

Main Idea: When we get beyond the big fish, we discover even bigger discoveries about a flexible God whose mercy extends beyond our own boundaries.

It will come as no surprise to many of you that I love a good fish story. My bass club held their first meeting of the year, this past week. Our first meeting is always the same. We review and tweak our by-laws, introduce the workings of the club to unusually large group of newcomers who, I can only surmise, have made it a resolution to pick up the sport to which even our Lord had a fondness. I find it, of course, no coincidence that Christ showed partiality for those who enjoy the water and the pursuit of that which can not be seen with the naked eye.

We also go over the new tournament schedule for the year and as you would expect when you get a number of fishermen together, we exchange a lot of “fish” stories, which if recorded in a written record, would be categorized as fiction. So you can imagine my excitement when my preaching assignment fell to the book of Jonah. After all, if we were to play word association and I said the word “Jonah”, what word you would you instinctively associate with the Old Testament minor prophet? Yep, whale or big fish. And while, we remember the big fish because it was one of those great bible stories many of us learned while in our children’s Sunday School classes, we would be remiss if we dismissed this little Old Testament book as nothing more than tales meant to entertain a child.

Jonah is a wonderful book whose message reveals much about the God we worship today. When one reads beyond the famous incidence of Jonah and the fish, we make discoveries that we never got to in our attention deficit years. So, since we are discussing new discoveries for a new year on this Epiphany season, which is a season of discovery, we turn our attention to a post big fish incident in Jonah’s life.

Now just for review, you will remember that God comes to Jonah and directs him to go to Nineveh and preach a word of judgment. Nineveh was the epicenter of the Assyrian empire. An empire notorious for its cruelty towards those they conquered. Ancient records indicate that Assyrians would often take hooks pierce the lips of those they captured and form a line of “hooked” prisoners and lead them away. There would be no love lost, and in fact, you would expect that an Israelite would welcome the

opportunity to speak a word of judgment on them. And that is precisely what God has commanded Jonah to do. To go to Nineveh and pronounce pending devastation. But Jonah wanted no part of it. To speak a word of judgment would be too risky, what if they responded, and what if God relented. So instead of heading northeast toward Nineveh, Jonah heads west. As if he could flee the call of God.

Now of course, the remainder of the first chapter and the second chapter are the portions of the text that you are most likely very familiar with. As he sails towards Tarshish, a perfect storm comes upon them and those on the boat interpret the storm as being a judgment on them. Jonah to his credit owns up to the grievance he has been to God and to the ship's crew. They throw him overboard and a divinely appointed fish swallows Jonah but somehow he survives. While resting in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays and God commands the fish to vomit Jonah up onto shore. It at this point in the story that we reach our scripture lesson for this morning and on this text and the narrative as a whole that I would like to offer a few discoveries we might can make this morning. In fact, I have five thoughts that have come to me this week as I have reflected on this text. Five?! I can hear the collective moans. "How long will this take?" you think to yourself. It won't be as bad as you think. And of course, I don't think my thoughts are exhaustive, in fact, you may have others that I hope you will share with me, but allow me to share with you my musings on this text.

The first thing I thought of as I read this text numerous times this past week was that, God is not obligated to dislike the people we dislike. Of course, in our more spiritual moments we would agree that Scripture presents God as one who accepts all people, but we are rarely in those spiritual moments. In fact, too often, we assume that God thinks just like us. Like much of American culture, we are pretty arrogant, when it comes to defining God's interests. Is not amazing how we form God in our own image?

Jonah clearly did not have any love for Assyrians, but he recognized that God may not share such contempt, even though God had spoken a message of judgment on them. Proper judgment, as most parents know, is not born out of contempt but rather out of love and the fact that God was going to judge Nineveh, I suspect was not because he disliked them but love them. Their violence, their evil, demanded judgment, but it was not God's hatred of them.

In a time of war, a time when we are continually defining acceptable boundaries and alienate those who are outside them, we must remember that God is not obligated to participate in our prejudices. This is an important discovery for the season of Epiphany, because we learn of God's inclusiveness. Of course, the day of Epiphany marks the visit of the magi to the Christ child. The magi were outsiders, astrologers in fact. They were not Jews in covenant relationship with God, but God was attracting all people, from all parts of the world through the birth of Christ. The implications for us are many. We are to be attractants for the gospel of Christ. We are to pique the interest of people whom God is pursuing. We are to open doors, not close them so that they can discover the glory of God for themselves. Remember how we spoke of reflecting God's glory? If we as a community faith, define ourselves as against this group, or opposed this one, then we are assuming that God, Himself, shares that disdain. We make a mistake to do so.

Now let's be honest. They are people that we don't like. I am not naïve enough to think that we all we go through life with an unending acceptance of everyone, but we must be careful, if for no other reason than the fact that this narrative teaches us that God deals with people on his own terms and not ours. In fact, I do not doubt that as we take up the responsibility that Mike reminded us of last week, to invite our neighbors to participate in Fellowship of the Valley, we will encounter people very different from us. Some of whom, we would not choose to share a drink with on the weekend, but our task calls us to be open to the movement of God in all people. Tough? Yes. Necessary? Absolutely!

Another discovery we can make in our text this morning is that God is far more flexible and exciting than we give Him credit for. God has a bad perception problem with many folks in our society. Unfortunately, I have to blame us church folks for it. For many, God (church) is boring. The last thing people want to do is invest time in a church "getting to know God." But that is because we want the kind of God, Jonah wanted but knew didn't exist. We assume that Jonah was resisting the call of God to preach, he was as the sailors discovered, running from God (1:10). But was it the thought of preaching that Jonah was fleeing or God Himself?

The text tends to imply that Jonah was fleeing God. Jonah must have known something about God that prevented him from participating in preaching of judgment.

Any Israelite would have relished the thought of telling those rotten Assyrians that God was going to get you, but Jonah knew God. It is possible that Jonah recognized the possibility that God could change his mind. God was, as Jonah must have known, unpredictable. His compassion and mercy is always getting in the way of our best made plans of judgment.

If Jonah was thinking this way, he was right. In our chapter, Jonah, does go to Nineveh, and preaches a dream sermon. Only one sentence. *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (v.4)*. There is only one point and no invitation. But remarkably, the folks of Nineveh respond even when Jonah gave them no opportunity. The king, the people, even the animals repent and we read the incredible verse 10 of our chapter, *“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”*

Jonah desired a predictable, boring, inflexible God, but that did not describe the God he knew. God is in fact, unpredictable. Working in ways that are mysterious to us. Doing surprising new things all the time. Calling pathetic figures, like Jonah, like us, to work on His behalf. One simply can not read scripture and come to conclusion that God is confined. He is God and will not conform to our need for routine. Consequently, He is a God that we can devote our lives and never exhaust its adventure and mystery. When we invite people to our community of faith, we invite them to participate in this adventure. That is an invitation, I think, is far more compelling than the boring God we too often present from our songs, and pulpits and programs.

Since we are talking about God’s adventurous and unpredictable nature, we might as well consider another discovery in our text. It is the discovery that God’s is incredibly persistent when it comes to carrying out His plan. God was going to get his message to Nineveh. Verse one of chapter three starts exactly the same as verse one of chapter one, *“The word of the Lord came to Jonah.”* Jonah couldn’t escape God’s plan for him, or his plan for having judgment proclaimed on the Assyrian capital.

This is helpful for us at Fellowship of the Valley, because, I believe it is God’s plan to birth a lasting community of faith here in this valley. One of the problems, that church planters, of which we all are in this place, is the fact that we tend to put too much pressure on ourselves. There is, for sure, a lot of work involved, but the reality is that

God is birthing this faith community not our own machinations. We all have been graciously called into this divine endeavor, but God's plan for new church will be carried out regardless of whether we participate or not. God just doesn't give up, because we are unwilling. What is amazing to me is that he chooses to use us and what a privilege that is. To realize that we set up because we are co-creating this faith community with God, or that we attend a meeting or invite a friend or host a group or edit a newsletter, we do so because of God's persistence in carrying out His plan.

What joy can be found, we will make this discovery. God, Himself, has allowed us to participate in His work. That is glorious and humbling. I hope that we can all find that pleasure as we work out this church plant with all its fear and trembling.

Now only, two other quick thoughts, though I have to admit that as I wrote this sermon, the thoughts kept coming. I deleted others because of time. Jonah is such a wonderfully rich book. It is only four chapters long, so I hope that this week you will go back and revisit it. But let me just point out two other quick things.

One really great discovery we can make in addition to God's acceptance, and His flexibility, and his persistence is that discovery of God's comedy. Indeed, I believe that the book of Jonah is a great lesson in comedy that teaches. I believe that all serious comedy is instructive and I believe that Jonah was a story with a comedic aspect that was meant to teach us so many of the things that we are discussing today. Now you don't study comedy as a biblical genre in seminary, but perhaps we should.

The problem with the book of Jonah is that everyone gets uptight about did he really get swallowed by a whale or not. But in my estimation, such debates completely miss the point. I think that Jonah was written with an element of absurdity that was meant to make us laugh and in the course of laughing cause pause for reflection. It is true, isn't that we laugh at that which we find to be true and the lessons of Jonah are true.

Just consider the story. The thought of a fish eating a man, getting indigestion, spitting him out, the man reluctantly goes and preaches to an overwhelmingly evil society that repents in totality. The thought of an entire city repenting so that even the animals walk around in sackcloth is crazy. But it is such absurdity that helps to illuminate its many lessons.

I had a friend of mine send me some pictures, many of which I found just completely hilarious and help to illustrate that we find truth in the midst of our laughter. All of the pictures were kind of in the vein of “You might be a redneck if...” One was of a “redneck doghouse.” Let me show you what I mean:



Now that is funny stuff, if for no other reason that there is some truth in it.

The whole episode of Jonah, including chapter 4 which is beyond the scope of our lesson this morning has an element of comedic absurdity, but it is within that comedy that we learn. So a great discovery we can make from this little book is to laugh. We need to lighten up a little. We, of all people, should be people of joy and we need to share the joy of laughter. If God can inspire such a funny book, then we surely we can find it within ourselves to live and laugh a little. Because Jonah teaches us that a little laughter can go a long way.

And finally, a discovery that we most likely know already but it never hurts to reiterate it again. We discover in our text this morning that God is a God of second chances. Listen again to verse one, “*And the word of the Lord came to Jonah, a second time...*” Did you catch it? A second time! God refused to give up on Jonah. I am not

going to say that God doesn't give up as some point, because well I don't know.

Judgment implies that God's longsuffering does have a limit, but Jonah teaches us that God doesn't give up easily. He is a patient and waiting God. A God ready to accept our repentance, ready to put us to His use. He is a God of second, third, a hundred chances.

So often, when speaking with people about God and their relationship with Him, there is the feeling that God done with us. But Jonah teaches us otherwise. There is new life with God through Jesus Christ. The message of new opportunities and new life permeate the New Testament and is foundational to the gospel message.

In just a minute we will approach this table and break bread and dip it into the wine. We will eat it and taste the goodness of God. We have the opportunity because God didn't quit us. He didn't forsake us. He gave us another chance.

When I hang out with my bass fishing buddies, there are plenty of stories that are told. Stories of the big one that was caught, and more frequently on the big one that got away. We will laugh or commiserate, but we always tell stories. Some of those stories are no doubt embellished, but they reason we continue to fish in club is that there is something in those stories, true or not that teach us how to be better fishermen. Such is the nature of fish stories. I discovered this week that Jonah's fish story was no different.