

Jonah: *Casting Lots*
Jonah 1:6-10

It's Palm Sunday! It's a day that the church universal remembers and celebrates our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem as the crowds sang out "Hosanna!", declaring Jesus to be the rightful King of Israel. It's a special day for Christians, and I'm going to speak a bit about Palm Sunday towards the end of my message, but first let us return to our journey through the book of Jonah where we find the rebellious prophet caught up in a storm of his own making. Our text will be Jonah 1:6-10:

⁶So the captain came and said to [Jonah], "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."⁷ And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Silence of Jonah; 2) Casting Lots; and 3) The Question of Identity.

I. The Silence of Jonah

Let us remember what we have learned thus far in chapter one of this famous story. Jonah is a prophet of God. He is a man of high standing; he occupies a very important office in his country serving beside King Jeroboam II; and he is a patriot who famously helped reestablish the northern borders of Israel according to II Kings 14. However, one day Jonah receives a call from the LORD to rise up and travel many days to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, to cry out against that great city because their evil had become an abomination before the LORD. We get the sense that God intends to destroy Nineveh unless they repent, so God wants Jonah to cry out against Nineveh, to warn the enemy of Israel of impending doom, so that they might repent and be spared.

Jonah wants nothing to do with this assignment from God. Surprisingly, Jonah does not articulate his objections or ask God to find someone else for the job. Instead, Jonah simply gets up and heads in the opposite direction of God's will. He travels down to the coast, finds a ship heading for a distant land called Tarshish, and sets sail "away from the presence of the LORD." Not surprisingly, Jonah's disobedience has a storm attached to it. God sends a great wind upon the waters that leads to a massive storm. The pagan sailors cry out to their gods as they try to lighten the ship by hurling the cargo and stores over the side of the boat, yet the storm grows ever more tumultuous by the minute. Finally, the captain of the ship goes down below to the cargo hold and finds Jonah fast asleep. There he confronts the reluctant prophet with these words, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

Now, the next verse in the narrative reads (vs. 7): And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.”

Notice the silence of Jonah. Jonah refuses to cry out to his God at the captain’s request. All the pagan sailors have cried out to their gods, but Jonah doesn’t utter a single word. Now, why is that?

Well, let’s think about it for a moment. Jonah is in direct, conscious rebellion against the will of God—that’s why he’s on the boat in the first place. Jonah is running away from God’s call and God’s purpose for his life. He is fleeing the presence of the LORD, according to vs 3.

Church, prayerlessness and disobedience go hand in hand. The more we blatantly rebel against God, the less likely we are to pray, right? But here’s what we also know: there is always a storm attached to our disobedience. That storm wreaks havoc with our lives, but not just our lives...the storm of our disobedience affects everyone else on our ship as well. Which leaves us with this question, “Will God hear our prayers for deliverance in the storm of our disobedience?”

In his commentary on Jonah, Dr. Hugh Martin addresses this question with great insight: Prayer is an appeal to God to accomplish concerning us the things which He has promised; to carry out in our experience and history, in our state and prospects, *His own will*. Hence, not merely does God refuse to hear the prayer of the impenitent, but really the impenitent refuse truly to pray. The first *true prayer* that comes from the transgressor begins with a resignation of his rebellion. Your coming over to God to ask Him to fulfil His will—and prayer is the offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to His will—implies the giving up, the surrendering of your own will to His. It appears then, that repentance is necessarily implied in all true prayer. Without repenting and returning to his duty, Jonah’s prayers could not be heard. Nay, rather; truly, Jonah could not pray.¹

Church, let us take these words to heart: Repentance is necessarily implied in all true prayer. True prayer is a surrendering of our own will, and an appeal to God to accomplish His promises in our lives according to HIS will, not ours.

And herein lies the problem for most people: like Jonah, so many of us do not trust God’s will for our lives. When we are young we picture God as the great killjoy of our fun. When we grow older we believe that God is self-centered, concerned only with His glory and His agenda regardless of our suffering. For any number of reasons many of us have decided to live life on our own terms, to flee the presence of the LORD come what may. But then the storm comes...and the storm always comes...and we find ourselves in desperate need of deliverance, faced with the same dilemma Jonah faces now: How can we cry out to God for salvation and deliverance from the storm when we have no intention of repenting? How can we hope that God would show us mercy when we remain determined to live in abject rebellion against God’s will for our lives?

¹ Hugh Martin, *Jonah*, pp. 125-126.

This is the tension we feel in the text, and it is precisely this tension that accounts for Jonah's silence. When our hearts are set on rebellion, even in the midst of the storm we have created, we do not pray...we cannot pray...because true prayer would require heartfelt repentance, and that would mean admitting our sin and turning away from our sin.

Church, I hope you can see that this very tension is why Jesus had to die on a Roman cross. We will always love our sin more than we love God until we see just how much God loves sinful people. Paul writes in Romans 5:8 that God demonstrated His love for us when He sent His Son to die in our place while we were still rebellious sinners...while we were still His enemies. Do you understand what that means? It means that we can trust God because God loves us without condition. God loves us with a deep, sacrificial love that far surpasses the love we might experience in the arms of a lover, or in the affection of parents or our children, or in the company of our best friends. Nobody else loves us without condition...only God. And because of God's great love for us, we can trust God...even when we are called to live in a counter-intuitive, sacrificial way in order to pursue God's will for God's glory. Hear the good news of the Gospel: no matter how horrible your sin and rebellion against God, you are deeply beloved, even now. No matter how far we have run to flee from the presence of God, we are pursued by Grace. God's love for sinful people is steadfast and immovable. But if we are to pray and be heard by the God who loves us, if we are to be rescued from the storm of our own making, we must repent of our rebellion. We must surrender our will to God's will, and place our trust in the One who gave us His only Son, amen?

If you find yourself in a fierce storm this morning, I hope you will take these words to heart. God will hear your prayer when it begins with heartfelt repentance...that's how prayer works. Let us look now to our second subheading.

II. Casting Lots

Convinced that this particular storm must be the work of an angry god, the sailors say to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So...what is this business of "casting lots?"

Old Testament scholar Kevin Youngblood writes:

Lot-casting was the only form of divination permissible in Israel. The basic procedure involved small stones or other objects marked in such a way as to represent individuals or commodities. The marked lot objects were then cast into a receptacle of some kind. The receptacle was then shaken until one of the marked lot objects fell out, which thus indicated the divinely designated individual or item.²

You may recall other references to "casting lots" such as the soldiers who cast lots for Jesus' clothing during His crucifixion, or when the disciples cast lots to determine who would replace Judas as the twelfth disciple in Acts 1. Casting lots was a uniquely Jewish custom of determining God's will when other methods of discernment failed. Proverbs 16:33 states: The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Thus, it is no small irony that the

² Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah: Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 2013), p. 79.

heathen sailors employ a Jewish practice of discernment when the Jewish prophet avoids taking any responsibility at all!

Now, to be clear, we should not think that this biblical reference to casting lots somehow justifies gambling...as though God is somehow responsible for what cards you get in a poker game or how the dice land on the table in casino! We should not think that God's will is being revealed through our "casting lots" when we are already steeped in disobedience. That said, we know that God is sovereign, and there may be times that God allows us to cast lots to make a decision. Hugh Martin mentioned a general who is forced to send men up a hill to almost certain death in battle. For the general to cast lots in deciding who to send on that mission might be completely reasonable. Casting lots is not a primary means of spiritual discernment, but in this instance, God reveals the cause of the storm to the desperate sailors by lots...and the cause is Jonah.

Now, before we move on, I want to make one quick observation about this process of casting lots to determine guilt. We must note the unwillingness of the heathen sailors (and Jonah) to seek first the truth of their own conscience.

Remember the disciples at the last supper, when learning that a betrayer was at the table, each man (with the exception of Judas) began to ask, "Is it I, Lord?" (Mark 14:19). The disciples were, by virtue of their relationship to Jesus, very aware of their own evil tendencies. But now contrast the behavior of the disciples with the behavior of the heathen sailors. Every man on that ship must know that his sin is detestable to God, yet each man is unwilling to own the possibility that it is his sin that has brought about this great storm. So, they cast lots in hopes that God will reveal who is to blame...each certain in his own heart that it is not him.

Church, I hope you can see how familiar this behavior is for so many of us. Ask anyone if they are perfect, and what will they say in response? "Well, no one is perfect." Even the most ardent atheist will admit to his lack of perfection and his propensity to be selfish or a bit rude at times. We are all proud of our humility that we can admit our lack of perfection; and those of us who are particularly humble will even acknowledge that some of our current suffering is due to our own sinful choices. But when it comes to acknowledging the serious, eternal, damning consequences of our sin, when it comes to acknowledging that this current storm that threatens everyone on the ship is a product of our guilt, when it comes to acknowledging that we are completely indebted to our offended God for an undeserved act of kindness and mercy for our unmerited salvation...well, that's a whole different ballgame, right?

Hugh Martin writes: The natural man is prepared neither so to condemn himself, nor so to be indebted or obligated to his God. He will admit he is a sinner so far as to acknowledge the justice of the smaller trials that he is called upon to endure; but then...he admits nothing extraordinary—nothing extraordinarily sinful, base, or ill deserving. This admission he can make without any great humiliation; without needing to make any application to God for any signal act of grace, or placing himself under any great obligation to God. His trials and punishments being nothing very extraordinary, he can contrive to bear them; to stagger on under them.³

³ Martin, pp. 128-129.

I spoke with a man many years ago who was very much like Dr. Martin's description. He had no problem admitting that he wasn't perfect, but he was so confident of his own goodness as compared to others that he had no fear of God's judgment upon his life. He was convinced that whatever punishment God doled out for his sin, he would simply endure it and get through it. He could not accept that his sin might be responsible for the storm raging around him, nor was he willing to confess that his only hope was in the unmerited grace of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. As far as this man was concerned, his sins were small, and the consequences of his sin were manageable...there was no need for the death of Jesus or God's unmerited grace.

Church, one of the most telling indicators of the Holy Spirit's work is that we finally see our sin accurately. Our sin is against a holy and just God, and that sin is a poison that will absolutely lead to eternal death. We won't be graded on a sliding scale. Our choices, behaviors, and attitudes won't be held up in comparison to anyone. We will be judged alone by God's law, and we will be convicted as idolators, murderers, adulterers, liars, thieves, coveters, and so on. Not one of us will stand in the presence of God and justify ourselves as those who "are not perfect but we've been pretty good compared to a lot of people we know"! Please, if you call yourself a Christian, ask God to show you your sin, so that you see your sin accurately. Sadly, apart from the Holy Spirit, we are all heathen who are inclined to minimize our own sin while "casting lots" for the sake of blaming others.

Now, it is true that this particular kind of storm on this particular occasion was, in fact, due to Jonah's disobedience. And it is also true, that, on occasion, you will be caught up in a particularly fierce storm due to the sins of others. But always keep this truth in mind: as Christians, we should be the first in any room to ask, "Is it I, Lord?" We should be those who are most honest and most familiar with our sin and the horrible consequences that our sins deserve. Nothing is as unattractive as a "Christian" who minimizes his or her sin while "casting lots" to pin blame upon others. If we have been convicted by the Holy Spirit, we should be the first in any room to point the finger first at ourselves because we are those who are aware of the evil that is within us and the awful costliness of our sin, even as we are those who find our hope in the unmerited favor and mercy of God who saved us when we could never save ourselves! Such is the contrast between heathens and Christians: heathens minimize their sin and look to blame others while Christians immediately ask, "Is it I, LORD?" Given that criteria, how would your family, friends and co-workers describe your behavior in the midst of the storm? Heathen, or Christian? I hope you will give that some thought as we now turn to our third and final subheading.

III. The Question of Identity

Having discovered through the casting of lots that Jonah is the one responsible for the storm, the heathen sailors fire several questions at Jonah in an attempt to understand who Jonah's god is and why that god is so angry. In vs. 8 we read: Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

The heathen sailors are trying to discern what god is so angered as to send this unnatural storm, so they ask Jonah several questions that might identify his god. They ask about his vocation, his place (land and country), and his race. These are all identity markers, right? If I ask you to tell me who you are, you will likely tell me where you are from, what you do for a living, and something about your people. We use these categories to articulate our identity, but notice that the heathen sailors are asking these questions to identify Jonah's gods. Timothy Keller writes: In ancient times, every racial group, every place, and even every profession had its own god or gods. To find out which deity Jonah had offended, they did not need to ask, 'What is your god's name?' All they had to ask was who he was. In their minds, human identity factors were inextricably linked to what you worshipped. Who you were and what you worshipped were just two sides of the same coin. [Worship] was the most foundational layer of your identity.⁴

Friends, whatever serves as your unquestioned, ultimate goal...be it earning dollars or being considered pretty by others...whatever you are willing to sacrifice everything else to obtain...that is your god; and that which you worship is ultimately the primary source of your identity.

Again, Keller says it best:

Everyone gets an identity from something. Everyone must say to himself or herself, "I'm significant because of *This*" and "I'm acceptable because I'm welcomed by *Them*." But then whatever *This is* and whoever *They are*, these things become virtual gods to us, and the deepest truths about who we are. They become things we *must* have under any circumstances.⁵

So, where did Jonah get his identity? Let us pay close attention to the first answer that comes out of Jonah's mouth. These are, in fact, the first words that Jonah speaks in our story. Look at vs. 9: And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew..."

Even before Jonah identifies the God that he worships, Jonah leads with his ethnicity. Jonah surely loved God and enjoyed being a prophet, but even more central to his identity than his faith in God was his love of country. Is it any wonder, then, that Jonah refused to present God's judgement and potential mercy to the Ninevites who were a threat to his people? Honoring God was important to Jonah, to be sure. However, when it came down to it, Jonah's final and deepest allegiance was to his race...his nation...his people, even if that meant running away from God.

We'll pick up here next time and go deeper into this question of identity, but for now, let us go back to the dusty road leading into Jerusalem 800 years after Jonah. On this first Palm Sunday, hundreds of Jews are gathered along the roadside leading into Jerusalem, cheering and dancing and celebrating the arrival of Jesus. Why? Why are they so excited about Jesus? Well, listen to what they are saying. In John's gospel we read: The large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, p. 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

Did you hear it? The crowds cried out, “Hosanna!” Which literally translates, “Save us now!” They assumed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver Israel from the Roman occupiers. They looked to Him to serve as their political King who would re-establish Israel as a world power.

And what happened a few days later when Jesus failed to deliver on their nationalistic expectations? The crowd turned on Jesus and shouted, “Crucify Him!” Like Jonah, the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem worshipped their nation above everything else...even their own Messiah.

Church, Jesus is worthy of our worship. He is worthy of song and dance. He is worthy of celebration on this beautiful Palm Sunday. But let us learn from Jonah, and the crowd on the street there in Jerusalem. Jesus has not come to serve our race, our country, our politics, our vocation, or any other gods that we worship. Jesus will not bow to another, nor will Jesus accommodate our idolatry of race, nation, vocation, self-glorification, or entertainment. Jesus is LORD, and He has come to set us free from the tyranny of worshipping gods who are not gods. He has come to deliver us from the storm of our own doing if we will repent and place our trust in Him. Jesus has come to give us an identity that is unshakeable...as those who are chosen, loved, and redeemed by the shed blood of God’s only beloved Son. It is an identity that is given to us by grace, and it is an identity that empowers us to have grace for others.

As we enter into Holy Week, let us remember the costliness of God’s grace. Let us walk with Jesus as He endures testing, ridicule, arrest, false charges, a bogus trial, scourging, and crucifixion...all for the sake of rescuing our unworthy souls from the punishment we deserve. Let us stand beside the empty tomb and declare with our whole hearts, “Jesus is LORD!” Jesus is our Savior...not our race, not our nation, not our politicians, not our business acumen, not our friends, not our good looks or our healthy bodies...Jesus and Jesus alone has come to save our souls and to give us an identity that cannot be shaken. Pray a true prayer this morning. Repent of your rebellion against God, and call upon His name...the name of Jesus...for the salvation of your souls. This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let us pray.