

Like Me Series (Jonah) / Series Intro / February 2, 2020

Key Texts: Jonah 1.15, 17; 4.1, 6, 9-10

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Summary: This sermon opens up our Jonah series called “Like Me.” Jonah is way more than a “fish story.” It’s a story about a very flawed man, a very bad people, an extraordinarily good and gracious God, and ... it’s a story about you (and me).

So, this little book called Jonah shows God’s heart ... for all people. And it shows how God will work with and through incredibly flawed people ... like me. And that’s why we’re going to spend from now till Easter digging through this tiny little Old Testament book of Jonah. But still ... 2 ½ months in Jonah? It’s such a tiny little book – just 48 verses. You can read the whole thing in 3 minutes, if you read really fast. Some websites say 8 minutes, some websites say 10. And we’re going to spend 2 ½ months in a book you can read in 10 minutes? But guys, ... there is so much in those 48 verses. It raises so many huge questions and challenges. It’s a rich little book. You’ll see!

But a lot of folks – some of you – may be kicking back a little. After all, it is an outrageous story, isn’t it? It’s kind of the fish story of fish stories. Do you remember the story? Jonah is on this boat, running away from the job God called him to do. This incredible storm comes up, threatening to swamp the boat. Jonah tells the sailors, “This storm is on me. If you want to save your boat, throw me overboard.” And it says, “They took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.” And then, here it is: It says, “Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1.15, 17) Till he repented of his running from God. So the fish spit him out, and Jonah goes where God sends him ... rather grumpily. And that’s all most people know about Jonah – the fish story part.

And ... I mean, I tell some whoppers, but this one does seem way over the top, right? In fact, Jonah is one of the reasons some people mock the Bible. I didn’t have to dig very far to find this post. It’s called: “Silly Bible -- The Fishy Tale of Jonah.” The writer says, “It’s sometimes fun to read through the Bible and work out which of the tales in it is the least plausible, the most pointless, the least well thought out, etc.” She says, “A strong contender for all three of these is the story of Jonah. It must rate alongside the Noah’s Ark and the Tower of Babel stories as the silliest.” ... A little later on she says, “The notion of a man being swallowed by a fish, remaining alive and untouched for three days could only have been written by someone having not the slightest idea of fish anatomy and physiology. What on earth did they imagine happens to the things that fish eat, and where did they think Jonah was going to get oxygen from? Jonah would have been dead from suffocation within a few minutes and would have been substantially, if not completely, digested within three days. There would be nothing to pray and whatever was vomited up onto a beach would be fit only for gulls and other passing scavengers.” Wow!

And, she does make a good scientific point! Which is why Jonah is one of the most well known, and most doubted stories in the whole Bible. It fascinates me how much time and

energy has been spent trying to figure out whether the “swallowed by a fish” part of the Jonah story is scientifically possible.

- This is from News24, Breaking News First. The article describes the digestive systems of fish. And the kinds of fish that might be big enough to swallow a man: Whale Sharks, Basking Sharks, Great Whites, Groupers, Sperm Whales. Bottom line – according to the article, Jonah’s not coming out alive.
- This one is from AskSmithsonian: “Could a Whale Accidentally Swallow you?” Their answer, “Maybe, but you’re hosed.” They even rip apart a fish story from the early 1900s that claimed a Sperm Whale actually did swallow a man whole, and when they caught it, and cut it open, he was alive. Their conclusions ... Uh uh! Didn’t happen!

But trying to establish the story as scientifically plausible kind of misses the point, doesn’t it? That kind of misses the point of a ... of a “miracle.” There’s a really old joke about a kid telling his parents about what he learned in Sunday School. Mom says, “What did you learn today?” The kid says, “Well, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When they got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.” His mom is like, “What!? Is that really what your teacher taught you?” And the kid says, “Well, no. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you’d never believe it!”

You see, I don’t really care if they can prove “scientifically” that there really is a fish that can swallow a man whole, and spit him out 3 days later, and he survives. What I care about is ... what I can about is whether there really is a God. And I think there is. The idea that this universe just popped into existence, on its own, out of nothing ... now that’s crazy! Way crazier than the fish story in Jonah! The idea that everything that is just gradually morphed into what it is now, on its own, without a designer – that takes way more faith than I’ve got!

Because, you see, what I care about is whether there really is a God. Because, unless your God is really, really puny, if there really is a God, then you can’t discount the possibility of a miracle, can you? I mean, the God who spoke this universe into existence with a few words ... well, do you really think pulling off a fish story like the one in Jonah would be too hard for him? Seriously?!

Because, in reality, every miracle – every miracle -- is a fish story, isn’t it? The reason we call them “miracles” is that they are not normal, they are not natural, they cannot be accounted for “scientifically.” A virgin birth, walking on water, stilling a storm with a word, healing a man lame from birth by touching him, raising the dead ... being raised from the dead ... Every one of them is just as scientifically implausible as the fish story in Jonah, aren’t they? But if there really is a God ... And if that God really is omnipotent ...

But here’s the deal, maybe this fish swallowing Jonah and spitting him out 3 days later is not what the story is really about. Maybe the miracle part is kind of little. Listen guys, don’t get so wrapped up in the “fish story,” that you miss the incredible lessons, the incredible gems of this little book! The story isn’t about the fish! Maybe it’s really about a guy ... like me; about a guy ... like you.

This Jonah, this “prophet of God,” really is so much like me. Not because I’m like this “prophet of God”! He’s like me because he’s a jerk. He has these encounters with God ... like I have had. And he handles them quite poorly sometimes ... like I have, sometimes. And God kept blessing Jonah repeatedly ... like God has blessed me, repeatedly. And Jonah was incredibly ungrateful ... like I have often been. And when God removed his blessing, a blessing he didn’t ask for, a blessing he didn’t appreciate, he gets ticked at God ... go figure.

And I’ll bet, you’ve been there too. You have had encounters with God, whether you recognize them as such, or not. And sometimes you handled them quite poorly, like Jonah. And I know God has blessed you repeatedly, and I also suspect you have been incredibly ungrateful at times, like Jonah. And when God removed some blessing from you ... a blessing you didn’t ask for, a blessing you didn’t appreciate, I suspect you’ve gotten ticked with God ... like Jonah. His story is our story ... so there are things we need to see ... and learn.

But ... but maybe it’s not just the story of a very flawed man, used by God. Maybe it’s also about a people who desperately needed God. And that’s the part of the story that grabs me most: really, really bad people, hated by Jonah, but loved by God.

Now I’m not going to spend much time this morning unpacking the historical context of this little story, or telling you about the city of Nineveh, and the Assyrians who lived there. What I will tell you is that these people were flat-out bad; they were flat-out evil! They were the worst. You know those pictures you have seen of Isis “soldiers” cutting off the heads of their enemies? Well the Assyrians left carvings. Skinning their prisoners, and pulling out their tongues. Stripping their bodies and impaling them on poles. By the way, this was a picture of Assyrians brutalizing Israelites. Cutting off their hands, and their feet. Piling their heads in mounds or putting them on stakes like some totem pole.

And God says to Jonah, “I want you to go to Nineveh and preach to these guys.” Now, what would you tell God, if you were Jonah? What would you tell God if you knew there was a real possibility that your head would end up on one of those poles? What would you tell God if he told you to go preach to the people who had been terrorizing your friends, your neighbors? “I want you to go to Baghdad, I want you to go to Teheran.” We’ll dig deeper into the historical context next week.

Bottom line, these were bad people, and Jonah hated them ... with a righteous hate, he figured. Have you ever hated anyone before? I’m not talking about someone who annoys you, or someone you don’t get along with, or even someone you deeply dislike. I’m talking about hate. Have you ever hated anyone before? So much so that you would prefer they go to hell. You would prefer they never, ever ... taste ... God’s grace. God’s grace on them would be wrong to you. God saving them would be offensive to you. I think maybe I have ... hated ... and it’s an embarrassing, ugly thing ... for a Jesus follower.

So, when God sends Jonah to preach to people he hated, he got really annoyed – really annoyed with God. Because guys, whenever you hate people you’re going to clash with

God! You see, I love it when God graces people I love. And I even love it when God graces people I am neutral towards. But have you ever resented God's grace towards someone you hate, or even towards someone you merely despise? Jonah did. Has that blasphemy ever crossed your mind: "God may forgive you, but I never will!" As if you are a higher judge than God!

So ... Jonah resented God. He resented God for sending him to preach to these Assyrians. He resented God because ... because he was afraid they'd actually listen to his preaching. Can you imagine that – a preacher hoping they wouldn't respond to his preaching?! You see, Jonah didn't want these really bad people to listen to God, to find God. He didn't want them to repent of their sins and get all forgiven like. He wanted them dead! "God you're doing it wrong! Grace is cool ... when people deserve it!" Which is how we think it, too often ... stupidly.

But ... but maybe this story isn't really about a big fish, and maybe this story isn't really about a flawed prophet, and maybe this story isn't really about a really, really bad people who needed saving. Maybe this story is really about God.

It's a story about how big God is, and the scope of his judgment. Did you know that someday every man, every woman, everywhere will stand before God – the one God, the God of Jonah, God our Father – and they will give an account, and he will determine their eternal destiny. That's what Jonah tells us. These Ninevites didn't even worship the God of Israel. They worshiped their own gods – they worshiped a whole bunch of puny wannabe gods. And the real God – our God – was calling them to repent. And, even though they hadn't acknowledged him as their God, for some reason they listened. Because whether they recognized it or not, he was their God too! And that's still the way it works. Listen – this is not politically correct, but it's God's truth. It doesn't matter whether you are a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or nothing at all ... someday you will stand before God, and Jesus will be there. And what happens next will depend on what you do with Jesus. That day is coming!

But there is a whole lot more we will learn about God from this little book. This one is huge: God wants all men to be saved. He wants all men saved! No exceptions. Even ... the worst of the worst. God wants all people to be saved ... no exceptions. Even those we'd rather see damned. The grace of our God is simply ... mind-blowing.

Oh, and one other piece. God wants us to give the same kind of grace we get. When you recognize how God has graced you, it is absurd when you refuse to let him, or help him grace others. Here's what happened in the story. After "God saw what (the Assyrians) they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, and (God) changed his mind (he changed his mind ... we'll get back to that one; God changed his mind) and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened," (Jonah 3.10) Here's how Jonah responds. When the Ninevites "repent," Jonah is ticked. It says, "Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of

forgiveness! So, God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!" (Jonah 4.1) How's that for incredible?

So, Jonah goes off and pouts, and mopes, and sits there eating dirt. And it says, "God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant." (Jonah 4.6) And then the next day this worm chews on the plant and it withers. And then it gets hot, really hot. And God sends this blistering wind to make Jonah miserable. And Jonah prays to die. Weird story, isn't it?

And here's how the story ends. God says to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" (Jonah 4.9-10) In other words, how dare you! How dare you receive my grace and then refuse to give it! Where's your gratitude. You didn't deserve it either!

Guys, I'm looking forward to digging through Jonah. I think it's going to be great study for us, incredibly challenging. It's way more than a fish story. It's about God using a very flawed man, like me. And it's about God loving on incredibly evil people. It's really a story about the amazing power and grace of God. And ... I suppose, it's really a story about me ... and you ... "Like Me"

- It's about how big our God really is. Do you really believe in God?
- It's about how we respond when God nudges. Because he will ... he does ... how do you respond?
- It's about what we think of God's grace ... towards us, and towards them. Are you stingy with grace?
- It's about whether we think God really responds when we pray. Do you really think God ever "changes his mind"?

One last thing. In chapter 2 we read Jonah's prayer ... his prayer prayed inside the fish. He prays these words: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry ..." (Jonah 2.2) It goes on for 7 more verses, a powerful prayer. Now ... How would anybody know what Jonah prayed? No one else was there. There were no hidden cameras, no hidden microphones, no cell phones, no Alexa. Here it is: At some point later Jonah had to tell someone about it, right? Jonah had to tell someone his sordid story. About his running from God, about his hatred of those God still loved, about his annoyance with God's grace and God's ways.

What a remarkable honesty! How authentic does a man have to be to tell a story like this on himself? How courageous does a man have to be to own it. Well ... I want to be like that too. I want you to be like that. That authentic, that honest with God, that courageous. You see, God can't heal what you won't be honest with him about. He knows anyway, just have the courage to be ruthlessly honest with God.

That's what this Lord's Supper is all about – getting honest with God. Every one of us is a sinner, offered grace. Every one of us deserves nothing, and is offered life with God for now, and for forever. “On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it.” (1 Corinthians 11.23-25)