

## **Jonah means...**

First in a series of four sermons on Jonah

A sermon preached at

Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

Edmonton, Alberta

October 5, 2014

by Carol Penner

Text: Jonah 1:1-16

In Hebrew, Jonah means dove. The dove is a gentle little bird that turns up over and over again in scripture. Noah released a dove at the height of the flood; the dove brought back an olive branch, a sign of hope in an anxious time. In Isaiah doves are described as mourning and lamenting. And in the temple, doves were used for sacrifices; Jesus' parents brought two doves to the temple after he was born. And of course when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit took the form of a dove, coming down from heaven. The Psalmist writes, "Oh that I had wings like a dove [a Jonah]."

Dove...it's a funny name for a man. Jonah's father's name is also interesting. His name was Amittai, which means truth. What does the story of a man named Dove, son of Truth, offer us today?

The whole premise of my four-part sermon series on Jonah is that there is good news for us here in this book. People have been reading it for a couple of thousand years and finding meaning in it, so I think it is worth a sermon series. We still here references to Jonah today in our culture. Eugene happened to be reading a book this week where the sailors in the book wonder whether there is a Jonah in their midst. And this week I read a book entirely devoted to showing how Jonah as a story has survived in many ways. It's called *A biblical text and its afterlives: the survival of Jonah in modern culture* by Yvonne Sherwood (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

I think there is good news here, but I want to tell you right off the bat that I am not going to tell you what Jonah means, even though that is what my sermon title might suggest. You have to notice the dot, dot, dot after the title. There is a rich history of interpretation of this book, Jonah has meant many things to many people over the centuries. I don't think there is one meaning for Jonah, the story is too rich for that. So if I'm not going to tell you what it means, what am I going to do? I'm going to invite you to approach this story with a question. And that is "What good news does the story of a man named Dove have to offer to us today?" I will share some of the good news I find, and I hope you will share your thoughts with me.

As we start to look at this story, there is an elephant in the room. When something is very obvious and awkward and hard to talk about, we refer to that topic as "the elephant in the room". In the story of Jonah the elephant in the room is actually a whale. Or to be textually accurate, "a big fish". Some readers of the story of Jonah have reduced the whole meaning of Jonah to a debate about whether or not a person could really be swallowed by a whale, and live for three days in its belly. This is actually a very modern topic, and for those who are preoccupied with it, the book of Jonah becomes a test of orthodoxy as to whether or not you believe in its literal truth.

I don't find that approach to Jonah particularly compelling. Believing in Jonah is not in the same category as belief in God, and it reduces the whole of Jonah to a few small verses about a fish. I don't want to take that approach. Other people take a different approach. They too focus on the verses about the big fish. But they decide that Jonah is a fantastical, somewhat ridiculous little story useful only for making cartoons and veggie tale movies for kids. Neither approach does the story justice.

I hope we can approach the story with curiosity and an open mind. In our reading of this book in the coming weeks, I hope that we don't try to reduce Jonah to a pithy little nugget that we can put in our pocket. It's polyvalent...it has many meanings; it's a story that can journey with us, because it's a story about a journey. A journey that involves storms and amazing creatures and amazing conversions in foreign lands. It's a big picture story that points to God and the nature of creation. I hope you are as excited as I am to be taking flight with Jonah.

What does a man named Dove have to tell us?

Well who was this Jonah? We are told in II Kings 14:23-29 that Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam II was king of Israel for 41 years, from 786 to 746. II Kings says that he was an evil king because he did not worship God faithfully. Yet in spite of this, God prospered Israel during this time.

Jonah was a prophet sent by God to tell the king the good news that he would be successful. The king would have always been happy to see Jonah with a message like that! And Jeroboam II was very successful in battle, expanding Israel by regaining some lost territory, even capturing the rich city of Damascus. He was also able to fend off Assyria. Assyria was a big, bad, powerful enemy that was perched and ready to swoop down to conquer Israel.

Jonah had the privilege of seeing his country flourish, and get stronger. You can imagine Jonah's feeling of pride in his country, and his joy that God was helping it increase. He probably loved being a messenger with good news for his people.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'" That's the first verse of the book of Jonah, and it's the first we hear about this part of Jonah's prophetic career. II Kings doesn't mention that Jonah was sent to Nineveh.

Nineveh was the largest city in Assyria, a country to the north-east of Israel, in what is now Iraq. Archeologists have found the ancient ruins of Nineveh close to the modern day city of Mosul. At the time of Jonah, Assyria had been plaguing Israel and its neighbours for over 100 years. The rulers of Assyria: Tiglath Pileser, Shalmanezar, Sargon; these names struck fear into everyone's hearts.

Assyria was the country that prided itself on its cruelty. They believed that the best offence is a horrific offence. When they invaded a country, they didn't just kill people, they tortured them slowly and dismembered them, piling up body parts for everyone to see. They took great care in recording what they did. They made stone monuments depicting these atrocities, so conquered people could see it and weep. They also wrote descriptions of their battle tactics on stone tablets, which we can read even today. I read transcripts of some of them...they are absolutely horrifying! If Assyria was charged with crimes against humanity in the world court, it would be found guilty again and again. I think if Israel had known the term "axis of evil", they would have used it to describe Assyria.

Assyria's wickedness was so great, that God decided to do something about it. He decided to send Jonah his prophet to give them a message.

Notice from the text that he does not send Jonah to say, "I am about to destroy you and there's nothing you can do about it." All Jonah is supposed to tell the Ninevites is that God is watching them. The power of a gaze is something we are familiar with. The child sees the plate of cookies on the table and they know they are not supposed to take one. They reach out their hand, but the mother watching from another room only has to say "ah,ah,ah..." as in "I'm watching you!" and the child's hand slowly retreats from the cookies. Or on a wider scale, on TV we've been watching the demonstrations in Hong Kong. Will China crack down on the protestors? The presence of people holding up their cellphones taking videos signifies that the eyes of the world are watching. The authorities know there will be repercussions if they are cruel and violent.

Jonah, God's prophet, is supposed to tell Nineveh that God is watching. What does Jonah do? Instead of starting the 500 mile journey east to Nineveh, Jonah flies in the opposite direction. He goes west till he hits the sea at Joppa (we may know that port as Jaffa, or Haifa). There Jonah buys what must have been a very expensive ticket on a boat going to Tarshish. That's a city 2500 miles from Israel, on the very eastern edge of the Mediterranean world.

Later, in chapter 4, we get Jonah's reasoning for why he fled. He says, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Jonah doesn't want God to forgive Nineveh. He doesn't want Nineveh to get the chance to repent. Nineveh is Israel's arch enemy. Prophecy to Israel? No problem, Jonah was happy to present that good news message. But prophesying to Nineveh was beyond the pale. Jonah wanted them to be destroyed. It was the patriotic way to feel! What would Jonah's friends at court say to him, if he helped Nineveh prosper in any way?

Jonah is so determined to not prophesy to them that he gets on a boat and heads full-speed in the opposite direction. It's noteworthy that Jonah goes to sea. Have you ever noticed that there are no stories about Israelites going to sea? (Unless you count Noah.) Israelites were a land-based people, who were terrified of the ocean, they saw it as a very dangerous place. The fact that Jonah goes to sea, shows how desperate he really was.

Jonah gets on the boat and a hurricane comes up. There is a saying, "Let those who do not know how to pray, go to sea." And this story proves the rule. The sailors are all crying to their gods, and the captain shakes Jonah awake, imploring him to call on his God. Does Jonah pray to God? No! He's the exception that proves the rule, it seems.

The sailors cast lots, trying to find out who was causing this storm. The lot falls on Jonah. They turn to him and ask him urgently, "What is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? Of what nation are you?"

We, like the sailors, are waiting for Jonah to speak. What will Jonah say? Will he admit who he is and what he is doing on the boat? Jonah has a couple of choices here. He can choose to say nothing. Or he could lie and say, "I don't have a clue why this is happening." He feels that if he does this, the storm will claim the ship, taking him and all the sailors to a watery grave.

But Jonah, son of truth that he is, does not tell a lie. He tells them, “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” The sailors are aghast. “What have you done?” they cry to Jonah. Why would anyone try to flee from the God who made the sea, by getting on a ship?

The statement that Jonah makes about worshipping God is revealing. Jonah has not had a loss of faith. He believes in God. He knows he has disobeyed God. But significantly, we still don't see Jonah praying. This would be the time for the prayer that Rudy Wiebe talked about in his sermon before Christmas. A short, powerful prayer, “God be merciful to me, a sinner”. Why doesn't Jonah pray for mercy, why doesn't he call on God to save them?

He doesn't do that because Jonah is unrepentant. He wants Nineveh to be destroyed by God, to get the punishment it deserves. He would rather die than see them saved. In the face of the sinking of the ship, Jonah realizes that he is an albatross around their neck. The storm is sent for him, and yet they are suffering from it. And so he confesses who he is, and he tells them to throw him overboard. Jonah goes from being an albatross to being a dove, a messenger of hope, who tells them how to save their lives.

To the credit of these fine pagan sailors—they don't want to do this. They want to save Jonah's life in addition to their own. They don't want to throw a prophet of the God who made the sea into the sea, not when they themselves are in this sea-tossed boat. They try to row to shore—impossible! And when they face death as the waves rise higher and higher, they pray again, this time to God of the Hebrews, “Do not hold the life of this innocent man to our account.” Basically, “We're just doing what he told us to do! And they pitch him overboard.

Jonah sacrifices himself to save the sailors. We might not get the reference here, but any Jewish person reading this story would immediately be nodding...Jonah means dove. And the purpose of the dove was for sacrifice.

As soon as Jonah goes overboard the sea stops raging. All the sailors are “filled with the fear of the Lord” and they make sacrifices and they make vows to the God of Jonah.

We've come a long way in this first chapter, from the dry land to the sea, from obedience to disobedience, from unbelief to belief, from life to the edge of death. Jonah who in the beginning of the chapter refuses his role as prophet, by the end is on a ship in a storm, prophesying that God is Lord, and that the sailors will live if they throw him overboard. People all around him are turning to God. Jonah the prophet is being successful in spite of himself.

Can we find ourselves in the story so far? Like Jonah, have you ever not wanted to follow a call that God has given you? I can relate to that story. I remember waiting outside a courtroom once. There were the people on our side of the case on this end of the hallway, and there were the people on the other side of the case on that end of the hallway. I knew the people at the other end of the hallway really well, and I really, really didn't like them.

And the word of the Lord, came to Carol, daughter of Jean, and God said, “Go talk to that person at the end of the hall.”

My reaction to that voice is “HA! They are the last person on earth I'm going to talk to!!!”

Again, that voice in my head, “Go talk to that person!”

“No way!” I say in my head.

Then the excuses come. “I don't have anything to say!”

“Go talk to that person!”

Then there's me trying to pass the buck.

"There are lots of other people who should be talking to that person, why should I do that!"

"Go talk to that person!"

Then there is me bargaining. "God, I will talk to any other person in the world. Just tell me who, but I will not talk to that person."

"Go talk to that person!"

There wasn't a ship heading for Tarshish nearby, or I would have bought a ticket right there and then. We are called, at times to be a Jonah. To be someone who bears a message of hope.

We are happy when God calls us to do that for people we love, we are gung ho about that. To tell our friend some piece of good news, that's no problem. Here I am Lord! Send me! But when it's to give good news to people we don't like, we head in the other direction. Like Jonah we balk at bringing hope to people who we see as the bad guys.

That's where it's important to remember who we are. When we are baptized, we take on Christ, our name becomes Christian, little Christ.

Jesus brought good news to many people's enemies. To the Roman centurion, to the prostitute, to the tax collector, the zealot, the leper. Not only that, Jesus brought good news to people who directly opposed him, who were his own personal enemies, who were actively plotting his death. To the scribes and Pharisees, and even to Judas.

You would think that even Jesus was tempted to board a ship to Tarshish when it came to seeing Judas in the garden on the Mount of Olives. Judas standing there with the soldiers in a mass behind him. Jesus tempted to give Judas the cold shoulder, to turn away, to have a "He's the last person I'm going to talk to" sort of attitude. But in Matthew's gospel Jesus lets Judas greet him with a kiss, and responds by calling Judas, "Friend" (Matthew 26:50). An olive branch of peace, a sign of Jonah even to the betrayer, the axis of evil among the disciples.

To be true to our name as Christians, we are called to get out of the boat to Tarshish, even if we've paid for our ticket and are all set to go. We see ourselves in Jonah sometimes.

Or maybe in today's story, what captures our imagination is the person of God. You could choose to view God as vengeful, punishing Jonah and all his innocent shipmates with death. You could find the story very disturbing. But if you read the story carefully, you see that the word punishment isn't used at all in the text. That's something you bring to the story.

I wonder if in this story God is more like the man in the Jesus' parable, who wants bread for his guests, and so he goes to his neighbour's house and knocks and knocks and knocks until he gets a reply. God keeps knocking on Jonah's door, no matter how many times Jonah tries to put a pillow over his head. Nineveh is hungry and God won't take no for an answer. Or God as the Syro-Phoenician mother whose daughter is sick, who keeps pestering Jesus to heal her, even after Jesus gives excuses. God wants to save Nineveh, he is desperate to save Nineveh, and so he is going after the man for the job. He will keep pestering Jonah till he takes the job. God cares for Nineveh. From God's point of view, Nineveh is suffering too. They are destroying themselves and they don't even know it.

Today we can find Nineveh everywhere. Here's a quote I heard last week: "There can be no reasoning—no negotiation—with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force." That's a quote from President Obama, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly. Maybe we see Nineveh in ISIL, beheading people and posting videos all over the internet. Nineveh was into beheading too...although they didn't have the internet to record it, they got the image out with chisels and stones. ISIL even occupies the same territory where Assyria was.

Or maybe we find Nineveh in the war machine, all those multi-national arms corporations who couldn't be happier than when wars break out and more dollars roll in. We can find Nineveh, the axis of evil, in the people making pornography, or in child traffickers, or in Mexican drug cartels, in Boko Haram kidnapping Nigerian schoolgirls. Or closer to home, conservative churches in North America might think that gays and lesbians are Nineveh. Or liberal churches think that conservative churches are Nineveh. Maybe it's the co-worker you can't stand who is always out to get you, or the family member who is always backstabbing. Nineveh is there to find, we each have our own personal axis of evil.

We live in a world that continually asks us to choose sides. The media paints a picture, us and them, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. We paint those pictures and gobble them up. Moral outrage is the order of the day, and if it makes you treat people in morally outrageous ways, well, they had it coming. In today's story, we can identify with Jonah, who has bought right into the choosing sides paradigm.

This week, maybe God is knocking on our hearts. Knocking and knocking. Maybe there's even a storm or two. Knocking to try and crack open that paradigm. No more us and them. Every person is God's beloved child. God wants us to find love like Jesus in our hearts, so that we can greet anyone we meet in the garden with the word "Friend". Here in our congregation we are challenged to be an enemy-less community.

What's going to happen this week? Will we head east or west, Tarshish or Nineveh? What does the man named Dove do? It's all in here [holding up a Bible], have a look. Come back in two weeks and we'll talk about what we found.