

“Love that Goes Overboard”

Introduction: I recognize that it seems just a little bit weird. It seems weird to spend these four Sundays in Advent in the OT book of Jonah. In Jonah you’ll find no angels, no sheep or camels, and no amazingly pregnant mothers. But as I’ve thought about Jonah for the last little while, and about what we learn not only about him, but even more, about his God, who is our God, Jonah is a very appropriate person for us to walk with in the coming weeks. It’s not because there are four chapters in Jonah and four weeks in Advent, so it all works out very nicely from an organizational perspective thank you very much! It’s because the God who we meet in Jonah is a God of deep compassion, so deep that ultimately he sent his one and only Son to embody that compassion and to die for us in order that it might be applied to us. As John puts it in his first letter:

This is how God showed his love among us: He *sent* his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and *sent* his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. – 1 John 4:9f

This sending is what Advent is all about. We look back to remember and celebrate the first sending, or coming of the Son, Jesus, in his birth, and then we also look forward to anticipate God’s second sending, when Jesus will come again to bring God’s kingdom reign in its fullness, on earth as it is in heaven. This is Jonah’s God. This is our God. This God is a sending God.

But Jonah is also an appropriate person for us to walk with in Advent because in the middle of these two sendings of Jesus, God does not sit still, nor does he allow us to sit still. Instead, so deep is his love for the world that he sends us to make others aware of his compassion. As we mentioned last week when we pondered the sending by Jesus of the seventy-two with his peace and with the good news that the kingdom of God in Jesus had dawned (Luke 10:1-12), Jesus gathers us, he teaches us, and then he sends us out. But, like Jonah, we don’t always want to go! In fact, this is the very helpful thing for us about Jonah. Most of the other prophets are larger than life. They’re bold. They’re courageous. They’re fearless. “Here I am, send me” exclaims Isaiah. But Jonah? Jonah is rebellious, Jonah is petty, Jonah is narrow-minded, Jonah is sullen, Jonah is self-serving, Jonah thinks he knows better, Jonah, if you’ll allow me to say this, is us. How God has compassion not only for the Ninevites, but also for Jonah, has a lot to say to us about this God who loves the world so very deeply that he sends.

I. The Reluctant, Running Prophet

A. As we look a bit closer at this chapter in Jonah’s life, we begin by hearing God’s call on Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. Jonah, it seems, didn’t think twice. He didn’t bother praying on it, he didn’t ask any questions, he didn’t employ a 24-hour rule before responding, he simply ran, the other way, as fast as he could! Jonah wanted nothing to do with being sent by God to these people. Why? Well, frankly, they were a very wicked people. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, one of the cruelest and most violent empires of ancient times. In the eighth century B.C. when Jonah lived, their wickedness hadn’t yet reached its height, but it was bad enough. In today’s terminology, we would easily classify it as a “terrorist state.” Torturing, dismembering, and decapitating their enemies was standard practice, along with child sacrifice and cruel slavery. One could easily imagine Jonah being just a little bit afraid to stand on the streets of this city urging people to repent!

B. However, fear did not seem to be the main reason for Jonah's refusal. For, what went through Jonah's mind and heart, as we'll see even more clearly in the coming weeks, is that this evil people didn't deserve God's mercy. They deserved judgment. Why go and preach to them and give them another chance? Jonah knew that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (4:2), but he just couldn't believe that the Ninevites were deserving of this love. Furthermore, while Jonah undoubtedly knew somewhere in the back of his mind that through his promise to Abraham, God's intention was to bring blessing to all nations, Jonah and many of his Jewish contemporaries got easily tempted by a nationalist, "Israel first" policy. A nation as different racially and religiously as the Assyrians, they reasoned, would certainly need to get their act together before God would bring them into the fold of his mercy. "Lord," Jonah was in effect saying, "extending your love to this miserable people is just too much; you've really gone overboard this time."

C. What do you think about Jonah's response? How does it strike you? A number of you shared last week of your desire to go bring peace to various people in your lives. But are there people to whom you would rather not go?! You can't think you're off the hook just because God isn't sending you to Iran, or Saudi Arabia. God may just be sending you to work, or to your neighbor's house, or to a town meeting, or to a holiday meal with family, all places where we can certainly find an "other" we are tempted to believe does not deserve the mercy of God, until, and unless, they shape up. Our struggle, without knowing it, is theological. Like Jonah, we can't figure out how the mercy and justice of God can be found in the same sentence. Simply put, how can God be merciful to evil people and still be just, allowing their evil to go unpunished?

For the full answer we must allow Jonah to point us to Jesus, for what it takes is indeed a love that goes overboard; it takes a love that is substitutionary in nature. In this first chapter, we are given a picture of this love as it comes to the sailors on whose ship Jonah was fleeing.

## II. Substitutionary Love

A. You see, if Jonah thought he could outrun God, he was sadly mistaken! God was always one step ahead of this reluctant prophet. In this instance, God stirred up a storm to get the attention not only of Jonah, but also, somewhat ironically, the pagan sailors. Jonah would end up ministering God's mercy to the nations, whether he wanted to or not! It happened when the sailors, freaked out by the violence of the storm, woke a sleeping Jonah up and asked him to call upon his God to rescue them. Remarkably Jonah's response was that they should throw him overboard into the sea. When they do, the raging sea grows calm. And in response, the sailors begin to worship the LORD, the one who made the sea and the dry land.

B. It's hard to say what Jonah's motives were in this instruction to toss him overboard but at the very least, he finally seems to be thinking of others ahead of himself, which is the first step toward what love truly is. It would be a long journey, with lots of fits and starts, as we will see. But it reveals that true love is not about using others to meet our needs; true love involves some sort of sacrifice on our behalf for the good of another.

Illustration: Parents know this full well. To enable your child to become all that he or she can be involves spending time with them, and money on them, lots of time and lots of money. This naturally takes away from time and money we'd otherwise spend on ourselves. But we gladly sacrifice these things out of love for our child.

Jonah sacrificed his life (or he thought he did) for the sailors; he substituted himself for them so that the raging sea would destroy him and not them.

C. Significantly, in a conversation he was having with some of the religious leaders, Jesus refers to himself as one “greater than Jonah” (Ma. 12:41). He is referring to the fact that as Jonah offered himself to rescue the sailors from the sea, so would Jesus offer himself to rescue us from our sin. It is a substitutionary love that we don’t deserve. It is a love grounded fully in the compassion and mercy of our God. Although, as we will see next week, Jonah didn’t die, Jesus really did, which truly makes his love for us, and for the world, a love that goes overboard. It is an overboard kind love in that is merciful – we don’t deserve it, and it is just – the penalty for our sin is paid as God, in Jesus, takes the judgement due us upon himself.

And so we remember in this Advent season that the one who was sent to us in the manger would eventually be sent to the cross so that we might experience his compassion and in turn be sent to share such good news with others. May Jonah help us in this season to come to know this God of compassion more clearly, so that we may love him more dearly and be ready and eager to say, “Here I am, send me,” even if it’s just around the corner.