

West Valley Church
11/13/11

Engage The Word
Part Four: Jonah 1-4

I have a good friend who is a highly accomplished photographer out of Denver, Colorado. I've known him since he was in one of my youth groups years ago. His work has been published in numerous magazines, been featured on Oprah, and he has been contracted to do photo work with international non-profits, businesses, and even governments. He's one of the personal photographers for her Excellency, Ernestina Naadu Mills, the first lady of the Republic of Ghana. She is a believer in Jesus who has a strong faith and is willing to be public about it. In fact, she and her husband recently contributed to create a Ghanaian national edition of the Bible that they are making available to all students in the public schools of Ghana. This is a copy of the inside cover of that Bible, and this is what it says:

“MY DEAR STUDENT,

President John Evans Atta Mills and myself love God's Word and are committed to its practice. It is my pleasure to partner with Scripture Union and Tyndale House Publishers to place this New Living Translation in your hands.

If you will devote yourself to learn about Jesus Christ and develop a personal relationship with Him, it will be of great profit to you. You will gain wisdom and understanding from the Bible that you cannot get anywhere else. This is the best preparation you can make to live fully functional lives; to be at peace with God; and to effectively serve Christ and your family, this nation, and humanity.

The Bible clearly instructs young people to take responsibility for their own spirituality and to fully interact with God's Word; to read, study, meditate, memorize, obey, and practice God's Word. Psalm 119 says: “How can a young person stay pure? By obeying your word...I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” The Bible must become for you the standard of your conduct and the goal of your actions.

The Bible addresses the kinds of challenges we face in Ghana; inter-tribal and communal peace, poverty, disease, responding to the HIV/AIDS endemic, reconciliation, and developing sound human capital for national development.

As a young person, my own personal encounter with the Bible was significant and has transformed my life. I, therefore, urge you to read this NLT Bible that I am placing in your hands, and obey what it says.

God bless our homeland Ghana as we commit ourselves to the principles and

standards of God's Word, the Bible.

Blessings to you,
Her Excellency Dr. (Mrs.) Ernestina Naadu Mills
First Lady, Republic of Ghana”

It's no surprise that God is blessing Ghana, and it's going to be interesting to see what else God will do there because of their commitment to his Word. By the way, Ghana is a democracy, has the highest student enrollment of West African countries, has an adult literacy rate of over 65%, and was the world's fastest growing economy in 2011. What I wouldn't give to have that be an American Flag and a statement by our president. So many issues would be resolved if we would just read the Bible. Just think of what God will do for us as we are reading it together! That's why we are on the fourth Sunday of our six weeks of *Engage the Word*, on a forty day journey through the Bible together. Would you take out your “Engage the Word” books, and turn to the sermon outline page for today, day 21. If you don't have a book, you can use the sermon notes in your worship folder, or use your iPad or smart phone and go to our website on the sermons page and download it from there. If you don't have a book, go to Guest Services right outside these doors.

Your reading for today is the story of Jonah. Many of you have begun talking about this story in our Community Groups this morning. By the way, if you haven't been to those, I encourage you to join us next Sunday at 8:45 for some great discussion.

Let's see what Jonah's story has to say to us today. If you haven't read it, please do—it's only four short chapters. In it, God calls Jonah, and tells him to go up to Nineveh to preach to the people there: “The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce My judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.’” (Jonah 1:1-2, nlt)

Nineveh was in what is now Northern Iraq, just about to the modern-day northern border. It was the farthest city of the known world at that time—the most remote city going that direction. Here's a map of the Mediterranean. Nineveh was about 500 miles northeast of Jerusalem. The blue arrow shows where Jonah was in Israel, and the green arrow shows where God wanted Jonah to go up to—Nineveh.

Jonah was a Jew, the Ninevites were not Jews. Jonah had no interest in seeing these non-Jews get any kind of favor or blessing from God. They were headed for destruction and Jonah preferred it that way, thank you very much.

So because Jonah wouldn't obey God, I want you to see first

1. Jonah: *Running* from God.

God called Jonah to get up, and go up, to Nineveh. By the way, anytime God calls you to something, it will always be “up” - he always calls you to more. More influence, more maturity, more relationship with him. Anywhere with God is always up! But Jonah disobeyed God, and so he ran. He didn’t just run; he went the furthest opposite direction he could go. Instead of going northeast to Nineveh, Jonah went west, to Tarshish (shown by the red arrow). Tarshish was on what is now the Southwestern coast of Spain. He headed two thousand miles away in the other direction. Look at what the Bible says: “But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the LORD. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the LORD by sailing to Tarshish.” (Jonah 1:3, nlt)

I want you to notice something here: God called Jonah to get up and go up, right? What did Jonah do? He went *down*. Let me just say that God wants what’s best for you; he’s calling you *up* in life. But if you disobey or don’t follow him, you will go *down* in life. Jonah went down in three key ways, as will you and I, when we sin and disobey God.

First, Jonah went down *socially*. The Bible says he went down to Joppa, to get on a ship. Joppa was a seaport, south of Jerusalem. In those days seaports were pretty rough towns, filled with a lot of sin and “sinful enterprises,” shall we say. And sailors were some of the worst of the bunch (I’m not making any comments about people in the Navy! I said “in those days”!) When Jonah ran from God he went down first socially. He was associating with some bad people.

When we are living a life apart from God and running from Him, the company we keep will show it. The Bible says, “Bad company corrupts good character.” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Proverbs 13:20 says, “Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble.” (nlt) So Jonah goes down socially, which leads to the next level—Jonah goes down *emotionally*. In verses four and five of Jonah one, it says that the Lord provided a fierce storm that hit the boat, but Jonah was asleep *down in the hold*. First, I hope you heard that the Lord provided it. When you are running from God, you are going to run into some tough circumstances. Did it ever occur to you that maybe God was providing those, to get your attention and warn you to turn around and start moving up in life instead? Anyway, Jonah was in a deep sleep down in the hold. The “hold” was the bottom of the boat. This was where all the run-off from the decks ended up. Maybe you don’t know what that means, so let me explain: these men were out at sea. There was a violent storm. When they got sea-sick, or when they had to go to the bathroom, that didn’t always end up over the edge of the boat. All “that” would

run to the bottom deck.

The picture here is one of deep depression. When you are depressed, all you want to do is sleep, and you feel like your life is floating around in.... “stuff.” Running from God will often do that to you. The Psalmist describes it this way: “When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night Your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.” (Psalm 32:3-4, nlt)

Finally, Jonah’s life went down *spiritually*. Jonah knows that the storm is God trying to get his attention. But instead of repenting and telling God he’ll obey, in his depression he asks the sailors to throw him overboard. He sinks deeper and deeper into the cold, dark waters. Then the Bible says, “Now the LORD had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1:17, nlt)

This was symbolic of spiritual death. In Hebrew law, someone was officially dead after three days and three nights. In fact, when Jesus described his own death, he said he would be dead and buried in the grave for three days, and then come out of the grave, just like Jonah was in the fish and then came out (Matthew 12:40). Isn’t it amazing that way back in the Old Testament God was providing an object lesson of what Jesus would do for us!

You can’t run from God, and you can’t run away from your sin. The Bible says, “But if you fail to keep your word, then you will have sinned against the LORD, *and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.*” (Numbers 32:23, nlt, italics added) You will find that your life will progressively go down, further and further, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. If that’s you, then I pray you will do what we see Jonah doing next: watch

2. Jonah *Turning* to God.

The first nine verses of chapter two show Jonah’s prayer of repenting and turning to God as he’s cruising the ocean depths in the confines of a giant carp’s gut.

Sin can have frightening consequences, but if you pray, God will answer: “Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is His ear too deaf to hear you call. It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, He has turned away and will not listen anymore.” (Isaiah 59:1-2)

It was Jonah’s sin that caused him to be cut off from God; it wasn’t what God wanted at all, and finally Jonah realized that. The Bible says that “Jonah prayed to the Lord his God...” *His* God. Not “the” God. *His*. Jonah realized the foolishness of his running from God. He realized what the Psalmist knew all along: “Yet I am confident I will see the LORD's goodness while I am here in the

land of the living. Wait patiently for the LORD. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the LORD.” (Psalm 27:13-14, nlt)

He realized, in all his troubles, from the bottom of the sea amid half-digested fish food, that God was HIS God, God was FOR him, and God would forgive him, accept him, love him, and restore him.

So Jonah had a change of heart. Remember, Jonah ran from God because he did not want to see God give his love and forgiveness to the Ninevites—non-Jews. Look at Jonah’s change of heart, though, in verses 8-9 of his prayer: “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.” He’s talking about Nineveh, but notice— “God’s love for *them*.” He realizes that God loves them, too.

“But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.” That is, I will obey (that’s what a sacrifice is—obedience).

“What I have vowed I will make good.” This is not a foxhole prayer or a “plane going down get me outta this and I’ll serve you the rest of my life” prayer. He’s saying, “I will do what I promised when I first signed up to be yours, God. I will obey.”

“Salvation comes from the LORD.” He’s acknowledging that it is God who saves, and God can save anyone he wants to—anyone who turns to him.

Once Jonah makes that decision and prays, we then see

3. Jonah *obeying* God.

So Jonah did what God told him to and went up to Nineveh. That’s the great thing about God—God is a God of second chances! He did that for Jonah, and he was about to do that for Nineveh.

This is what it says in chapter three: This time Jonah obeyed the LORD's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" (Jonah 3:3-4, nlt)

Nineveh was a big city—actually, the city itself plus about three suburbs. It was roughly 60 miles across, so three days of solid walking. But where it says it was a “large city,” the original language isn’t talking about the size of the city—it literally means, “A city that is great to God” or “a city that’s very important to God.” God is saying to Jonah, “I care a great deal about those people.” And God says that about you, too. And God says that about West Valley: “I care a great deal about the people of West Valley.”

So Jonah goes. Jonah didn't just wander into town unnoticed and then begin shouting in the streets. He was probably quickly recognized as an "outsider" - he was dressed like a Jew and they didn't get too many Jews way up in Nineveh. But remember, too, that Jonah was just recently one of the chunks that a fish blew...his skin was probably bleached and he had the strong odor of fish bowels. But he barely gets his foot in the gate and revival breaks out. The people all repent immediately! They are repenting across the city in a wave that is faster than Jonah can walk!

What caused that to happen? Well, here's a little background information that you may not know. At the time that Jonah arrived, the city was going through a severe famine. They were fighting off enemy attacks from outside and revolts from inside. In 763 BC, right before Jonah arrived, there was a full solar eclipse—always considered an omen from God. And then walks in this bleached boy who's been belched from a whale belly! And they figure, "That's it! God must be trying to tell us something, and this must be it!" God had prepared them to hear the message, and they were ripe for Jonah—they were desperate to hear from him!

Maybe you are going through some challenging circumstances, and you are here today hearing this and wondering if maybe God is talking to you. Guess what: He is! He brought you to this time and this place and he's saying to you, "I love you! There's hope for you. I want to give you a second chance at life and get your life on an upward direction. No more going downward socially or emotionally or spiritually. It's time to start moving up!" If you will do what Jonah and the Ninevites did and repent (that means turn around from sin and the direction you are going away from God) and turn to him, he will forgive you and change your life!

God forgave the Ninevites, they turned from sin and started following God, and they were saved from destruction. And now, Jonah was really ticked! See

4. Jonah Angry with God.

He obeyed God, but he still hated Nineveh. He's actually upset that God forgave the people of Nineveh! Look at his tirade in verses 1–5— "This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: 'Didn't I say before I left home that You would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that You are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.' The LORD replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry about this?' Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city." (Jonah 4:1-5, nlt)

Jonah is so selfish! In that prayer in the English translation, he uses the word “I” or “me” seven times. In the original language, he says it *nine* times! It’s all about himself! He says to God, “I told you so! Now do you understand why I ran away—to keep you from doing this, because I knew you wouldn’t be able to help yourself. You’d have to go and love them, and forgive them. But would you listen to me? NOOO.” Do you see how ridiculous Jonah sounds? And yet how many times do you and I think we know better than God does?

Jonah even itemizes God’s character: Gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abiding in unending love. He’s quoting Exodus 34:6-7. But he’s not praising God for being like that; he’s listing them as character flaws; weaknesses in God that caused him to forgive those filthy Ninevites, instead of giving them what they deserved.

But let me tell you: thank God he doesn’t give us what we deserve! In fact, he gives us what we *don’t* deserve: Forgiveness and love.

Before, in the fish, Jonah and Nineveh were both dying and he wants to be rescued. Now they are both rescued and he wants to die. Isn’t that just like a selfish person? There’s no pleasing them. From music style to temperature to asking for an offering: “It’s too loud. It’s too hot. It’s too old. It’s too new. It’s too deep. It’s too shallow. They focus on outsiders. They want to serve coffee. They changed the color of the walls. I don’t want to give money (but I’m happy to take what the church gives). They aren’t doing things the way I want it to be done.” Can you believe how selfish Jonah was?

So God asks Jonah, “What right do you have to be angry?” But Jonah ignores God and goes up on the hill that overlooks Nineveh. He’s waiting to see if his temper tantrum has convinced God to change his mind and destroy the city. So Jonah makes a little lean-to and settles in, in the hopes that all those people will be killed. That’s his attitude! Those people don’t belong in church, so go ahead and kill them! At best, here’s a prophet who misunderstands God’s mercy and has a limited view of God’s plans. At worst, here’s a person with a shocking disregard for human life and a bitter hatred toward people. Jonah would rather see people die and go to hell than see anything done to reach and rescue them. Can you believe someone would be like that?

Vladimir Nabakov was the Russian-born novelist who wrote in the 1950’s and 60’s successful novels like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation of a Small Creature*. These are not good moral books but they were successful.

One summer in the 1940’s, Nabakov and his family stayed with James Laughlin at Alta, Utah. While there, Nabakov went on butterfly hunts to add to his large collection. Nabakov was a selfish man, and one evening at dusk he returned and

said that, while in hot pursuit of a butterfly near Bear Gulch, he heard someone moaning—crying for help down by the stream. Laughlin asked, “Did you stop?” Nabakov said, “No, I had to get the butterfly.”

The next day they found the body of an old prospector who had fallen. That area was renamed because of Nabakov, “Dead Man’s Gulch.”

Folks, we are often like Jonah and Nabakov. We complain about music styles or room temperatures or church programs—chasing butterflies—when people around us are poor and hungry and dying and going to an eternity without Christ. Why are we not willing to drop everything and rescue them? And then, when we do reach folks, we complain about that! Just like Jonah.

But in this story, God does what he always does—he shows Jonah patience, grace, and love. That’s what he will do for us too, when we get our priorities straight and return to doing what he wants us to do. Let’s pick up the story:

“And the LORD God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. *(By the way, in a book that talks so much about destruction, this is the only destruction that happens—a single vine!)* And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed. Then God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?’ ‘Yes,’ Jonah retorted, ‘even angry enough to die!’ Then the LORD said, ‘You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?’” (Jonah 4:6-11, nlt)

West Valley has more than 12,000 people and over 8,000 of them are living in spiritual darkness. That’s not even Yakima—just West Valley. Shouldn’t God want to reach such a great city—a city that’s important to him? Will you do what God is telling you to do and help reach them through this church?

Some of you need a second chance. You are like Nineveh, or like chapter-one Jonah. You are far from God, going the wrong direction. But God can forgive you and get you moving upward!

Some of you are like chapter four Jonah. You could care less about people who are poor, or who don’t know Jesus—as long as *you* get church the way you want it. You, too, need to repent.

Whichever group you are in, you both need to repent and turn to God. Ask him to forgive you, and start doing the things God is asking you to do. Start moving up. God is a God of second chances!

pray

I have something for you—ushers, would you please start handing these out? What they are giving you is a card that we are calling the “get out of guilt free” card. If you repent and ask God to forgive you, this card reminds you that because of what Christ has done, you can be forgiven. If you have fallen behind on your reading, pull out this card and just start reading again on the day we are at. Don’t beat yourself up—use this card, get out of guilt, and get going up and do what God asks you too.

And together as a church, we are changing course, we are going to do what God asks, so we can see this community reached and rescued with the Good News that God loves them. We are going to serve this community so that they can be saved into the great life God has, the community of believers we are, who love God and love people. Who introduce people to Jesus Christ, equip people with a faith that works, and live as people with purpose. We love, we learn, and we live!