

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**When God Commands**  
**Jonah 1:1&2**

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Man's inhumanity to man is breathtaking. The worst carnage of all has taken place in the last hundred years: the Nazi holocaust that systematically murdered six million Jews; Joseph Stalin's reign of terror that eliminated twenty million Russians; Mao's slaughter of untold millions of Chinese; the Khmer Rouge Communists planting in the killing fields of Cambodia more than two million corpses; the Hutu killing frenzy in Rwanda.

Every time we witness genocide, we say, "Surely we've learned our lesson. Nothing like this will ever happen again." But it does. Even today in the Sudan, a massive genocide is taking place. And the world mostly ignores it.

There is a monstrous evil in those who destroy weaker people. But that brutal evil is nothing compared to the banal evil of bystanders who shrug their shoulders and allow evil to go on unchallenged. Edmund Burke said, "The only thing evil men need to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Last week 26-year-old Thomas Scantling boarded a Philadelphia subway train with his 5-year-old son. He calmly pulled a hammer out of his backpack and began to beat sleeping passenger, Dewayne Taylor. He continued that savage bludgeoning until the train reached its next stop. As Mr. Taylor stumbled out onto the platform, Scantling followed to beat him some more. But, as shocking and senseless as that act of violence was, the real evil was in the fact that ten riders watched and did nothing. One passenger even closed his eyes and nodded back to sleep.

What happened on that subway train is a snapshot of a world where brutal evil is allowed to go on unchallenged by the banal evil that does nothing.

But Jonah is not the sort of person who stands passively by while evil triumphs. He does not bear the name *Jonah bar Amittai* for nothing. In the Hebrew, *Amittai* literally means "the teller of truth." His father was a truth teller, no matter what it cost. So he gave his boy the name *Jonah son of Amittai* or *Jonah son of the truth teller*. No wonder the son grew up to be God's prophet. He hated evil and spoke out against it. No one was going to beat others with a hammer as long as Jonah was riding the subway train.

Since Jonah was a little boy the face of evil in the Middle East was the Assyrian Empire. For 600 years this beast from the east had been the undisputed master of the Orient. Assyrians had conceived battlefield tactics that left the world breathless with amazement. With iron chariots, lightening quick cavalry, and state-of-the-art siege equipment, the Assyrian killing machine was invincible.

Yet it's not their military genius, but their utter ruthlessness, that's remembered by history. They put entire cities to the sword and depopulated whole nations. Fifty years before Jonah was born, King Tiglath-Pileser invaded northern Israel from the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. He leveled every city in his path. His soldiers raped every woman they saw, and roasted their babies over their campfires. The only city Tiglath-Pileser left untouched was Samaria. Five years later, when Samaria refused to pay its tribute, his son King Shalmaneser V utterly decimated the city. In the rubble of what was once Samaria, he left thousands of Jews impaled on sharpened stakes, and a mountain of skulls as a reminder of the wrath of Assyria. The survivors of this holocaust were hauled off in chains, never to be seen again.

Thirty-five years after Jonah, Sennacherib the Great invaded southern Israel. He wrote on tablets of stone that he had totally destroyed 45 cities, butchered most of their inhabitants, and carried off 200,000 Jews as slaves. His graphic description of the Assyrian atrocities beggars the imagination. The Assyrians were to the Jews of Jonah's day what the Nazis have become to the Jews of our day. To Jonah, Assyria was the embodiment of evil.

I share this history so that you can understand Jonah's reaction to the opening lines of this biblical drama:

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'"

At first blush the word of the Lord must have filled Jonah with delight. The Son of the Truth Teller is not the sort of man to passively ride the subway while the Assyrian brutalizes Jews with his iron hammer. There's nothing he would like better than to go to Nineveh and preach a hell-fire-and-brimstone message of God's wrath.

Yet we read in verse three: "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish." Tarshish was a Phoenician outpost in what is now Spain, as far in the opposite direction from Nineveh as he could get in the world of his day. Why doesn't the Son of the Truth Teller want to hand deliver the truth to the evil city of Nineveh? At the end of the story he admits to God why he ran away:

"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 4:2)

Jonah hates the evil of Assyria so passionately that he will accept nothing less than God's utter annihilation of Nineveh. But he knows that God is a gracious God. And he fears that the Ninevites might actually respond to his preaching and repent. He knows that his God forgives those who repent, even if they are guilty of the grossest kinds of evil.

Jonah faces the same dilemma that ensnares us all. Most of the time we love the truth. But sometimes a commitment to God's truth will break our heart. It will take us places where we don't want to go, force us to say things we don't want to say, and do things we don't want to do. The truth is often messy, and almost always inconvenient. It shatters our illusions, turns our world upside down, and rearranges our realities. In the first two lines of Jonah's story we are confronted with the first principles of discipleship:

**All of God's Word demands all of our obedience all of the time.**

When most of us think about the story of Jonah, we immediately think about the whale. Actually, only 3 of the 48 verses in this short book talk about the fish. The book of Jonah is not so much about a whale, as it is about a city in distress and a prophet in rebellion. Nineveh is wicked beyond imagination. But God is gracious beyond comprehension. He commands the Son of the Truth Teller to take the gospel to this evil citadel of the Assyrians, but Jonah runs the other way so that his enemies won't be saved.

Ultimately, the book of Jonah is the story of the taming of a rebel. The significant question of the book is not whether Jonah was in the whale, but whether his rebellious spirit is in us. Like Jonah, we are confronted every minute of every day with the word of God. Verse one could just as easily say, "The word of the Lord came to Gus...to Bob...to Joyce...to Bill...to Mary...to Charles...to Emily..." Some 2700 years have come and gone, but the issue is the same for us as it was for that ancient prophet: what will we do with the word of the Lord, especially when it's unpalatable.

In a postmodern world where Christians increasingly treat the word of the Lord like a buffet table where we can pick and choose the parts we like (while passing by the portions we find difficult to swallow), we need to come to grips with these truths from the first two verses of Jonah's story:

**1. God is and he is not silent.**

Verse one is profound in its simplicity: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai..." The great theologian, Dr. Francis Schaeffer, wrote

that everything in our Judeo-Christian faith hangs on two fundamental facts: 1) **God exists** and 2) **He is not silent**.

Moses first saw God in a burning bush. There could be no more perfect way for God to reveal himself than in a blazing fire. Fire is a living thing. It dances. It burns with passionate energy. When fire touches you, you can never pretend that you didn't feel it. Fire is not cold and distant so that it can be ignored. In Exodus 3:3 Moses says, "I will go over and see this strange sight..." It only gets stranger in Exodus 3:4: "When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'" God not only exists, he speaks to Moses in language a child can understand. The first words out of his mouth are the first words the old man learned as a baby: "Moses, Moses!"

Then God tells Moses to take his message of liberation down to Egypt. Like Jonah, Moses doesn't want go. So he engages God in a theological debate. One of the oldest tricks in the book is to turn the simple commands of God into complicated theological and ethical dilemmas that are just too hard to figure out (so we have an excuse not to obey them). He says in Exodus 3:13, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is his name?'" God speaks and we often respond with questions instead of obedience.

But God patiently answers in Exodus 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." Again the two most fundamental facts of our faith: *God is*, and *he is not silent*. Moses is without excuse. Jonah is without excuse. God is, and he speaks clearly.

We have even less excuse. Moses didn't have a single word of Scripture. He was dependent on God's audible voice. Even Jonah only had a partial Bible. But we have the entire Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Jude 3 calls it "...the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints."

Like Moses, we can try to muddy the waters with questions. Like Jonah, we can understand all too well and run the other way. Or we can go directly to Nineveh even though it kills us every step of the way. But we can never pretend that God doesn't exist, or that he has never spoken clearly to us.

## **2. God's word is *simple*.**

Notice in verse two how simply God lays out his command to Jonah: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it..." Actually, in this

translation there is a word missing from the original Hebrew text. This verse should read, “*Arise* and go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it...” God gives three commands: *Arise! Go! Preach!* Could it be stated any simpler than that? What?—Get up and go! When?—Now! Where?—Nineveh? What for?—Preach against the city! Jonah could never claim that he was confused about the directions.

God’s Word does contain prophecies that confound us, some sayings that are hard to digest, and sincere believers may debate and differ on peripheral doctrinal issues. The Bible has its share of mysteries and riddles. But in the areas that matter most, the word of the Lord is simple and direct. The things that matter most to God are communicated so simply that even a child can understand them: “Moses! Moses!”

But Jonah didn’t get up and go to Nineveh. He played the Moses game. He turned the clear word of God into a theological and ethical dilemma. In my mind’s imagination, I hear his self-talk: “How could a good God redeem an evil city? Where is the fairness in that? How could he be a patriotic citizen and bring about the salvation of an evil empire that was bent on destroying his nation.” The fact is 35 years after God spared Nineveh the Assyrians swept back down and decimated southern Israel.

The truth is often messy. God’s commands are not always easy. Whether you are talking about pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexuality, abortion, or so many other moral absolutes of God that are being redefined in our postmodern culture, it is easy to muddy the waters with exceptions to the rule. In complicated times old values are up for grabs in a pluralistic society. But for Christians the word of the Lord is specific and to the point. It leaves no room for excuses or options. The issue isn’t whether we agree with it, or whether it is easy, but whether we will obey its clear dictates.

### **3. God’s word remains the *same*.**

When I see those commands to Jonah in verse two, “*Arise...go...preach...*” I think of another person who walked this earth some 700 years later. Even though he is a rebellious prophet, Jonah is one of the most vivid pictures of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. On several occasions Jesus spoke of Jonah as a type of himself. In talking about his death and resurrection Jesus said, “Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so the Son of Man will be in the tomb for three days, and then rise from the dead.” (Mt. 12:40)

Here in verse two we see a picture of Christ. God commanded his Son, “Arise, go, preach to the wicked world, and die for its salvation.” It wasn’t easy for Jesus to tear himself away from his Father and leave heaven. It wasn’t easy to reduce his infinite size to a two-celled zygote in the womb of a peasant Palestinian woman, to see his infinite power morphed into a helpless baby, or his infinite wisdom be limited by humanity, or his lofty glory turned into a suffering servant.

Moses, Jonah, and every one who has ever been called to “arise and go” to the place that God commands has debated with God. Even Jesus argued with his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. But he did not run in the opposite direction. He rose up. He went to his Nineveh. He was the ultimate Son of the Truth Teller. His message was not received. Though some repented, the city of Jerusalem rejected him. But in spite of his horror, and in spite of the questions that racked his soul that night in Gethsemane, he set his face like a flint toward the cross. Like Jonah, he was thrown into the stormy seas of terror and destruction. Instead of a great fish, he was swallowed up by death. He spent three days in the belly of death. And, as the fish spit up Jonah, so Jesus was spit out of the tomb. It seemed that Jonah had come back from the dead. Jesus literally came back from the dead. And now, having been spit up from the belly of death, the resurrected and living Jesus goes from Nineveh to Nineveh (even this Nineveh called Naples). He preaches the message that God saves those who will repent and trust in his redeeming and resurrecting work in their lives.

On the eve of being swallowed up by death, Jesus prayed to his Father for his disciples, “As you have sent me into the world, so I send my disciples into the world.” (John 17:18) In another place Jesus said to them, “As I have come into the world, so I send you into the world.” His final words to them are recorded in Matthew 28:19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” God said to Jonah, “Arise...go...preach...” He could have added, “...and die...” for Jonah had to die to his nationalism, his bigotry, his questions and moral dilemmas, and his own ideas about what was fair. God said to Jesus, “Arise...go...preach...and die.” And Jesus says to us, “Arise...go...preach...and die to yourself and your ideas about how life ought to work.” The word of the Lord hasn’t changed in the 34 hundred years since Moses first heard it in the burning bush.

#### **4. God’s word demands *submission***

The issue for Jonah wasn’t whether he had heard the word of the Lord. The issue for Covenant Presbyterian Church in Naples isn’t whether we

believe "...the word of the Lord..." At the heart of our core values is our passionate belief that, from the first verse in Genesis to the last verse in the book of Revelation, the Bible is the inspired Word of God. We've settled the matter: this Bible has been preserved without error. The issue for us is not the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, but its authority. Every day, in every decision we have to make, we are confronted with that issue. It is not whether we believe, but whether we will live it out in obedience—even when God tells us to go where we don't want to go or do what we don't want to do. People used to wear a wristband with the letters WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? I don't think there are any questions about what Jesus would do. What he would do is clearly presented in the gospels. Maybe we should wear a wristband with the letters DWJD: Do What Jesus Did!

It wasn't easy for Jonah to go to Nineveh. I don't want to beat up on Jonah. I think that if I had experienced the evil brutality that his people had experienced at the hands of the Assyrians I wouldn't have wanted to bring the gospel to them. If I knew that they were going to rise up 35 years later and invade Israel again, destroying cities, roasting children alive over slow fires, skinning alive the chief men of Jewish cities, and impaling my countrymen on sharpened stakes, I would want God to obliterate them—not keep them alive to do future damage to my people.

God's word is not easy to obey. Sometimes the truth is like a bone that sticks in the throat of your soul. There are times it will offend your sensibilities. That's why Jesus said that no one could follow him unless they took up their cross and died to self. The Cross crucifies even your most precious and passionate ideas about life. I don't know what you are facing today, dear saint. But like Jonah, there is a word that has come to you from the Lord. Will you arise? Will you go? Will you do what God has called you to do? Will you see it through to the end even though it brings death to those things you hold most dear?

Jesus said to his disciples, "This is my body, broken for you." He then added, "This is my blood, poured out for the remission of your sins." In his Passover Supper—and in the death, burial, and resurrection that followed—Jesus calls us to rise up, go, do God's will, and even to die that we might rise up again in resurrection power to see the transformation of Nineveh.