

Attributes of God

Jonah 1:1-7

October 1, 2000

When you think of Jonah, what is the first image that comes to mind? The great fish--a whale. Growing up as a kid, this was always one of my favorite stories in the bible. We had this children's illustrated bible, and it had a picture of this huge whale. I would try to imagine what it must have been like for Jonah inside the fish for 3 days. That is fascinating stuff for a kid to think about. I am still fascinated by this story although now it is for different reasons. You see the more you study this book the more you realize this isn't primarily a story about a great fish or a run away prophet or a wicked city. This is a story first and foremost about God. This story has much to teach us about the character and person of God. You will notice in the bulletin I listed some major themes of this book, and they all center on God.

I promise if you spend time in this story, you will know God better. That is my prayer for us as we take the next 5-6 Sundays to explore this book. I want us to finish this book knowing God more intimately than when we started. And along the way, as we learn about God we will also learn about ourselves. (Rd Jonah 1:1-7). Well, like we said, this story has much to teach us about God. As we look at these verses I want to point out three things we immediately learn about God here.

The first thing we learn about God here is that God is intimately involved with his creation. There is a popular brand of theology out there, and you hear it in many different forms, that says there is a God and he is the creator of all things but God has long since left creation behind; God just set creation in motion then moved on to other things; God is no longer involved in creation. But the story of Jonah, and the verses we

read here tell a different story. They tell of a God who is intimately connected with all he created.

Notice in verse 1 God says to Jonah, "Go to the great city of Ninevah and cry out against it because its wickedness has come up before me." Does that sound like a God who does not know what is happening in his creation? Does that sound like a God who left his creation behind? Out of the vastness of the created order God sees the wickedness of this one city, and it moves God to act. I don't know about you but I find encouragement here in this verse. God doesn't just see the wickedness of Ninevah, but he get involved.

Sometimes it can get discouraging as we see our culture continually embracing evil and turning their backs on God; but part of the message of Jonah is that God will not sit idly by and let wickedness reign. He is too intimately involved with his creation. He loves his creation too much to allow evil to win out in the end. Furthermore, on a personal level, he loves you too much to allow evil to reign in your lives. That is why he sent his son Jesus to die for us: to once and for all make a way for the shackles of sin and evil to be broken. In fact, in Jesus Christ we see the greatest evidence of how intensely involved God is with his creation. Now, we have further evidence here of God's involvement with his creation. Notice in vs 4 it is God who literally hurls a great wind on the sea. Later in this book we will see God providing a great fish and God causing plants to grow up and plants to wither. This book leaves no doubt that God is in control. God is intimately connected to his creation.

A second thing we learn about God here is the greatness of his mercy. The wickedness of this city comes before God and it is well within God's right to bring

judgment and destruction upon Ninevah, yet God sends Jonah to go and preach against this city. God is giving the Ninevites an opportunity to repent. What great mercy. But that is who our God is. He is merciful. Think of all the times we have personally turned our backs on God, all the times we have embraced sinfulness yet God is always there showing us mercy. God is always there giving us opportunity after opportunity to repent and turn back to him.

Now, I want you to see something here that is easy to miss. God is showing mercy to the people of Ninevah here. If you remember your OT history, Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. These are Assyrians to whom God is displaying his mercy. The Assyrians were not the people of God. They were not Israelites. In fact, the Assyrians were well known for terrorizing the Israelites. The Assyrians would descend on a foreign town and completely wipe out its population--from babies to the elderly and everyone in between. They did leave a few alive to keep as slaves, but by most historical accounts being an Assyrian slave was worse than death. The Assyrians were one of the most vicious empires in history. When the Assyrians came to town there was no mercy; and yet mercy is exactly what God is showing the capital of the Assyrian empire. Can you imagine being an Israelite and reading this book of Jonah for the first time? There must have been shock on the Israelites' faces to hear that God was sending one of their prophets to this godless city of Ninevah. There must have been shock as they read how God saw the wickedness of Ninevah and instead of wiping them out on the spot God decided to show them mercy.

This story forces us to wrestle with one of the hardest questions--to whom will God show mercy? The answer we learn is almost as difficult as the question. The

answer is anyone, everyone. Even the most wicked and depraved of humanity can experience the mercy of God. Now, let's just be honest with ourselves here. There are times when we encounter those who embrace wickedness and we secretly take pleasure or comfort in the fact that someday they will get what they deserve. But you know we will be surprised to encounter those people someday and find out that they didn't get what they deserved, instead God showed them mercy. And you know what, someday we will find ourselves in God's presence and we will hit our knees worshipping God because he didn't give us what we deserved. Instead we will look into the Father's face and find mercy there because of his son Jesus Christ. The depth of God's mercy is unimaginable. That is, in part what this story teaches us about God.

A third thing we learn about God here is his inexhaustible faithfulness. When Jonah gets the call to go to Ninevah what is his response? He goes on the run. Now, you can read about this in 2nd Kings, Jonah's hometown is Gath Hopher. Ninevah is about 500 miles to the northwest of Gath Hopher. Now, where does he run? First to Joppa which is south then to Tarshish which is located east in what is modern day Spain. Jonah runs completely in the opposite direction of God's call. In fact, Tarshish was as far east as you could go in Jonah's day. From Joppa it took about a year to get to Tarshish with all the stops.

It has always fascinated me that Jonah didn't just say no to God. Jonah could have just stayed in his hometown and tried to ignore God, but he went on the run. Maybe that isn't so amazing. Don't we often do the same thing? We don't just ignore God's call; we try to run from it.

[Told story of God wanting me to share gospel with one person in particular I worked with. I didn't want to do it. I went out of my way to avoid the person.]

Often times we don't just say no to God, we run from him. That is what Jonah does here. But notice the great faithfulness of God. Jonah flees and what does God do? He pursues Jonah. Jonah runs and God goes after him. It would seem easier for God to just let Jonah run off to Tarshish and for God to find another prophet. Jonah wasn't the only preacher in town. God could just give up on Jonah; Jonah made his decision. But God will not give up on Jonah even though Jonah gave up on God. God is faithful even in the midst of Jonah's unfaithfulness.

I find great encouragement in that. There are so many times when God would have had every reason and every right to walk away from this relationship, yet he has been faithful. Many of you could testify this morning that in those times you went astray God faithfully pursued you. He didn't give up on you. I am reminded of the story Jesus told about a shepherd who had 100 sheep. Jesus asked if one of these sheep goes astray will not the shepherd leave the 99 in pursuit of the one? God is that good shepherd constantly, faithfully pursuing us.

Well, in sermons like this we can only scratch the surface of all that is here. I would encourage you this week to spend some time thinking about what this story has to teach us about God. Spend some time thinking about God's intimate connection with his creation, his great mercy, and his inexhaustible faithfulness; spend some time thinking about what these mean in your life.

- When we run from God we really aren't putting distance between ourselves and God.

If fact if we turn around we will find he is right there.