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Sermon: April 24, 2016
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“WHAT DO YOU DO?”
Jonah

Your worst enemy lies unconscious at your feet, severely wounded from a self-inflicted gunshot. Without emergency medical treatment they will die, and soon.

It is the neighbor who molested you as a child, or the dealer who got your daughter hooked on narcotics, or the ex who took twisted pleasure in rubbing your face in their sordid affairs. And you are not their only victim! This – person – has ruined every life they have touched.

There is no one else here, just you and your tormentor.

The place is secluded enough for you to leave unnoticed, but close enough to a hospital for an ambulance to arrive in time.

There is no blood on your clothing. You have left no footprints in the dirt, no fingerprints on the gun. There is nothing to connect you to this horrible event.

Besides, this is an attempted suicide. The evidence proves it beyond a doubt.

? Your worst enemy lies dying by his (or her) own hand. Do you turn around and walk away? Do you dial 9-1-1? *What do you do?*

For Jonah, this was not a hypothetical scenario. He actually wrestled with this dilemma.

Please turn with me to the book of Jonah.

■ 1:1: **“The word of the LORD [comes] to Jonah son of Amittai.”**

{II Kings 14:23-25} In the book of Second Kings we learn that **“Jonah son of Amittai”** is a **“prophet from Gath Hepher.”** He speaks **“the word of the LORD”** in the northern kingdom of Israel (also called Samaria), during the reign of Jeroboam II.

Jeroboam reigns, first as co-regent and then as full-fledged king, from 794-753 B.C. Jonah’s prophetic ministry occurs during that span of time.

■ **“The word of the LORD [comes] to Jonah”** in verse 2: **“Go to the great city Nineveh”** (**“the [big] city Nineveh,”** **“the [important] city Nineveh,”** the capital of the Assyrian Empire) **“and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”**

“Its wickedness has come up before me.”

Not only do the Ninevites indulge in immorality and embrace idolatry, they are exceptionally abusive to the people they conquer. These vile criminals plunder national treasuries, enslave hundreds of thousands, deport entire populations to distant lands, and burn cities to the ground.

{Ettinger} Worse than that, they practice wholesale torture and mutilation. They **“cut off their [victims’] hands, [gouge] out their eyes, and [leave] them to die in utter agony. Nobles [are] skinned alive; ‘common’ prisoners of war [are] thrust through the stomach with stakes.”**

This is not the work of a few out-of-control soldiers. It is standard operating procedure.

Assyrian kings delight in inscribing the details of their atrocities on tablets and pillars and palace walls.

☑ {Grayson} Ashurnasirpal II depicts his murder of an enemy leader thusly: **“I flayed [him]; his skin I spread upon the walls of the city.”**

☑ {Grayson} Sennacherib boasts of butchering humans like livestock: **“I cut their throats like lambs.... I made their gullets and entrails run down upon the... earth... Their hands I cut off.”**

☑ {Grayson} Shalmaneser II brags of his barbarity: **“A pyramid of heads I reared in front of his city. Their youths and... maidens I burnt up in flames.”**

These are sanitized quotes. The original inscriptions are longer and more detailed.

Ninevite savagery is not impulsive or spontaneous; it is a calculated application of terror. It is designed to crush potential resistance, enhance Assyrian power, and keep the foreign gold and silver rolling in.

Nineveh’s **“wickedness has come up before”** God. In a world full of sinners, these stand out. Their offenses are piling up, one on top of the other, like a tower reaching into the heavens.

{II Ki 17:6; Sargon Cuneiform} Regarding Israel, Assyria has not yet conquered the northern kingdom, not yet **“deported [27,290 leading] Israelites”** to **“Halah, Gozan... and... the towns of the Medes,”** not yet resettled the land with pagan gentiles from elsewhere. That is still three decades in the future, in 722 B.C.

Nevertheless, the Assyrians have already turned the northern kingdom into their puppet. They have extracted

vast sums of tribute (i.e., protection money), and they have dictated Israel’s foreign policy.

The current emperor is content to have Samaria as his vassal, but his successors will not be so easily satisfied. Assyria is Israel’s worst enemy.

No wonder the Israelites fear and hate Nineveh! In their eyes it is the epicenter of worldly evil.

And what does YHWH, the God of Israel, command his prophet to do? **“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it”** and, by extension, the whole nation of Assyria.

“Go... and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” **“Go... [rail] against”** Nineveh, go denounce the Assyrians, go condemn your adversary. This is the divine imperative.

The LORD God has sanctioned him to cut loose and lay into them. In this case, obedience means telling off the enemy. Who wouldn’t jump at the opportunity?

■ Jonah does not. Instead, in 1:3 he **“[runs] away... and [heads] for Tarshish.”** (Nineveh is 350 miles east of the Mediterranean, in what is now Iraq. Tarshish is 2,500 miles to the west, in what is now Spain.)

There is nothing haphazard about his rebellion. First, he heads **“down to Joppa,”** Israel’s only major port. Second, he seeks out what is surely the only vessel **“bound for”** Tarshish. Third, he **“[pays] the fare”** which, given the distance, is very expensive.

Fourth, he goes on board with a pagan crew, despite the fact that he normally takes great pains to avoid all such contact. Fifth, though Hebrews are terrified of the sea he sets out the long way across the Mediterranean toward the most distant port.

Each step of the way he is confronted with the same choice: to plunge deeper into disobedience, or to repent and obey the Living God. He chooses defiance every time.

■ Jonah is fully conscious of what he is doing, and he makes no effort to conceal it. He even informs the sailors that **“he [is] running away from the Lord”** (verse 10) – and that is early on, before they run into trouble.

? {1:3} Why does Jonah **“flee from the LORD”**? Why does he deliberately disobey YHWH’s direct instruction? Why does he rebel against God?

■ {3:4, 5, 10} In chapter 3 the Almighty compels Jonah to obey. He has no choice, so he goes to Nineveh and proclaims **“Forty more days and [this city] will be overthrown.”** **“The Ninevites [believe] ... and all of them, from the greatest to the least”** repent of **“their evil ways.”** The LORD God **“[relents] and [does] not bring on them the destruction he [has] threatened.”**

■ The prophet cannot conceal his fury. In 4:2 he gripes, **“Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”**

Assyria is Israel’s most lethal enemy. Jonah takes that personally!

Yet Nineveh’s awesome power and unrivaled wealth mask a fatal flaw: the empire is unconscious. The entire population assumes that their main idol Aššur [Ashur] rules the universe. They believe Aššur approves of their atrocities, and that with his blessing they will perpetually grow stronger and richer.

They are dead wrong. If they continue to sin, the Assyrians will destroy themselves. The wages of their immorality, injustice, and idolatry is death.

The prophet’s sermon is a wake-up call, an alarm, a danger signal. Yet Jonah wants the Ninevites to die!

That is why he rebels against the Living God. And that is why he criticizes the LORD for his essential qualities of grace, compassion, patience, and mercy.

Jonah’s worst enemy lies bleeding with self-inflicted wounds. His well-thought-out plan is the same as his initial impulse: turn around, walk away, and let them perish.

★ Let us understand this: every word YHWH speaks, and every action the Almighty takes in these chapters is an unequivocal rebuke of Jonah’s attitudes and actions.

★ And let us be clear that Jonah is a stand-in for all of God’s people. The Jews acknowledge this, and Christ Followers should too. The truths revealed in this book apply with as much force to us as to the prophet.

? *What are those truths?*

☆ First, the Living God is “**gracious and compassionate ... slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.**”

☆ Second, Holy God judges sin but he goes to extreme lengths to save sinners from condemnation.

☆ Third, God calls his people to impart his mercy and kindness with others, even their worst enemies.

☆ Fourth, God holds us accountable for our attitudes and actions toward our enemies.

These truths are well-illustrated in Jonah. Yet they shine most completely, most powerfully, most beautifully in the life and ministry of Christ.

Do our mindset, words, conduct and relationships reflect this aspect of God’s glory? If not, we really haven’t seen Jesus. Let us open our eyes!

‡ Your worst enemy lies dying by his (or her) own hand. *What do you do?*

The book of Jonah is the word of the Lord.