



Who Knows?

TEXT
Jonah 3:4-4:1

September 23, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

I was on the phone with a friend from Miami this week, and as we talked, I mentioned to her that I was preaching today. She wanted to know what I was preaching about, *and at the time, I wanted to know what I was preaching about.* She knows that I tend to be anxious when I preach. I think every preacher should be. But in my last congregation, I didn't experience the sleepless nights and desperate prayers over my keyboard *quite* like I do now.

I should say that this friend of mine is a psychologist by training, so she prepared to talk me through it. She asked what it was I was preaching about. And when I said Jonah, she responded, "Oh, this is great! Just use the sermon on Jonah you preached *that one time.*" It's a nerve-wracking thing whenever someone remembers something you've said better than you do. She reminded me that one of my first sermons at the church I served in Miami was on Jonah, and she proceeded to tell me all about it.

So I got off the phone with her and thought, "Well, maybe I can lean on the wisdom of my younger self this week,

brush something off from years ago." So I found my old Jonah sermon this week ... and put it right back in the file it came out of.

Rereading it was one of those weird, looking-at-yourself-through-a-mirror moments. It allowed me to realize, I am in a very different place now than I was then. For one thing, that message had a lot to do with the ocean, which just doesn't work as well in Kansas. But more completely, I was understanding Jonah then as a *call* story. And my reading of Jonah and understanding of *call* is different now than it was six years ago as I just began church ministry.

The story of Jonah is a *story* — a short, poetic, dark-comedy kind of story. As Tom helped us understand in week one, it's not true. And that's the point of this kind of literature. It welcomes us into a story that points us to truths. And if it's a good story, one that survives the years and young pastors' preaching, it will point you to new truths each and every time you read it. Its shortness, its vagueness, its lack of tangible historical fact allows us to enter into it again and again, and never exit in the same way.

Six years ago, I read Jonah as a call story. I couldn't have read it as anything else. I had recently finished seminary, achieved my Master of Divinity degree, which I maintain is some kind of bizarre "anti-degree" that only teaches you that you don't actually know anything. Through my three years of seminary, I learned that I knew less than I thought I knew the year before. And the only thing I felt I really "mastered" was telling my own call story.

It's the thing you're asked in your applications, again in your interviews and immediately when you step on campus. It's a valid question that just becomes an obsessive one. "How did you end up here?" I was self-conscious about my answer. I think more of us were than we were admitting.

I learned quickly that my classmates had some pretty fantastic stories: missionary families that raised them around the world; family trees of generations of pastors spanning all of U.S. history. I went to school with Burmese students who were persecuted for their faith and Chinese students whose families kept their Bibles hidden. And there

I was: 22 years old, the youngest student in my class, with a story that began and ended with something like, “Who knows? I don’t really want to do this, but I feel like God wants me to. I don’t know what it looks like yet, so I’m here to find out.”

In my essay for Princeton, I wrote that my call to ministry felt much like the first time I ever saw the ocean. It was terrifying and beautiful and huge — and full of things I could not see, but I knew were there, lurking under the murky surface. So I wrote that I was looking for my first stepping stone in this vast thing — a sandbar to relieve the swimming, until the next one made itself known, or a whale that came to swallow me whole.

So when I preached on Jonah as a recent seminary grad, that’s what I talked about: the ways God calls us into big, terrifying things that we often don’t really want to do; and that God calls us into hard places, testing and trying places, and that the response of faith is to *go*.

All of that remains true. But when I read Jonah now, at this point in my ministry and my life, Jonah’s *call* is not the thing that captivates me. Studying Jonah again in these last few weeks, it has been the third chapter, long after the call and the whale. It’s the chapter about the Ninevehites and their response to Jonah that is most stirring me to wonder.

A quick recap: God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn them that God has no-

ticed their wickedness. Jonah doesn’t want to go. Nineveh is a stronghold city of Assyria; the Assyrians are enemies to the Israelites. So Jonah runs away — jumps on a boat leaving town. A terrible storm comes, and the sailors recognize the storm is of God and discern that Jonah has really ticked God off, so they toss him overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a fish, where he prays in gratitude and gives praise to God. And once he’s “spit up” on dry land, God calls Jonah once again, so he goes.

Jonah goes to Nineveh, walks this entire large city, proclaiming that in 40 days it will be overthrown because of their wicked ways. And here’s what happens: They all repent. Every person in Nineveh puts on sackcloth and ashes. The king proclaims a fast and demands that every creature, humans and animals, begin the work of repentance. And the king says this fantastic thing. He says, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind.”

It’s amazing. Jonah goes and does this thing he doesn’t want to do — and he’s wildly successful. Most of our prophet’s stories end up in tragic death. We regard them as successful only in hindsight.

But here’s Jonah, our “fish-vomit prophet,” having a 100 percent success rate among the enemies of God’s people. When he’s done, even the cows have offered contrition. God spares the city because of their repentance, because of the work Jonah has done.

It’s remarkable. And Jonah? He’s mad! He yells at God and marches off, outside the city, alone in the desert. He constructs a booth and sits under it, utters the dramatic, almost comedic lines, “Lord, take my life! For it is better for me to die than to live.” And the dramatic: “Just kill me now!”

So here’s the thing. We interpret this part of the story as if Jonah is mad because he wanted God to destroy Nineveh. He feels dumb that he proclaimed destruction to his enemies, only for them to not be destroyed. He so hates this city and its people that he didn’t want to go there in the first place, and now they’re receiving God’s grace — grace that should be reserved for Jonah and his own people.

All of that can be right. The nature of the story though, is that we have to interpret because we don’t entirely know. I think the king pokes fun at *us* with his uttering, “Who knows?” We don’t fully know why Jonah is sitting in the desert telling God to just kill him now, but at this point in my ministry, at this point in our world and our life together, it’s this part of the story that has my attention.

We don’t know why Jonah is so mad, but I think we’ve sat under that booth of resentment with him. I think we know what it means to march away from success, boiling in anger because it doesn’t look like we thought it would. I think we know what it means to get entrenched, fully committed to

a “thing” — an idea, a cause, a call — and forget along the way *what* it is we’re working for and *who* it is we’re working for. I think we often suffer from the same small imagination as our prophet, offended when God’s ideas are bigger than ours.

We talk easily about the struggle to answer God’s calls. We train our seminarians to tell their call stories, nodding in understanding and affirmation when the story inevitably includes “I resisted for a while,” “I didn’t answer right away,” or “I tried these other paths first.” But I don’t hear us talk about this part as often — the part where we’re wildly successful and the entire city is redeemed. The part where the good news is true, and mercy abounds, and even the animals come to believe.

So I’ve been wondering this week if we’ve lingered too long in the first chapter of the story. I’m wondering, what if we have romanticized the hard trip to Nineveh, so identified with being swallowed up, sold ourselves on the outcome of destruction because God’s bigger dreams are more terrifying?

What if we have used humility as our safety blanket, playing small to protect ourselves from goodness out of our control? What if it is true that it is really our light that frightens us more than our darkness? What if we have so glorified the struggle, we’ve limited our imaginations to the struggle? What if God has more in mind for us too?

The reason my friend from Miami called me this week is because we just lost a mutual friend. His name was Andrew, and the very last time I preached with you, I told you a story about him. I talk about him most often as the “crazy motorcycle guy,” who rode his Triumph motorbike from Miami to the Arctic Circle and back, connecting Presbyterian churches all along the way.

Andrew had just graduated from seminary this summer. He was just commissioned to serve his first church up in Minnesota and collapsed with a heart attack. It was unexpected, as these things are, and painful for us who loved him.

So I spent some time last week thinking about Andrew, looking through photos and social media pages. As I scrolled, a strange thing happened. I could see his impact on my ministry.

After Andrew, there were motorcycles and trips to Mexico. On the building that had teetered on debate of who *could* and *couldn’t* be married inside her, there were rainbow-colored ribbons, drenching her in dreams of people from around our country. Where the same stagnant events happened every year, now there were inflatable water slides and hologram angels visiting the nativity.

I don’t mean to say that Andrew was solely responsible for these strange things. But he lived in a way that testified to the truth, that God’s imagination is so much bigger than

ours. He lived with a boldness of faith that was reckless and irresistible. And with that kind of witness in our midst, even our Ninevehites couldn’t help but believe.

And here’s the thing that frightens me in hindsight: I believed that. I was preaching and teaching that. But I don’t know if my photos would have changed without this new-to-the-faith, soccer-loving, cigarette-smoking Englishman.

I was new to ministry, but I was already being taught and tested in a tradition that is littered with booths of resentment. An institution that has been led by good, wise, called people, who often preferred the destruction they could see over the redemption they couldn’t imagine. I can’t help but wonder, “What could the Church be if we stopped being seduced by smallness, resisted the temptation to do what we know and can see, and allowed God to use us for the big things that most terrify us?”

I will forever remember the day I first visited you here at Village Church. The sanctuary was a dust-filled construction site, and Tom Are made me wear a hard hat, while he talked with odd enthusiasm about the ceiling. I remember that feeling in my gut telling me to pay attention, then promptly going home and telling that dear, patient, faithful committee “no.”

Faced with the reality that the opportunities I wanted existed — the opportunity to focus ministry on my own generation, the generation self-

selecting out of church, opportunity to experiment with worship different than what we've always done — when faced with the reality that this was possible in bigger ways than I had imagined, I was terrified.

I went on to interview with other churches; to travel and test calls in places that were smaller, that felt familiar, that were filled with Ninevehites I had grown comfortable struggling against.

It was another month before I recognized the booth I had erected for myself — a month of not sleeping and not-so-subtle hints from my husband — and I composed a humbling email that I sent with the prayer, “Who knows? Maybe they'll give me another chance.”

Six years ago, I thought the hard parts of the call were the hard parts of the call. I thought the story was about getting yourself to Nineveh. And it is. But I'm fairly certain now that the truly hard things are the big ones; the best ones; the moments of surprise success when even the animals come to believe.

The thing that keeps me awake at night now is not what is hard, but what is possible. The thing that makes me panic when I climb into this pulpit is not that I might say something stupid (I'm used to that); it's that I might say something right. God has somehow squeezed through my words before and inspired people to do reckless, big, bold things. And if I'm honest, I'd rather

stay inside my fish than be responsible for that.

Village Church, I was afraid to come here, because you are big, with a history written by people who weren't afraid to say, “Who knows?” and throw all of themselves into imagining big things. And it is true and terrifying that we have the ability to live as big as God desires, and we might be one of the few churches in our day for whom that is true.

And in this day, when wickedness abounds, and we are quick to name our enemies, holy imagination does not have the luxury of playing small. Those who can dream bigger, do bigger, must.

So what is it that God wants to imagine with us next? What booths do you need to climb out of? What opportunity have you looked away from because the possibilities are too great? In what ways is God calling you, calling us, to imagine together? What, if anything, is possible?

Prayer:

Holy God, awaken us to your imagination. Call us to what scares us the most. Surprise us, with goodness we can't even comprehend, and help us to trust it is true. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.