

June 10, 2012
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Jonah 1

Title: "Feeling for The City What God Feels for The City"
(First in a four part series)

"We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond)."

That is how we say who we are, as a church in this part of the world. It is our identity and mission statement. Printed on the Order of Worship, on First News, on our Letterhead. *"We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond)."* All the particulars of any vision statements emerging from that basic conviction.

"We are a community ..." Not just individuals following Jesus. Not just an amalgamation of individuals. But an inter-connected community. Birthed into being by the Holy Spirit of God. Centered in a Person, in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, resurrected, ascended to the throne.

"We are a community following Jesus ..." A community reading about Jesus, thinking about Jesus, worshipping Jesus (and with Him His Father and Spirit), praying in Jesus' name, watching and waiting for His glorious return. And following. Actually getting in line behind Jesus. Recognizing that we humans all follow some master, some god, we are turning around and seeking to follow Jesus as master and God.

"Following Jesus ..." Whom else would we want to follow? As the disciple Peter said to Jesus when many others were falling away from following Jesus: "To whom else shall we go? You have words of eternal life." Only You. For only You are the Man Who is God. Only You are the God who is Man.

"With a heart for the city ... following Jesus with a heart for the city." Heart. The word implies not only vision, but feeling. Not only conviction, but emotion.

"We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond)." I have been suggesting to our leadership since I was called here three years ago, that we need to make a small change in the wording of our identity and mission statement; a small change with, I think, huge implications. I think we need to change the "a" to "His." I think we need to change "a heart for the city" to "His heart for the city."

"We are a community following Jesus with HIS heart for the city." With the God-Man's heart for the city. With the Triune God's heart for the city. Much less fickle than my heart for the city. Much more preserving than my heart for the city. Much more merciful and companionate than my heart for the city. Which brings us to today's text.

No where else in the Bible is God's heart for cities more clearly revealed than in the Old Testament book of Jonah. As we will see in our four-part series of studies in the book, there are many practical themes and lessons relevant to our lives in the 21st century. But in and through all the themes and lessons we will constantly meet the Living God's feeling for cities. I use the word "feeling" very intentionally. Not just God's vision for cities. Not just God's thoughts about cities. But God's feeling for cities. The book of Jonah is all about God's feelings, God's feelings for what God Himself calls "the great city." More to the point, the book of Jonah is all about the Living God seeking to bring His people into His heart, into His feelings, for the city. Or, better yet, the book of Jonah is all about God getting His people to feel for our city what He feels for our cities.

WHICH IS WHAT Jonah the disciple, Jonah the prophet DOES NOT WANT TO DO! Jonah does not want to feel for the city what God feels for the city. Especially for the 7th century before Christ city of Nineveh, on the banks of the Tigris River, in what is now 21st century Iraq. To Jonah, Nineveh was a very, very bad city, an evil city. It is the leading city of the Assyrian Empire, which had, in the 8th century BC, inflicted great horror on Jonah's people, on the Jews of the northern tribes of Israel. And Jonah does not want to feel ALL that the God of the Jews feels for that "wicked" Gentile city.

Let me put it this way. Jonah the disciple, Jonah the prophet, is called to go where he does not want to go, to do what he does not want to do, to say what he does not want to say. Why does he not want to go and do and say? Because it involves facing a part of God, a dimension of the character of God, he does not want to have to face. To go where he does not want to go, to do what he does not want to do, to say what he does not want to say, means having to come to terms with something about God he wishes were not true. In running away from God's call ... or, as I should say, in *trying to run away from God's call* ... Jonah is not just running from the call; he is running from the God he wishes did not exist. Imagine! A prophet of the Living God. Who up to this point has served God faithfully, having been used at a crucial moment in Israel's history, wanting to run away from God.

It is a bit difficult to date the story of Jonah with modern historical precision. We know that the Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was the leading city, destroyed Samaria, Northern Israel, in 722 BC. Whether the story of Jonah takes place before or after that is not clear. I think it is before that horror, shortly before 722 BC. Assyria had already destroyed any kingdom in its way. Jonah and his fellow prophets could see "the writing on the wall." The Assyrian army was ruthless, driven by manic arrogance and gratuitous violence. Think the Assad forces in Syria today. [Syria, by the way, was one of the empires Assyria leveled on its way toward Israel].

Then came the call. Jonah 1:1. "The word of the LORD, the word of Yahweh, came to Jonah, 'Arise, go to Nineveh the great city ...' Go to Nineveh? Just the mention of the name evoked images of the brutality of the Empire. Jonah wants to see Nineveh destroyed! Nineveh is the source of destruction in the world. Jonah wants Nineveh

destroyed. Then came the call. “The word of the LORD, the word of Yahweh, came to Jonah, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for its wickedness has come up before Me.’” (1:1). Jonah – go and preach to the great city. You are a faithful prophet of the Living God. Go and do what faithful prophets are suppose to do: go preach to the great city.

Preach what? One sentence: Jonah 3:4. “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown” A word of warning. A word of pending judgment. Now, why would Jonah not want to go and preach such a word? Yes, to do so would be very risky. Imagine you or me being called to do that in our time. We would be laughed at, jeered at, maybe even have rocks thrown at us. But why would Jonah, who wants to see the city destroyed, not want to go with a word of warning?

Because the word of warning is a word full of grace. It is? Yes, that God would warn anyone is pure grace. The word of pending judgment is a word of grace. You see, God could just destroy the city, as Jonah wants God to do. Why give a warning? Why warn the city of pending judgment? Because ... and this is the key to understanding Jonah’s story ... the fact that God would even bother to speak means there is a possibility people will listen. And if they listen, there is a possibility of people repenting. And if the people repent, if they turn, people will find grace. As long as God warns there is the possibility of redemption.

And THAT Jonah does not want to see happen. He does not want his and his people’s enemies to have the opportunity to hear a Word from Yahweh that might cause them to turn from their destructive ways and find mercy and grace in the Living God. Jonah knows that when the Living God, the creator and redeemer, speaks something always happens. And Jonah does not want what could possibly happen to happen.

When you see someone walking near or toward a cliff, you warn them, do you not? If you have any feeling for them, any desire for their well-being, you warn them, right?

And is not that warning an act of grace? You do not want them to fall off the cliff. If you did not care if they fell you would not even bother to speak. “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3:4). A word of grace, because God does not want the city to fall off the cliff. God does not want the city to collapse. All over the world today cities are collapsing. Even as magnificent high-rises rise in our cities, cities are collapsing. From the inside. God does not want to see cities collapse.

God will say to Jonah at the end of the story: “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know the difference between their right and left hand?” (4:11). God is saying, the city does not know the way of living that leads to life. The city does not know right from wrong. And as a result is heading for the cliff. Go Jonah – speak to the city. Go - tell the city that it is heading toward the cliff! It is a word of warning full of grace and truth.

But Jonah does not want grace and truth for Nineveh. He does not want grace for his enemies.

So he runs. He runs in the opposite direction from the call.

He disobeys the call to go where he does not want to go, to do what he does not want to do, to say what he does not want to say, because he cannot handle what God feels for the city.

“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, because its wickedness has come up before Me.” (1:2). Yes, “wickedness” is one meaning of the Hebrew word God uses. But as OT scholar Douglass Stuart argues, another, and primary meaning of the word is “trouble.” [Word Biblical Commentary, 437, 449] Or “misery,” “disaster,” “difficulty,” “harm.” God is concerned about the “trouble” the city is in.

Jonah was not being sent to the city to warn it that God was angry and about to destroy it. Jonah was being sent to the city because God could see that the choices the city was making – especially the choices regarding God and God’s place in human life – were causing the city “trouble.” The city was experiencing “trouble” because it was heading in the wrong direction – not know right from wrong. God does not want the city to be in “misery.” God wants the city to thrive.

We know that in the second half of the 8th century before Christ, Nineveh has suffered a number of military loses. It has also suffered a number of diplomatic set-backs on the international stage. There was a rising famine. There were domestic up-risings. There had been an eclipse of the sun many took to be a omen of pending doom. There was a severe earthquake. The monarchy was shaky, weakened by internal ungodly choices.

“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3:4). The message is not: “In forty days I will destroy you.” The message is: “The clock is ticking ... the inherent consequences of your choices are catching up with you. You are about to experience the full force of the inherent misery of your choices.” God does not need to destroy cities that ignore Him and His ways. Cities that ignore Him and His ways eventually implode in on themselves. If cities choose the way of corruption and immorality and injustice and violence, the corruption and immorality and violence eat away at the cities’ souls. God does not need to act to destroy. The cities self-destruct. “Yet forty days and the city will implode.” A word of warning. And thus a word shot through with grace. “Jonah ... arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and speak out because the city’s trouble has come up to Me.” The implication being, “I do not want the city to experience such trouble.” “But Jonah.” But Jonah could not handle God’s feelings for the city. So the prophet heads off in the other direction. He was, presumably, in Jerusalem when the word of Yahweh came. Nineveh is east of Jerusalem. Jonah heads to Joppa, a seaport west of Jerusalem. There he finds a ship heading to Tarshish, in Spain. There was a class of ships called “Tarshish-

ships” not only because they sailed to that city, but because they were thought to sail to the extreme limits of the trading world. Last Tuesday, when we were planning today’s Service of Worship, Andrea reminded me of how the Jesus Storybook Bible tells the story. Jonah goes up to the ticket booth, and says, “One ticket to NOT Nineveh, please!” Anywhere but Nineveh.

What was Jonah thinking? Did he really think he could run from God? We know that in the ancient Near East, many people thought in terms of “localized gods.” That is, “the power and presence of a god was localized in the territory” where the worshippers lived. [Smart, Interpreter’s Bible, 879] So was Jonah thinking in these terms? That he could flee the presence of Yahweh by going to a place where Yahweh was not worshiped.

I do not think so. For one thing, Yahweh has expressed concern for Nineveh where He was not yet named. And for another, Jonah himself – in verse nine of chapter one – calls Yahweh “the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” Jonah the prophet does not have “localized” view of God. No prophet of Israel does.

Then what was Jonah thinking? The word of the LORD, the word of Yahweh, came to him in Jerusalem. The place where other words of the Lord had come to him over the years. Jerusalem was, therefore, the place of encounter with God, the place of intimacy with God. Jonah is thinking, I think, that if he just got away from the sacred place the word of God would go away; he would be left alone. God would then call some other prophet.

So he runs away. Or, again, tries to run away. He finds a ship that will take him away from encounter, away from intimacy. And, as Billy Graham once said, commenting on Jonah’s response to God’s call: “If you start running from the Lord, the devil will always have a boat for you. And you’ll always have money to pay the way.”

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah ... ‘arise, go to the great city.’ But Jonah arose... to flee the presence of the LORD” (1:2). But it does not work. It cannot work. Where is Jonah going to go? Where are you or I doing to go to get away from encounter and intimacy? There is no escaping the Living God and His feelings for the cities of the world.

So God goes after Jonah. God is, as Francis Thompson called him, “The Hound of Heaven.” When we run from Him He runs after us. Until He has us – hook, line, and sinker. Watch how God goes after Jonah. God begins with natural phenomena.

“And Yahweh hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm” (1:4). We are going to see God act in similar ways in the rest of the story. “And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah” (1:17). “Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up” (2:10). “So the LORD appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah” (4:6). “But God appointed a worm ...” (4:7). “God appointed a scorching east wind ...” (4:8). God goes after Jonah using natural phenomena. Or, as I should say, supernatural-natural phenomena! The LORD hurled a great wind ... and there was a great

storm.” God loves Jonah that much! This is not to say that every storm at sea is the work of God, even if the insurance companies do label such occurrences “acts of God.” It is to say that some storms at sea, or on earth, are the work of God. Most of the time God woos us back with a gentle breeze. But sometimes He comes for us in a raging wind. The storm was so intense that the ship was on the verge of breaking into pieces. The sailors start throwing cargo overboard hoping to make the ship swifter, trying to out-run the storm. But to no avail.

And where was Jonah during it all? In the hold of the ship, fast asleep (1:5). That is how determined he is to run from encounter and intimacy. He keeps running by running into unconsciousness. He sleeps himself into unconsciousness so he does not have to even think about the storm possibly being an act of God. But God keeps after him. God will not let us sleep ourselves away from knowing Him, and doing His will. On board the ship are people of various religious and philosophical backgrounds. Most of them would share the conviction that nature was at the mercy of the gods. In their minds the storm could only be the work of an angry god. And the only way to ward off the storm was to find out which god was angry and why. [Smart, 881] The captain of the ship was sure someone had offended one of the gods. So he ordered all the sailors to pray to their god for help. The captain made everyone pray. Including the passenger who was fast asleep. “Why are you sleeping? Get up and call on your god.” (1:6). Might not the world today be saying the same thing to the Church? “You seem to be sleeping through the storm. Do you not see all that is happening in the world today? Why are you sleeping? Get up and call on your god!”

Do you see what God is doing in the story? God is using the religious superstitions of a Gentile sailor to make the Jewish prophet face reality! God does more. God uses another common conviction of the ancient Near East religions. God works with the concept of the lot. People of that day often cast lots to decide important matters. [See Joshua 7:14, Acts 1:26] The Gentile sailors wanted out of the storm. They need to know who has offended their god. So they cast lots. And the lot fell on Jonah! Coincidence? Or the “Hound of Heaven” using whatever at His disposal to get Jonah’s attention? Jonah thought he could flee. A storm arises. He thought he could ignore the storm by sleeping in the hold of ship. The superstitious captain wakes him up. He thought he could keep quiet. The casting of the lot exposes him as the one who had offended his God. God does more. Even though he has been exposed, he still tries to ignore reality. So, the sailors rightly begin to interrogate him. “Who are you? What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your nationality?”

Jonah responds. “I am a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh, God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9). He does? Jonah fears Yahweh? Jonah fears the God of heaven? The God who made the sea? The God who made the dry land? No, Jonah does not ... he does not fear Yahweh. And the sailors ... the “pagan” sailors ... hear the contradiction between Jonah’s affirmation of faith and his actions. “What have you done?” they say; “How could you do this?” It is not a question. It is an exclamation. They cannot believe that a person who says they fear such a God would dare to try to flee from such a God’s presence.

See what God has done? He has used “heathen” unbelievers to confront Jonah with the absurdity of his actions. Ever happened to you? I remember the first time it happened to me. It was while in was in Seminary. I was the manager the apartment building where Sharon and I were living. All the tenants knew we were Christians, and that I was studying Theology. One day I was helping the woman who lived in apartment number six. As I was fixing something – I do not now remember what - I was grumbling about all the terms papers I had to write that term. I was anxious, very anxious. As some of you know I can be! After some time she said to me: “Why are you so anxious? Is not the God you are studying at Seminary, the God you keep telling me about, big enough to help you with the papers?” I felt like crawling in a hole, as I have felt in other similar situations. God had used that self-avowed atheist to confront me the self-avowed believer with the inconsistency between my belief and my actions.

God is doing this for the church in North America right now. He is using the younger generations to confront the established church with our many inconsistencies. As never before, many in our cultures are raising very troubling questions. “How could you do this?” “How can you behave like you do in the face of suffering and evil and say you follow Jesus of Nazareth?” Read the disturbing book by David Kinnamon, “Un Christian,” in which he lists the charges made against us in our time. “I am a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh, God of heaven who made the sea and the day land.” You do Jonah? Then why are you on a boat headed the opposite direction from where this God called you to go? But Jonah still keeps running. And God still keeps after him. God respects Jonah’s freedom, his freedom to choose. God wants Jonah to obey, to find the joy of living in God’s will. But God will not force him to obey. So God puts Jonah on the horns of a dilemma. The French sociologist Jacques Ellul helped me see this. It is God’s master stratagem to bring Jonah into His heart for the city. Jonah and the sailors know the reason for the storm: Jonah’s disobedience. Jonah and sailors know the solution to this crisis: throw Jonah overboard. There is another solution: Jonah could say “Ok Lord, I will go to Nineveh But that he cannot do. Yet. Everyone on board the ship knows the reason for the storm: the prophets disobedience. Everyone knows the solution to the crisis.

Watch this. If Jonah tries to ‘save face’ and keep quiet about his sin, the storm will continue, and he will keep dragging the sailors into trouble. On the other hand, if Jonah comes clean and confesses his sin, and has the sailors throw him overboard, the storm will subside, and the sailors will be saved from further trouble. What makes the dilemma worse for Jonah is that the sailors row harder to get to shore; they do not want Jonah to have to accept the consequences of his sin! “Pagan heathens” do not want the Jewish prophet to die!

What is Jonah to do? He confesses his sin – “I know that on account of me this great storm had come upon you.” And he accepts the consequences of his sin. He goes overboard. And the sailors’ lives are spared. And they worship the God of Jonah. Do you see what happened? Who are these sailors. Are they Jews? No. They are Gentiles! In Jonah’s mind Gentiles do not deserve the change to repent and find mercy and grace. Look what happened! The very thing Jonah does not want God to do for Gentiles

Jonah chooses to do for Gentiles! The very thing Jonah does not want God to do for the great city of Nineveh Jonah chooses to do for the sailors on the ship. Jonah sacrifices His life for people he had judged unworthy of the love of God!

Jonah disobeys the call to go where he did not want to go, to do what he did not want to do, to say what he did not want to say, because the going and doing and saying involved facing a dimension of the character of God he did not want to face. In the storm, on the horns of a dilemma, Jonah acts out the very dimension of God he did not want to face! It was at that point in the story that God sent the great fish to come and swallow Jonah.

To punish Jonah? No, to rescue Jonah. To rescue Jonah and get him back on the road to Nineveh. In the storm Jonah experiences the dimension of God's character he wants to see exercised against Nineveh; he experiences God's judgment ... but against himself! Jonah suffers the consequence of sin. And in the storm he experiences the dimension of God's character he does not want exercised for Nineveh: he experiences God's mercy – for Jonah! Jonah should have drowned. And God could have found another prophet to do His will. But God loves Jonah. God had called Jonah. And nothing would prevent the Word from having its full effect. Not even Jonah's disobedience.