

July 5, 2020

Majoring in the Minors
Jonah: How Small Is Your God?
John 1:1-3

Opening Words: Lost in the back of the Old Testament are the Minor Prophets. There are twelve in all. This is the list: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In the traditional Hebrew canon, they are listed chronologically. Our canon is more concerned with length. Regardless, the order does not matter because each one is independent. It is important to note, they are not considered minor because they are not important. They are considered minor because they are brief in comparison to the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Many consider the Minor Prophets to be books of judgement. However, they are much more complex. They are books that paint a picture of God who never stops pursuing those who broke his heart. To date we have looked at Joel, Hosea, Amos, and Obadiah. Today and next week, we look at Jonah. This is sermon number five in my twelve-part sermon series, *Majoring in the Minors*.

Did you know, according to the United Press International, 75% of all Americans believe in the existence of God? That figure seems low because that figure is shrinking. In 2005, 82% of all Americans believed in the existence of God. Obviously by your presence, I know you believe in the existence of God. However, it is one thing to believe in the existence of God and another thing to understand God correctly. That was Jonah's problem. He believed God existed, but his understanding of God was incorrect. His understanding of God was too small. I hope that is not your problem. Our scripture reading for today is Jonah 1:1-3. Let me call this message *How Small Is Your God?*

Jonah 1:1-3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant “Dove,” but we just call him Jonah. He lived in the eighth century BC. There is no other way to say it. Jonah is a curious Old Testament book because it has a New Testament feel. Let me give you some strange coincidences. First, Jonah's name dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Second, Jonah is saved not saved by a whale, but he is saved by a great fish, the symbol of the church in the early church. The church exists to save people. Third,

Jonah's call to the Ninevites, Gentiles, non-Jews, is a New Testament theme. Jonah must have been Paul's favorite minor prophet. If you do not know the story of Jonah, then ask any Sunday school child and they will enlighten you. I do not want to sound critical, but the story reveals Jonah's ignorance about God. Jonah's understanding of God was too small. He failed to recognize the vastness of God. So, let me ask you the question of the day, how small is your God? Jonah's understanding of God was deficient in several ways.

First, Jonah did not understand the presence of God. In the Christian faith, we understand God to be omnipresent, all present. That means God can be in all places all the time. God's presence encompasses the whole universe.

The word of God came to Jonah. The Almighty directs him to go to the great city of Nineveh. The problem is he does not want to go. Instead of going to Nineveh, he goes to port city of Joppa. It is there he buys a ticket to Tarshish. Geography is important in this story. Joppa is on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and Tarshish is on the western shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Today, we call Joppa Jaffa, a suburb of Tel Aviv, Israel. Today, we call Tarshish Spain. What is Jonah trying to do? He is trying to run away from his divine task by running away from God. The prophet should have known better. You know what Jonah did not understand. There is no where you can go to escape God. There has never been a moment in your life when you have been orphaned. God is with us right now. If you believe God is omnipresent, always present say, "**Amen!**" God is all present! How small is your God?

Second, Jonah did not understand the power of God. In the Christian faith, we understand God to be omnipotent, all powerful. God is not limited by natural law. God has power over wind, water, gravity, physics, and the rest. God's power is unlimited.

With his ticket in hand, Jonah entered the ship and headed to Tarshish. That is about a 2200-mile trip. I have no clue how long that would take on a wooden ship. It must have been a long time and the best they could hope for was good sailing weather. It did not happen. The ship was involved in a great storm. The sailors looked for the person responsible. They draw lots and the lot fell on Jonah. They throw him into the water and the water instantly calms. The prophet would have died if not for the great fish, who swallows Jonah whole.

It has been said, a coincidence is a little miracle where God wants to remain anonymous. Do you think it was just a coincidence there was a great storm? Do you think it was just a coincidence the lot fell on Jonah? Do you think it was a coincidence the storm calmed once Jonah hit the water? Do you think it was just a coincidence a great fish just happened to be in the area? Do you think it was just a coincidence Jonah was swallowed whole? The fish could have just as easily bit down. As Jonah sat in the belly of the great fish, he must have had a new insight about God. God is all powerful.

If you believe God is all powerful say, "**Amen!**" God is all present! God is all powerful! How small is your God?

Third, Jonah did not understand the knowledge of God. In the Christian faith, we understand God to be omniscience, all knowing. God is aware of what is happening in the past, present, and future. That means it is impossible to keep a secret from God.

Jonah's escape to Tarshish was supposed to be a big secret. There is no sign in the text he told anyone. There was no going away party. He acted alone because he wanted to slip away and be forgotten. The Bible does not encourage secrets. They damage relationships and ruin community. That is exactly what happened in the story of Moses. The great lawgiver was raised by the Pharaoh's daughter in the palace. For many years, she kept the secret he was not her biological son. To make matters worse, Moses was a Hebrew. When it is finally revealed it caused a great stir. You can hide the truth from people for a long period of time, but you cannot fool God. Psalm 44:21 says, "*God knows the secret of the heart.*" Jonah learned the hard way. God is all knowing. If you are thankful God is all knowing say, "**Amen!**" God is all present! God is all powerful! God is all knowing! How small is your God?

Fourth, Jonah did not understand the love of God. In the Christian faith, we understand God to be all loving, omnibenevolent. This is the hardest aspect of God for Jonah to understand because love is so complex. This is the question that must be answered. Why did Jonah not want to go to Nineveh? There is a political side to that answer and a moral side to that answer. Nineveh was the capital of a foreign power, Assyria. Nineveh's sins were well known. Another minor prophet, Nahum tells us Nineveh's sins included plotting evil against the Lord, cruelty and plunder in war, prostitution, witchcraft, and commercial exploitation. If there was one place that did not deserve God's grace, it was Nineveh. Yet, God sends Jonah to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire because God loved them too. You cannot really blame Jonah. God's love is not easy. Sometimes love forces us to sacrifice. Sometimes love forces us to change. Nether one comes naturally. No one is exempt.

William Gladstone (1809-1898) is one of the names in the history of Great Britain. Near the end of his life he reported the most difficult thing he had to do in service to his country was report the death of Princess Alice (1843-1878) to the House of Commons. She was thirty-five years old and the daughter of Queen Victoria (1819-1901). The story is tragic. The little daughter of the Princess was seriously ill with diphtheria. The doctors told the princess not to kiss her little daughter and endanger her life by breathing the child's breath. That is exactly what happened. Once, when the child was struggling to breathe. It was more than Princess Alice could handle so, forgetting herself entirely, took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking to death. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said, "Momma, kiss me!" Without thinking of herself the mother tenderly kissed her daughter. That kiss was the beginning of the end. Princess Alice got diphtheria and some days later died. That story illustrates an

important point. Real love forgets self. Real love knows no danger. Real love does not count the cost. Real love is not afraid to sacrifice. However, real love also forces us to change.

Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983) was a Dutch Christian. During the Second World War she and her family helped many Jews escape the Nazis concentration camps. In time, they were caught and arrested. She was sent to Raven Bruck concentration camp. In her famous book, The Hiding Place, she told how she found hope in God while imprisoned. After the war she toured and lectured on the importance of forgiveness. At the end of one of those meetings a man approached her holding out his hand. She instantly recognized him as one of the wardens from the camp who had treated her and her family so badly. In that split second, she was faced with the reality of the choice to forgive. It is one thing to talk about forgiveness. It is another thing to forgive. She held out her hand and shook it as he quietly asked her forgiveness. She had to forgive him because God loved him too. Sometimes love forces us to change. Sometimes love forces us to sacrifice. Jonah had a hard time understanding God's love. I hope that is not your story. Many still struggle with the depth of God's love for us. If you do not believe me than look at the cross. How small is your God?

There is an old preaching story about a medieval monk. He announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. That story reminds us God did not count the cost of loving us. How can anyone question God's love for us? Augustine (354-430) may have said it best. He once said, "*God loves each of us as if there was one of us.*" If you are thankful God loves you say, "**Amen!**" God is all present! God is all powerful! God is all knowing! God is all loving! How small is your God?