

Summer Reading 2 - Jonah

June 13, 2021.

It was a day just like any other day for Michael Packard and his friend Josiah.

Granted, their days were not much like any day for any of us —

Michael and Josiah were — and are — lobster divers.

Which means they make their living by diving to the ocean floor and scooping up lobsters,

so that the rest of us can sit down at a table,

put on our lobster bibs, and with butter dribbling down our chins,

enjoy one of New England's great delights.

Michael and Josiah make that possible.

So on June 13, 2021, a day like any other day for Michael and Josiah, they were out in the waters off Provincetown.

Their normal routine was for one of them to stay up in the boat while the other made the dive,

so in this case Josiah was up above in the boat

while Michael was diving down below.

Josiah was watching with care, as he always did,
tracking where Michael was by the bubbles coming up to the surface.

And then the bubbles stopped,
and there was a great thrashing of waters,
and Josiah knew something terrible had happened.

I mean, you're a fisherman, you're off Cape Cod, we've all seen the movie —
that's what was going through Josiah's mind.

So he's frantically searching the waters, panicked,
and a long minute goes by
and then bursting out of the water comes a whale
and out of its mouth comes Michael the lobster diver.

That's right.

In a turn of events that was a surprise both to the whale and to Michael
Packard,
the hungry whale making its way along the ocean floor,
happily scooping up fish,
had inadvertently scooped up a lobster diver.

“Everything went completely black” said Michael later,
“and I thought that was it, this is how it ends.”

Meanwhile, the whale was having pretty much the same experience you or I might have if we got a big bite of a wormy apple — and did what we would do — spit it out.

The story was everywhere on the news,
Michael and Josiah ended up on Jimmy Kimmel,
and a documentary about this event came out this summer.

And in most every headline at the time,
from Cape Cod right round the world —
there was some variation on these themes:

“Real-life Jonah escapes whale.”

“A Story of truly biblical proportions.”

All of which brings me to my second summer Reading selection:
the Book of Jonah.

For those of you who weren't here last week,
just a quick note about what I'm up to.

You're stuck with me as your preacher all through the month of August,
and with four Sundays in a row to entertain you,

I decided to call this series of sermons my Summer Reading series.

On these 4 Sundays, I'm sharing with you four of the great stories of the
Bible —

see how God is at work in each of them,

and pondering, with you, what God might be saying to us through it.

Last week was Esther, AKA Barbie —

and this week Jonah —

who was not a lobster diver ... but who had a similar experience.

The Book of Jonah is all of 4 chapters long, one of the shortest books in the
Bible.

Flip through the Old Testament, and you'll likely miss it completely.

It tells the story of, well, a guy named Jonah,

whom God called to be a prophet, a preacher for God.

Just like God called Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and such.

But the call of God went better with those folks than it did with Jonah.

Because in this story, Jonah declines God's request,

which, you know, you shouldn't do.

The story says that God came knocking one day and said,

“my man Jonah,

I've got a job for you — I need you to go to the city of Nineveh,

in the country of Assyria,

and tell all the people there that God says it's time to repent.”

And Jonah, it says, upon hearing this, runs down to the local marina,

finds a boat headed west, and hops on it.

Nineveh, to be clear, was located to the *east*.

This was not because Jonah was directionally challenged —

it was because he just really really didn't want to do what God was asking

him to do,

because he really *really* didn't like Assyrians.

Nobody did. Assyria was the number one enemy of Israel.

Why on earth would I go preach to *them*, Jonah thought.

So he deliberately got on a boat headed the opposite direction.

He didn't like this assignment from God, so figured he'd run away from God.

Yeah, well, you can't really do that, you know.

Run away from God.

Jonah finds that out quick.

A storm blows up at sea, and the boat he's on starts taking on water, and the sailors on board say "Jonah, is there some reason why everything went wrong as soon as you got on board this boat?"

and Jonah says, "well, it's possible it's because I'm running away from God," and they're like "dude, what were you thinking?"

And they start desperately trying to row him back to land,

but Jonah figures the fastest way to take care of things at this point is to just jump overboard and test his swimming skills.

Enter the whale, who swallows Jonah up.

A whale sent by God to not only save Jonah from the waves but also give him a place to do some thinking.

Jonah sits in the belly of the whale for three days, so the story goes, and he does do some deep thinking.

It occurs to him that the getting-away-from-God plan is not working out so well.

So he says "okay, God, you win, I'll go preach what you want me to preach to the people you want me to preach to."

The whale immediately spits Jonah upon to the nearest beach, and Jonah reluctantly sets out for Nineveh.

Where, surprisingly, his preaching is an instant success.

“Repent!” he says, and everyone says “Okay!”

They repent, those Ninevites, every last one of them,

From the King right down to the sheep and cattle, it says, they all put on sackcloth and ashes and ask God to forgive them for anything they’ve ever done wrong.

And God, being a loving and merciful God, forgives them all.

That should be the end of the story, right?

Love and forgiveness and reconciliation and great preaching.

That should be the happy ending.

But it’s actually not.

Laraine read to you what happens next.

Jonah, who has just succeeded in getting an entire city to turn to God, is actually not happy about this. Like, really not happy.

“I *knew* this would happen,” he says to God.

“This is why I tried to run away from you in the first place.

I knew you’d ruin everything by being all loving and merciful to these Assyrians,

because that’s the kind of God you are, and it’s really annoying.”

And God rolls God’s eyes, and says “Seriously, Jonah? You’re mad at me for loving my people?”

And *that’s* the end of the book.

It’s a great story.

There’s drama.

There’s storms at sea, and a whale.

There’s a crazy guy who thinks he can run away from God,

and there’s an entire city covering itself in sackcloth and ashes and praying.

There is a lot of plot in this story.

It’s a fun tale to tell,

and you can just imagine people thousands of years of ago,

sitting around the campfire or the kitchen table

and saying “hey, Grandpa, can you tell me that story about the big fish again?”

Just last week here at church, one of our dads said that his daughter’s favorite Bible story to listen to

is the one about Jonah and the whale.

It’s a great story.

But there are a lot of great stories out there that aren’t in the Bible.

There are a lot of stories that were told around kitchen tables that didn’t end up as scripture.

Jonah did.

When the wise elders of Israel began collecting together the most sacred books of faith,

they chose to include this little tale.

Why?

Because the truth is that Jonah and this whale of a story

was — and still is — one of the most profoundly important sacred texts ever written.

It was — and still is — groundbreaking and radical,
with a message about God’s love that was unprecedented in its time,
and still hard for us to fully comprehend.

Before Jonah came along,
before this story emerged,
people’s understanding of God was pretty limited.

Their God was, well, *their* God.

The God who had guided them into a new land,
the God who had protected them and led them.

Their God.

Those people in other countries?

They had *their* own Gods.

And just as the people of different countries didn’t get along,
so too, they figured, with their Gods.

Everybody stay on your own side of the line, and things will be fine.

The Book of Jonah said

“you’ve got it all wrong, people.”

Our God is the God of all people,
our God is the God of all the lands.

That's why there was nowhere Jonah could run to that God wasn't present,
because God is *ever-present*.

And, wait, there's more.

God wanted the message of love and forgiveness preached in Nineveh,
because the Assyrians are God's people too.

So that's why the story of Jonah ended up in scripture.

Because it might hook you in with the story of a fish — so to speak —
but what it leaves you with in the end is the most important,
startling, unnerving truth there is:

that God loves *everyone*.

Even the people *you* don't.

And as hard as it must have been for Israelites to hear that about Assyrians,
it is just hard now for us to hear that about — well, who?

Who is it tough for *you* to love?

Who is it tough for you to imagine *God* loving?

The most powerful story I ever heard told in this church was something like a Jonah story.

It was the story of someone who heard God asking him to take a message of love somewhere that he really didn't want to take it.

And when you hear the story, you'll understand why.

Ten years ago, a gentle man named Walt Everett came and spoke to us.

Years before, his 24 year old son had died tragically;

he had lost his life at the hands of another young man.

The killer had been brought to justice, and sent away.

Walt was a pastor, and he found himself no longer able to minister to others, no longer able to preach,

overwhelmed by rage and grief.

And then he started hearing God speaking to him,

a whisper in his ear that said "forgive him."

"I didn't want to," Walt told us. "I didn't like this man."

Like Jonah, he didn't want to hear that God loved this man too.

But God's whisper wouldn't stop,

God's voice kept speaking to him, calling on him.

Until the day that Walt Everett found himself walking through the prison door and sitting down with Mike, his son's killer, and speaking words of forgiveness.

Years later, when Mike came up for parole,

Walt spoke on his behalf, and Mike was freed.

It wasn't just his life that began again, Walt said, it was mine.

Walt Everett's story exists at a level that most of us will not be called upon to experience.

But all of us, *all* of us, are encumbered by what we carry.

So I ask again —

Who is it hard for you to love?

Who is it hard to imagine *God* loving?

You can ask that on any level.

Whom do we struggle to love, nation to nation,
whom do we struggle to love, group to group, party to party,
whom do we struggle to love, person to person?

And how hard is it to hear God say “but I *do* love them.”

How hard is it to bring into your prayers those who anger you most?

I find it hard myself, of course I do.

Which makes the message of Jonah’s story as challenging for me to hear
now as it was for people to hear then.

The message that says God’s love is as great for everyone as it is for me.

Everyone? *Everyone?* Hoo boy.

But it was a carpenter from Nazareth, centuries later,

who showed us

that to live that truth is the way of hope, and the only way forward.

That to believe in God’s limitless love for all is the path to freedom for all of
us.

What Jonah taught, Jesus lived,

and by his life we have learned again what has been eternally true:

that it is only in seeing each other as God's beloved
that we will see the Kingdom of God.

Amen.