

**Hearing.... And running?
Jonah 1:1-17**

That's quite a start to our Breakfast theatre story isn't it friends, this first chapter in the story of Jonah the son of Amittai.

And perhaps you noticed that the dialogue is fairly simple, the action starts almost immediately, and there is very little effort made to describe the setting.

It would be the perfect script for a classic Arnold action movie – Jonah! Go to Nineveh!

But seriously - it's very sparse on the details. When God speaks to Jonah we aren't told where Jonah is, God does not specify what Jonah is to say nor does He list any particular offences which the city of Nineveh has committed.

When Jonah flees but we're not told how he fled, what route He took or how long it took for Him to get to Joppa. He boards a ship, but we're not told what kind, or how much he paid.

You get the point.

So if we want to know more about this character Jonah and some of the details surrounding him we need to look at 2 Kings 14:23-27.

23 In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah,

Which puts us on the calendar around 786 B.C.

Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.

So we're in the time period where the northern tribes had broken away from the Kingdom of Israel, hence the reference to the two Kings – we're concerned with Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Samaria

24 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit.

When the northern tribes first broke away from Jerusalem and Judah, Jeroboam 1 had began an alternative religion and

established an alternative worship site in northern Israel to keep people from having to return to the temple in Jerusalem which would weaken the north politically.

25 He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

So now we discover that Jonah was a prophet from Gath Hopher, who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II. He claim to fame was that He prophesied that Jeroboam would achieve a military victory that would enlarge the northern Kingdom.

Now if you've never heard of Jonah outside the story which we started this morning – you are forgiven - because Jonah worked in the shadow of some of the greatest prophets Israel ever had.

Elijah and Elisha were his predecessors; Amos and Hosea were his contemporaries; and Isaiah came after him.

All amazing men of God who did miracles and stood up to ungodly rulers and wrote scripture.

By contrast Jonah's only claim to fame was a prophecy that a wicked King who used religion for political purposes would succeed in building up Samaria expanding its territory.

Jonah was kind of a one-hit wonder but 2 Kings 14:26 explains why this one act was so significant...

26 The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them.

27 And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.

So we shouldn't be surprised that when God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire - he balks at the idea, and tries to flee.

You see even though Jonah didn't have a career like Elijah or Isaiah did – He had come to epitomize and represent the

success and prosperity of the nation of Israel as the chosen people of God.

In contrast the Assyrian Empire represented by its capitol city of Nineveh epitomized everything that was Gentile. It was a constant threat to Israel - culturally, then religiously, then politically and militarily.

So Jonah and Nineveh are the antithesis of each other, polar opposites which repel like magnets do when you try to force them together.

And everything that happens in the first chapter of this story reflects this opposition of opposites.

The wickedness of Nineveh has come up to God, but Jonah goes down to Joppa,

the city of Nineveh is northeast from Gath-Hepher, Joppa is southwest from Gath-Hepher. Ninevah is in the east; Tarshish is in the west...

Why this focus on opposites? Well Friends – it's because the story wants to start us off by having us understand that human beings do not naturally seek out, or obey the one True God – instead they oppose him, they do the opposite of what He wants.

Either because we are ignorant of God and his laws and so like the city of Nineveh we develop our culture and live our lives in ways that may seem fine to us, but are unknowingly opposed to God's laws.

Or – we are like Jonah. We are not ignorant of YAHWEH or his laws because He has revealed himself to us – but... we don't realize that we approach our relationship with the divine with such self-focused and self-serving motives.

Jonah and the Northern Kingdom were thrilled to hear the Word of YAHWEH assuring them they would defeat their enemies – it benefited them. It helps to know the one true God.

It's only when YAHWEH instructs Jonah to go to preach against Nineveh that Jonah's self-centered nature is revealed.

He's being asked to do something that is not in Israel's or his best interests.

Now we might be thinking – why not go? YAWEH has told Jonah that its Nineveh's evil which has prompted this command to go and preach against it.

God is most likely angry with them and will probably destroy them. Wouldn't that be in Israel's best interests, wouldn't that be something that Jonah would want?

Well friends Jonah's previous experience with delivering a Word from YAWEH was all about grace and mercy – undeserved grace and mercy.

We need to remember Israel had a covenant relationship with God – that fact is highlighted through this story by the use of God's covenant name – YAHWEH.

And in this relationship arrangement between YAHWEH and Israel there were terms and conditions, and there were also consequences if either party was not faithful to them.

And as we read in 2 Kings 14:24 the northern Kingdom and Jeroboam II were certainly not great examples of Covenant faithfulness.

Given those circumstances YAHWEH had every right to let them suffer – in fact it was often the suffering that had brought them back to Him in the past.

They would suffer – turn back to YAHWEH and cry for help, God would send someone to deliver them and they would turn back and be faithful...for a while.

But in Jonah's experience the northern Kingdom had not cried out to YAHWEH, they had not turned away from their sin – but YAHWEH had graciously helped them anyways.

The point being that if YAHWEH was not going to hold his chosen people to their end of the covenant and enforce the consequences for unfaithfulness –

why would Jonah expect him to judge Nineveh who had no such relationship with God?

To put it bluntly – if Israel could get away with murder...what would Nineveh get away with!

So Jonah hears YAHWEH's command to go and preach against Ninevah and he's got a pretty good idea of what's coming.

So WDJ? What does Jonah do? He flees; he simply will not do it. In fact He would rather try to take his own life than be the instrument of God's grace to his enemies.

So we see the true nature of Jonah's relationship with YAHWEH revealed – it is self focused.

So what about us friends? We might be able to see the self-centeredness of Jonah – but what about our relationship with YAHWEH? Is it self-focused?

We believe that God loves us, forgives us – sent his son to die for us, is there to help us, hears our prayers, comforts us, guides us... and that is all true and good.

And we reach out to our community around us telling people that Christ came to give them life, How he can meet their deepest needs, how he gives us salvation and takes away our guilt...

And we understand that people want to feel like they are making a difference in this world, so we give them a chance to help-out with Inn from the Cold and fill up Shoeboxes...

And it's all true and good – but friends are we aware yet of how we can take all that and remain self-focused with it?

Doing good things makes us feel good, being free from guilt makes us feel good; knowing God loves us makes us feel good. It can so easily become all about us – how we are feeling and experiencing it.

Now we might feel a bit convicted about this and try to sort through all our motives inside, and sort out when it's ok to give ourselves some good feelings and when we should be acting 100% altruistically etc...

Friends we don't need to worry about that. The good news which the story of Jonah has for us is that God is on top of that for us.

Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus – not focused on trying to sort out all our motives – because He is the author and perfecter of our faith.

And that's what we see YAHWEH – who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – doing with Jonah.

It's as much for Jonah as for Nineveh that YAHWEH tells him to go and preach to them. Nineveh needs to know they are offending God in their ignorance, Jonah needs to become aware of how self-centered his relationship with God is.

So don't waste your time trying to sort out all your motives to determine if and when you were truly altruistic with God – just ask yourself a simple question which the story of Jonah raises for us.

What has YAHWEH told me to do... that I am running from?

Don't misunderstand – I'm not suggesting you imagine the scenario that would make you most unhappy or most uncomfortable...

and then figure that YAHWEH must want you to go there because it's so unpleasant and it's not what you want which would mean it's not self-focused.

Friends let me say this gently - that's messed up thinking. You'll be so self-focused on how miserable you are in that situation you'll be of no use to anyone!

You see YAHWEH didn't tell Jonah to stop being a prophet and be something else instead. He just wanted Jonah to bring a prophetic word to those Jonah hated.

Friends you needn't stop being what YAHWEH has called you to be, or deny the gifts and talents or the resources which He has given you.

But as we explore the story of Jonah this month we need to listen closely, and we need to examine our reactions to what we

hear in order to discover what YAHWEH is commanding us to do with who we are, with the gifts and resources he has given us ...

And we need to flag the commands that we instinctively make us react in disobedience and realize that is our sinful and self-centered nature identifying what is not in our interests.

Friends YAHWEH uses this to show us the areas where He will grow us past any self-interest we have in our relationship with Him.

So let's learn from Jonah's experience, let us be the opposite of Him.

Jonah heard and ran – let us hear and obey.

Jonah was proud and his pride brought him down – down to Joppa, down into the ship, and down into the sea - he was ready to die and would have but for YAHWEH's sending a fish.

Let us humble ourselves to obey and YAHWEH will lift us up with everlasting life as the scriptures promise.

Jonah was self-centered in his relationship with YAHWEH
Let us allow YAHWEH to grow us past self interest

Let's pray and ask the Holy Spirit to begin to help us identify where He wants to start working in us today.

- *forgive others as you have been forgiven*
- *I am the way, the truth and the life*
- *You shall have no other gods before me*
- *In your anger do not sin*
- *Do not steal, do not bear false witness*
- *Do not commit adultery*
- *You cannot serve both God and money*
- *Do not worry about tomorrow*
- *Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven*
- *Let He who is without sin cast the first stone*