitize their "heroes." God's people are twits ... a lot. Kind of like us. Which is pretty cool, because it means there's hope for twits, like us.

But it is possible – not certain, but possible – that this really is the first time in the story that Jonah shows any heart, at all. Not quite love; but still heart. He says, "It's on me, guys! Throw me into the sea, and you'll be okay." I wouldn't exactly call it repentance. You don't hear Jonah telling God, "I'm sorry, God, I blew it. You're right, God, I'm wrong. My bad: I'll go where you want, do what you

want.” You don’t even hear, “Throw me into the sea, guys, because I deserve it. Go ahead and kill me, because I have disobeyed my God and I don’t deserve to live.” And if it sounds like I’m being mean to Jonah, just wait. We’ll discover that even when he does obey his “Lord,” later, he really doesn’t want to. To the last sentence of this little book Jonah stays peevish towards God.

In fact, it’s possible that Jonah was kind of like, “Go ahead, throw me in, kill me. Go ahead God, let me drown. That’s still better than preaching grace to people I hate!” Which would be awful! Is there anybody you hope God hates ... as much as you do? Is there anybody who will make heaven seem like hell if you see them there?

And it seems to me Jonah had another option, didn’t he? I’ve always wondered why he didn’t just jump. Maybe while their backs were turned, just jump overboard. I mean, he says, “If you want the storm to stop, you’ll have to throw me in!” What’s with that? Why dump it on them? If he knew the storm was on him, why force them to do something they’d have to live with forever. Just jump in. ... I don’t know. Maybe Jonah had this thing about drowning ... I get that. Or maybe he had this moral thing about suicide, although he was suggesting murder. Or maybe he was just a coward. Maybe I’d be too scared to jump, too. Would you?

Anyway, maybe – just maybe – this is the first time in the story Jonah thinks of someone besides himself ... and that is a start! It would be a start for some of you. There’s no indication he’s thinking about God, but maybe he is beginning to feel a little something for these sailors. The New American Standard is a very literal Bible translation. Here’s how it words verse 12. Jonah says to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.” It will calm -- “for you.” Because of me this storm is “on you.”

So, maybe it’s a start. Because he wasn’t doing so well before this. Jonah is on the boat because he didn’t want to preach to pagans. And these sailors are pagans too; not mean ones, but still pagans ... the kind of non-believers that are around us every day! Good guys, just not Jesus-followers. Jonah watched them pray to their wannabe gods while he refused to pray to the real God. He wasn’t doing so well. He’d watched them as they tried to save his life, even after he told them to throw him off the boat. They are acting way more noble than he has. He knew they were in the fix, not because of their sin, but because of his. So maybe he started feel something for these guys: some pity, maybe; some compassion? And that is a start. That may be where some of you guys need to start. Maybe you need to turn towards God ... not for your sake, maybe for the sake of the people you love.

And then there are the sailors, yanked into a story that would change their lives. I suppose it wasn’t their story, really. Some might call them “extras.” But ... the other hand, maybe it is their story, too. Because these “pagans” seemed to be pretty good guys. They certainly worked harder for the “common good” than this prophet of God. We talked about that a couple weeks ago. And they did everything they could to respect both this God, “Yahweh,” and this dork of a prophet. And when they got a glimpse of Yahweh, they did the right thing – they offered him a sacrifice and they vowed to serve him. Smart guys.

In fact, it’s a pretty good model for quite a few people today. At some point in your life you are going to come face to face with the God of heaven, this “Yahweh.” Maybe not in as dramatic a fashion as these sailors, but you’ll get a sense of his presence, and his power, and his grace. Guys, God is not tame, but he is good! And even if you are already a pretty good person, the appropriate response

when you come face to face with the real God is to offer him a sacrifice ... of yourself, and vow to serve him. And then ... your life will start to make sense.

But the real star of this ... love story is ... God, right? Even though some people push back against a God this ... uncivilized. I mean ...

- What kind of God would respond with such ... “fury” ... at one of his chosen ones? Wouldn't a “time out,” or maybe even some understanding and grace have been more civilized?
- And, what kind of a God would allow the storm to threaten not only the one who was dissing him, but the innocents around him too? I mean, a God this big, this powerful, this smart could have been a little more selective with his lightning bolts, right?
- And, bottom line, isn't this whole idea of an angry God, a wrathful God, a God who could kill ... isn't that whole idea rather barbaric and primitive? Wouldn't this storm – if it really was God driven – wouldn't the storm in itself call into question whether this “Yahweh” was worthy of sacrifice, and worship ... some of us who are more sophisticated, more cultured, more civilized, might ask ... foolishly?

Even though ... even though most of us would agree that there is such a thing as “righteous anger.” I mean, if nothing makes you mad, you're broken. If people disrespecting people, people abusing people, people bullying people doesn't make you mad, you are way too “civilized,” right? If you can't muster up some righteous anger when someone is messing with your wife, or your kid, or your grandkid, what's wrong with you?! So why wouldn't a perfectly good God get angry at sin, when sin messes up his kids? If God was apathetic towards our sin, how holy would he be, how just would he be? I don't want a “civilized” God! I don't want a God who doesn't care! I want a God who hates sin so much that someone has to die for it ... even if it costs him his Son.

But all that is kind of besides the point. The love of God is so clear and so powerful in this story. There's this Jonah, this rebellious, belligerent prophet. God had options. An apathetic God would have just let Jonah go. You see, the opposite of love is not anger; the opposite of love is apathy -- “I don't care.” Some parents won't set any rules for their kids, they won't enforce any rules for their kids, they won't let their kids suffer any consequences for breaking “the rules.” That's not love, that's apathy. Letting someone you love head down a path of self-destruction, without trying to stop them ... That's not love, that's apathy. Letting someone you love hurt someone else you love ... that's not love, that's apathy. And we do not have an apathetic God. We have a God who is quite capable of using some kind of storm to turn us around or grow us up.

Nor do we have a vindictive God. This storm is not some cosmic temper tantrum! “I am your God! You diss me, and I'll smoke you!” “You run from me, you drown.” You see ... we haven't gotten to the fish part yet. You see, God had already concocted this incredibly wild plan to rescue his rebellious, belligerent prophet. You see, the God who sent the storm also sent the fish. Sometimes he sends stuff that rattles us; but always he provides a rescue. Truth, and grace; truth, with grace.

So ... God has this wild, uncivilized love for Jonah. And he also has this wild, uncivilized love for these sailors ... he really does! I know, God allowed them to come into harm's way because of Jonah, right? But in the end, wasn't it worth it ... for them? I mean, if this “Yahweh” really is the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the land, and everything in them ... if he really was their Creator, and their Lord, too ... What would it be worth for them to make his acquaintance? At the end of this scene the sailors are awestruck by God's power – how cool is that! Finally, their eyes are opening! They offer Yahweh a sacrifice and they vow to serve him – how cool is that! You see, if you actually believe there really is a God, and there really is a life after this life – a heaven, and a hell; and if you actually believe that your relationship with God will determine the quality of your life in the

present, and the direction of your life after this life ... what would you not give for God to rattle you or anyone you love until they bend their knees to him as their Savior and Lord? A little smack on the back of the head would be more than worth it, right?

And what about the Ninevites. They are in the scene too. And God is loving on them with this storm too, right? In fact, in a way, they are the reason for the storm, aren't they? I mean, God gave Jonah a mission ... go preach to the detestable Ninevites ... this detestable people God still loved. That's why God was sending Jonah to them in the first place, right ... because he still loved them, and wanted to give them a chance? Jonah didn't get it. Jonah didn't want to preach God's grace to people like us, so he runs the other way. And because God still loved Jonah, and because God still loved these sailors, and because God still loved these wretched Ninevites, God sends a storm. Is that so hard to believe? I mean, if there really is a loving God, none of that would be beyond him, or too hard for him, would it? I mean, is this love story any harder to believe than in a God who loves us so much he would send his own Son to die in our place!

You see, we don't see, we don't feel what's at stake in the story ... for all of them, and for us. So it's hard for us to see this as a love story -- a wild, uncivilized love story. But it is! Guys, there are those who call God, "the Hound of Heaven." I know that sounds almost blasphemous, but it's kind of like God is this bloodhound on your trail, and he's relentless. He's the hound of heaven chasing after Jonah. He's the hound of heaven chasing after these sailors, even though they seem like they are just extras in the scene. He's the hound of heaven chasing after these Ninevites ... the kind of guys the rest of the world hates. But our God is not like the rest of the world. He's like the father of the prodigal, who never quits loving on his rebellious kids. He's like the shepherd who loses one sheep, and leaves the other 99 in the wilderness to pursue the one that is lost. He's the one who kept nudging you before you became a Jesus follower, and he's the one who keeps on nudging you even after you become a Jesus follower. He's the one who sent his own Son to die ... for you.

Guys, I don't hang on to too many of the old hymns, but there is one that always grabbed me. It doesn't use those words, but it's about the Hound of Heaven. It opens like this ...

O Love, that wilt not let me go,
 (ever; God will never quit on you)
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
 (Have you?)
I give Thee back the life I owe,
 (Why would you not?)
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

And ... one of my favorite Christian artists growing up was a guy named Michael Card. He was a serious Jesus follower, a fine musician, and so very reflective. He wrote songs you could chew on. He actually called one of his songs, "The Hound of Heaven." Here are some of the words. He says,

I fled Him down the nights and days
I fled Him down the path of years
 (Some of you know exactly what he means.)
I heard all about the love of the One
Who was following me ...
 (You heard about him, and you felt his presence)

I clung to every shallow friend

The whistling mane of every wind
 (We've all tried putting something else in his place)
I feared that once I tasted that love
I could never let go ...
 (Why do we fear that? But we do!)

I shouted to the sky so blue
Please hide me from this one so set on loving me ...
 (Good luck with that, hiding from the God who loves you so fiercely.)
Finally, I can flee no more
I yielded for Your open door ...

Guys, your legs are too short to run from God. Listen: There is nothing you've ever done that will make him love you less ... nothing! And there's nothing you could ever do to make him love you more, than he does already. For some crazy reason, our wild, uncivilized God wants to do life with every single one of us ... right now, for now, and forever. Thank God.

Maybe you are scared that if you surrender to God your life will be worse. We can be so stupid! Maybe you are afraid that if you surrender to your Creator he'll get it wrong, for you. That he can't be trusted. Maybe you are afraid that if you surrender to this incredibly powerful God he will not be committed to your good, and your joy. Well, a God who will suffer for you, and die for you ... he's worth living for.