

The Story of Jonah | Jonah 2, Philippians 4:4-8 | Nov 23 2025 at FPC LC

Church, I need to level with you all. This week is Thanksgiving. Some of you all may already be on break. Others are looking forward to a break. Still others will be working in offices and homes and elsewhere, but hopefully, will get to pause for a meal with loved ones. Oh, and all of you have braved this turn towards cold weather and came out to church, which is always very good to see.

But here's the kicker. I don't think typical Thanksgiving sermons work the way they're intended. That is, I don't think finger wagging and uplifting the value of gratitude does much to move the needle. Really, I think, with the virtue and practice of gratitude, it isn't typically something where we have a knowledge gap to fill. Instead, I'm of the belief that gratitude starts with us getting a little outside ourselves, finding something a bit bigger than our own little worlds.

Prayer helps with that, considering others and living into Christ's mission of selfless love helps with that, and I think laughter helps with that too. Those are all forms of transcendence, all ways of getting beyond ourselves, and I think that's the way to gratitude.

And so, here is the deal. This morning, we have before us the story of Jonah. And real quick, biblical scholars tend to agree that Jonah very much is a story -- it tells us deep truths, not necessarily historical realities. And it's a short story. We just read chapter 2 and in total there's only 4. And what's more it is, I think, an incredibly funny story that teaches a lot of lessons about gratitude and having a healthy perspective on life.

But, as a final heads up, it gives us a lot of those lessons by way of contrast. What I mean by that is that scholars tend to view Jonah as a sarcastic sermon of sorts. To put that another way, The story of Jonah was likely written by an Old Testament prophet to make us laugh a bit as we watch Jonah make a whole lot of bad decisions. But, it's also a story that ought to make us think a bit as often Jonah will be so over the top that he really begs the question and teaches us gratitude in a sort of what-not-to-do way.

So, without further ado, we start, of course, **at the beginning** and notice that the whole story opens with Jonah receiving a call from God, "Go to Nineveh and make them repent." And so Jonah hears the call, loud and clear, says "ok God, we're doing this." He puts on his work boots and his traveling jacket, puts several days worth of supplies in his pack, goes down to the shipyard, and says "one boat ticket in the opposite direction of Nineveh, please." And the guy at the ticket booth, of course, says "well that makes perfect sense. After all, we all know Nineveh is the capital of cruelty, the seat of sin, the empire of evil in this day and age." And so off on the boat Jonah goes, going anywhere but Nineveh.

And what else would happen next except for a storm starting to rage right above him? The crew members, they look up and say "this is no ordinary storm." Then the loudspeaker starts up "everyone, this is your captain speaking, due to increased turbulence, we ask that you return to your seat and place your tray in the upright and locked position...and really, given these waves, we're gonna go ahead and need you to just start praying to whatever god you may know."

And so, next thing we know, the whole boat is crying out to pagan gods and the elemental spirits and whatever other faiths lost to time there were. Everyone is prostrating themselves, deep in prayer... Except for one guy. Turns out there was exactly one guy on the ship that really did not want to talk with his God.

The others on the ship pretty quickly take notice. They say, “you there. Jonah, is it? What faith are you?” And Jonah says “oh I follow the living God who rules over land and sea and sky, who put the stars in their course, and whom not even a sparrow dies without him knowing and caring.” And so they say “And you’re not praying?” And Jonah says “No, me and my God aren’t talking right now... oh! But it's not that. It's not me. This isn’t a faith thing, uh-huh think of something else.”

And so the crew think for a moment. After all, that was strange but you can’t throw a man overboard for not being a person of prayer. And pretty soon someone else says “we could cast lots?” And Jonah, a good Hebrew man who didn’t believe in silly divination practices like casting lots, says “yeah, that’ll surely give us the right answer. That’ll tell us who to blame. Try that.”

And so they cast lots. And does it land on Jonah? Of course it lands on Jonah. And so, into the ocean he goes.

He starts sinking further and further. The light of day above him starts getting dimmer and dimmer. The cold water around him gets more and more frigid. Lower and lower he sinks. But, then, just as Jonah is about to exhale the last bit of air he has and give up the ghost, it happens.

“Gulp.”

We turn the page and come to **chapter 2** where we catch up with our scripture reading. Jonah is now in the belly of the whale (or big fish, if we’re being technical). No wifi. No cable. No books or board games or much of anything, really. Just Jonah, alone with his thoughts, in the stomach of a fish, at the bottom of the ocean, for three days straight.

And now, I don’t think I need to illustrate this chapter too much more, it's the one we typically already know about. It's the one that’s taken on a life of its own. But, at the very least, we should appreciate its quite funny tone. What I mean by that is that chapter two, our scripture reading for today, contains probably the only kind words Jonah has to say in his entire book.

And what are his only kind words about? Being swallowed up by a giant fish.

I hope we can all see both the humor and the truth in that. Because, see, I do find this prayer, our scripture reading today, to be incredibly beautiful but also really funny. It employs these beautiful metaphors for human despair, comparing our griefs and sadnesses and struggles in life to the feeling of being stuck in a storm or sinking to the bottom of the ocean. And it gives a very real, human feeling of relief, of thankfulness to God for nothing other than rock bottom. A sense that making hard contact with reality is unpleasant but it beats sinking in life forever and ever.

But, it's also very funny to me because first, he refers to being swallowed by a giant fish as God’s saving grace to him. And second because we have to recognize the irony here -- all these beautiful poetic descriptions of being caught in a storm or sinking in the ocean were also just very non-poetic, literal descriptions of what had just happened to Jonah in the last chapter.

But, at any rate, as we turn to **chapter 3**, we notice that the story of Jonah doesn't tell us where in the world the fish spit him up or how long it's been between story beats, or much of anything else, really. But, at least when I play it out in my head, I imagine Jonah getting spit out, pretty close to Nineveh.

And taking it as a sign, he comes ashore and starts walking around the city-nation that was Nineveh. And as he does, we can imagine the thoughts running through his head. He's planning out his argument and several different comebacks. He's plotting his escape route in case things go south. He's studying the city, trying to figure out how he can put this weighty call to repentance in terms the Ninevites will understand. He's probably thinking to himself "if me, one of God's own people was that resistant to God's call. I can't imagine how these cruel, crude, dull people of Nineveh will take it. But, here we are."

And yet, everywhere, all through the city, just as he would start up what was assuredly supposed to be a very long, intricate speech. "People of Nineveh, the LORD God has called upon you to repent..." he would hardly be able to get a word out before being interrupted. The people of Nineveh, they'd say things like "Oh, really? We're supposed to repent? God wants us to love each other, not hate? Help and not hurt? Forgive and then also forget? This is the first I'm hearing of that but, ok, it sounds good to me."

Jonah walks a little further and tries again, "People of Nineveh, the LORD God has..." but he's interrupted again. "Susan, Susan, come look, it's that weird fish smelling guy who thinks God wants us to love one another." And Jonah says "Ok. He does. He just does, we're supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. I don't know what else to tell you." And they say "Oh well when you put it like that, it makes sense. Thanks for the heads up. This whole love one another thing sounds pretty doable and especially if it means God likes us, it sure couldn't hurt."

Really! That's Jonah chapter 3 for you. One by one, the whole nation repents. In fact, the story says even the animals repented. And so it's not too long before the king of Nineveh comes up, thanks Jonah, and says "Thanks to you and your God, we have decided to stop being evil and start being good. Mission accomplished. Well done."

And so, there's our happy ending, right? We can all go home, the job is done. Except for one thing. Here's Jonah who fairly recently got spit out by a giant fish and has since walked around the most nefarious empire on the globe at that time, anticipating a fight. But now? Now it's just sorta anticlimactic. The people just listened. It worked.

So, now, **final chapter**... We meet back up with Jonah who instead of rejoicing in what God has done, is just a little bewildered and probably a lot mad. So what's he do? He walks out of the king's throne room, surrounded by all these people he thought were going to kill him who are instead listening to his advice with baited breath. And he just keeps walking. Maybe he mutters to himself "I am so done with this!" He makes it through the city gates. He makes it back to the beach, he looks out at the ocean, and he realizes he's not getting back home the way he got here. So, he keeps walking even more. And eventually, he finds himself on a cliffside where he just looks back at the city, still trying to figure out exactly what all that was. And he ends up sitting there all the way until the dawn of the next morning.

And now, as he's sitting there, we get another miraculous story beat. See, God is looking upon him with some mercy. In fact, God goes as far as to miraculously grow a small plant next to Jonah to give him some shade on

the cliffside. You know, something nice after all that hard work. But, now it's the next morning and Jonah is still just there, sitting and staring back at the city in anger.

And so, God is still watching but Jonah still isn't budging. He's still just there, angrily staring. And so God starts to get a little worried about him and decides to send a worm to chew on the shade plant he gave Jonah, make it wither, and give Jonah a good reason to get back up and get on his way.

But, even with the shade tree withered, Jonah is still just sitting there, angry and near catatonic. So, God sends along a hot wind. But Jonah just keeps sitting there. So, God opens up the clouds and lets the sun beat down on the exact spot where Jonah is sitting. And yet, same thing. Jonah just keeps sitting there angrily. And then, finally, Jonah in the same clothes that he was wearing when he got spit up by the fish, the same clothes he sweat in as he walked for days and days through Nineveh, clothes that were now getting hot and sunbaked too, Jonah finally looks up at the withered plant and says, chapter 4 verse 9, "I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

Now, I guarantee most of you all did not know "I'm so angry I wish I were dead." was a bible verse! Nor did most of us know that that's really how the story of Jonah ends. Jonah says he's so angry he wishes he were dead, God tells him that he really needs to get his priorities worked out, and the story ends there.

More specifically, God takes Jonah to task for a bit and it's where I want us to land today. See, God basically says to Jonah in chapter 4 that he needs to get some perspective. God points out to Jonah that he didn't seem to care about Nineveh and all its people. He didn't care about the miraculous shade plant God gave him. That is, until it began to wither, and then he started to complain. And so God, in more or less words, tells him that Jonah's biggest problem isn't the fish, or Nineveh, or this shade plant withering. Jonah's biggest problem really seems to be Jonah.

And really, the lesson there is simple in theory but a life's work in practice. The lesson is recognizing half of life's battle is about perspective. Because, in truth, we all have some mountain top moments and we all see some valleys too. And we don't add or subtract a single thing from either of those by complaining or being mad or entitled or anything. Instead, where the difference can be made is less in what we go through and more in how we choose to go through it.

See, the truth of gratitude is incredibly simple but it takes a lot of practice. And that simple truth is that we get to decide what's going to be a big deal in our life. Most often, we get to decide not what happens but how we're going to roll with it. We could, say, find salvation in being swallowed by a giant fish. Or we could find bitter complaints in the miraculous repentance of an entire nation. We could ignore a miracle shade plant (until it withers and then find every reason to complain about it). Or I suppose we could be enamored by all the simple graces, shade plants, and gifts given to us every day. The point is, we get to decide.

Let's pray...

God we thank you for the startling wisdom of your word

We thank you Lord for the story of Jonah today.

We thank you for the bad example and ask that it would propel us into a better way.

Teach us, Lord, to let go of anger, bitterness, resentments and so on.

Teach us, Lord, to not keep score. Instead, if we were to keep a count, have us count all the unmerited favor you give to us each day -- both the simple daily graces you so abundantly give and the saving grace found in Jesus Christ.

Teach us, Lord, to look for the good and let go of the bad.

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— have us think about such things.

We thank you Lord for your grace given to us.

We ask that as we go into this thanksgiving week, you would draw our awareness to the many gifts you give.

For we know that you give abundantly to your children.

And this week, this Thursday, is merely one of our chances to take notice and appreciate it.

In Jesus name. Amen.