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This way forward

(NOT SO) HEROES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:

Jonah, The Whiney Prophet

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Last week we explored Samson. A bully who used his strength his entire life to further his own ends. Somehow, in the midst of his actions, God's will is accomplished, but Samson leaves a path of wanton destruction everywhere he goes. It's hard to believe a person like Samson made the Bible.

Jonah, at first, seems to be an equally baffling character, albeit not as brazen. But his story will be harder to hear because, by the end, it will hit closer to home.

In some ways, Jonah is one of the most intriguing, fun, clever, and curious books in all of scripture. It is filled with humor and outlandish situations. Prayers from a fish's belly, animals wearing sackcloth, people sleeping during raging storms, and Jonah praying for death because he misses the shade of a plant.

However, through its structure and storytelling, it is also one of the most revealing, pointed, and troublesome books as well.

It begins when God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah refuses. For most of us, running from God's will is an apt metaphor for the subtle ways we avoid being obedient. For Jonah, it was a track meet!

Immediately after God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he packed his bags and went in the *exact opposite direction*. No subtlety with Jonah!

We have all done it at one time or another. Perhaps it was a call to go on a mission trip or serve on the school board. But it might have been something more life changing ... when you refused to take a new job or move to a place you knew in your bones God was calling you to go to. You just didn't want to do it.

In this series on the not so Heroic figures of the Old Testament, Jonah is not as ruthless and egocentric as Samson but, in some ways, he is just

as hopeless and self-centered and filled with anti-heroic actions at every turn.

As Jonah kept running, he found himself on a boat with strangers. God sends a storm. Jonah knows it's God trying to turn him around, but he says nothing. He continues to endanger these strangers' lives by keeping to himself.

What happened last week in Charlottesville was a horror. And, in part, it comes about when people like you and I fail, like Jonah, to stand up and speak the truth. The truth against hatred. The truth against all forms of prejudice. The hard reality is that any silence on our part emboldens those whose hearts are filled with evil. We must not be complicit for other's harm through Jonah-like silence.

But Jonah not only refuses to speak up, he also fails in another way. While the others are praying, Jonah refuses even to speak to God. Perhaps he is afraid to pray, for he knows it could mean turning around and heading in God's direction.

Desperate, the sailors cast lots to figure out who is to blame. It falls on Jonah! He finally comes clean.

At this point, Jonah actually shows some humanity, as well as another layer of stubborn refusal. We might have thought Jonah would be ready to repent and do God's will, but no such words pour forth from his lips. Instead, as a way to save the other sailors' lives, a commendable action, while still not doing the Lord's will he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you." Jonah would rather die than go to Nineveh!

The heart of this story, though, is not about our casual or even stubborn refusal to be obedient to God in various places in our life. Jonah's story is even more complex and multi-layered. It's about the heart of the gospel, the nature of God, and the essence of our weakness.

Jonah went the exact opposite direction because he wanted the exact opposite of God. He didn't like those Ninevites. He hated them enough to want them all to perish from God's Old Testament-like wrath! Fire, Brimstone, and Hellfire destruction is what he wanted for Nineveh. Literally!

On one level, it is hard to blame Jonah. The Assyrians, of which Nineveh was their capital city, were ruthless conquerors, bent on world domination and they had committed endless atrocities in this quest.

In the end, Jonah tells us exactly why he does not want to go,

O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

What a sniveling whiner! Jonah knows God. He prays to the Lord. He thanked God for being delivered from the fish with great and lofty words of praise and glory. He offered the sailors an orthodox-creed understanding of faith and professed God as Lord of all things. It is easy to worship and praise God when things are going our way, like when we are being rescued, when God's will conforms to our own. But, the crux of the story takes place precisely because Jonah knew God all too well.

He knew God was a God of love and mercy. But Jonah was not ready to see Nineveh forgiven. He was not ready to let go of his hatred. In fact, he would rather die.

This story ends very much like that of the Prodigal Son, with Jonah playing the role of the elder brother. Jonah, it turns out, is a whining complainer who asks for death four different times in the story! He cannot stand to see mercy for others. And, because he cannot forgive, he ends the

story alone, in the blazing sun angry enough to die from heat prostration!

Jonah is the part in each of us who really does not want our enemies to find peace and wholeness; we want them to lose their business, their crops to fail, and their lives to fall apart.

The heroic people are those who experience the wanton evil of their enemies, but still find a measure of mercy and love.

Nadine Collier exemplifies this courage. Her mother was one of those murdered in cold blood by Dylan Roof during a Bible study. She would have understood Jonah's feelings toward Nineveh and what they had done to the people of Israel. But, unlike Jonah, she did not run away from God's call. She did not shy away from Jesus' command to repay evil with good. So, with great courage and commitment she uttered those now famous words to him, "I forgive you." But, even more, she realized that God is the ultimate source of forgiveness. This is what else she had to say,

You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you.

So, Jonah is not a quaint story about a fish and some people. It lies at the very core and heart of scripture – the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Eventually, of course, Jonah does preach to the Ninevites. It must have been the most lackluster sermon in the history of sermons! But they repent! Despite Jonah's failures, God uses Jonah and accomplishes His plan – the redemption of Nineveh – over 120,000 people!

The good news, the great and glorious news of the Gospel, is that God is always filled with infinitely more mercy than we could ever muster within ourselves. Let each of us be willing to speak the truth to others, accept it about ourselves, and most of all walk into the stream of His mercy and love. Amen.