



**T**he stories of the great heroes and heroines of the Bible inspire and instruct us in our own lives. Each one has a “who knows?” moment when God’s story seems to break into regular, everyday life—a critical moment offering a sense of calling or purpose. It’s as true for us as it was in ancient days. Who knows? Maybe God has plans to use you for His glory. Who knows? Maybe God put you where you are, with the influence you have, for a reason. Who knows? Maybe the things you suffer today will make sense in time. When God shows up, a sense of mysterious discovery enters our lives. Who knows what God has planned?

## WHO KNOWS? • JONAH 3:1-10 • Jennifer Holz • April 29, 2018

Who knows what a story can hold? Today we enter God's story through another fantastic story of the Old Testament. We've looked at the story of Esther and Gideon, and today we enter God's story through the story of Jonah. The book of Jonah is a little four chapter tale tucked in between the minor prophets of Obadiah and Micah. Jonah is considered a minor prophet because of the length of the book, not because Jonah is less important. But his book is more of a story than a prophecy. And it's a *whale* of a story as you know.

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.' When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened" (Jonah 3:1-10).

My first year in college, my roommate woke me up in late October and told me to grab a warm, waterproof coat and a camera, and then she led me to her car for a road trip. We drove several hours east to Plymouth, MA. She was taking me on my very first whale-watching trip.

Now you need to understand that I have always loved whales—humpback whales, especially. There is something about the ocean and these mysterious creatures. That first year at college I decorated my walls with all kinds of whale posters. My roommate thought that was odd for a person from Colorado to be so enamored with whales, but at some point she decided it was time for me to see an actual whale. It was an awesome day. I will never forget it.

But let's be honest: whale watching is not for the faint of heart, or stomach. Especially off the coast of Massachusetts in late October. The ride was cold, rough, there were tons of greenish people in the cabin below the deck trying not to vomit. Luckily, our stomachs were strong that day.

The other truth about whale watching is this: you are fortunate if you actually see very much whale. You stare for hours at the water hoping to see a fin, or a fluke or even glimpse the side of a whale. And usually you see something. It's amazing, but it's not at all like the pictures in the brochure.

I don't remember much of what we actually saw on that trip. We did see whales (that was great), but honestly it was just thrilling to be on the sea with one purpose: looking for God's amazing and mysterious creation.

Our story today takes us to the sea, and to a man who probably would have been happy to never see a large fish again. Jonah chapter 3 opens with these words: "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Which immediately begs the question: I wonder what happened when the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the first time? Glad you asked.

Let me sum up—and I'll do it in the spirit of Dr. Seuss (who has provided a little inspiration for our series). I'll call it, **Oh the Places You'll Preach**.

*God said to Jonah, "I'm thinking a thought.*

*I'm sending you out with a plan and a plot.*

*Nineveh's in trouble, it's in terrible shape.*

*I need to you go, and it's getting quite late.*

*I'll get you there safely, you'll carry My Word."*

*But Jonah went sailing,*

*"This plan is absurd."*

*But while he was running away in this tale,*

*God sent a storm, a wave and a whale.*

*The storm was too big, the waves were too wavy,*

*The whale swallowed Jonah, this story is crazy!*

*From the fish Jonah prayed*

*And God made a way*

*God saved him that day*

*So he could obey.*

*And that's what happened the first time God spoke.*

*I'm guessing the next time there won't be a boat.*

*Or a whale, or a storm or a sailing crew...*

*Just Jonah deciding the right thing to do.*

*That's the end of chapter 2.*

Chapter three opens with perhaps, other than the good news of the resurrection, the next best news that the Scriptures have to offer us: "And the word of God came to Jonah a second time." A second time. Another chance. The Word of God comes again. So, Jonah hasn't blown it? God hasn't moved on to someone else? Wow! That's amazing. It's hard to say what God sees in Jonah at this exact moment. He smells like fish. He has actively said "No" to God and tried to run away. And he has a seething hatred and a boiling anger towards this foreign nation, Nineveh. Otherwise he's a great candidate.

But this is God's story. And what we see in these chapters is a God who loves His world. We see a God who sees, hears, cares, rescues, pursues and forgives. We see that there is nowhere we can go to get away from God. God is compassionate, good, slow to anger, faithful...and He wants *life* for the wicked city of Nineveh, not death.

We also learn that God goes after His stubborn, resistant, obstinate, inflexible servants so they too might experience the story of *life* which God is writing. God doesn't give up on Jonah. And that's incredible news for us. Because if God doesn't give up on Jonah, then it's possible that God doesn't give up on any of us. The Word of God comes to Jonah a second time, and the Word of God comes into our lives again and again.

It's spring, and with spring, things begin to grow. Our grass is getting greener, but once again as it grows—there are those dandelions. No matter what we do, those little critters just keeping coming back. The word of God is like a dandelion, it just keeps coming back. And today that's good news.

Maybe you are here this morning in need of another chance,

another start, another opportunity to have a conversation with God. Perhaps this morning the word of God is coming into your life a second, third or 54th time.

In this season, I've had the chance to listen to many of your faith stories. With new officers coming on, New Members joining our church—part of all that happening is getting to hear people's stories of faith. I heard something like this over and over: After 30 years of rejecting God, God showed up again. After a season of walking away from God, a time of doing my own thing, God showed up again. I committed my life to the Lord at a young age, but I didn't really know what it meant or how to follow. And God showed up again a few years later and showed me the way forward. What's your "God showed up again" story?

The word of God comes again and again, and our rejection of that word is never the final word in our lives. In Jonah we see a God Who gives another chance—and not just for Jonah's sake, but because God has a part for him to play in the bigger story of what God is doing in the world.

God so loved the world that He made Jonah and gave him a part to play in the great story of redemption. "The word of God came to Jonah a second time, and Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh." And so God's story is cast: The role of Jonah will be played by... Jonah. Jonah arrives in Nineveh to find God's story is already well underway.

In verse 3 we are told that the city of Nineveh is so big it takes three days to get from one side to the other. That's a walking pace, I assume. Although much ink has been spilled debating exactly how big Nineveh's size and scope were, we are going to take this at face value. It's a big city. Jonah is going to walk through the city and speak God's Word, and it will take him at least three days to cover the city.

Jonah doesn't waste too much air on his sermon—maybe he's a man of few words, or God just decides this is not a time to let Jonah go off script. But here's the message: "Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned." That's the whole message. Not the most inspiring sermon ever spoken. But look at this, the text tells us that Jonah begins to go into the city. It's still the first day of three and the response is literally like a wildfire. The city is ready to hear the word of God. Jonah barely gets his sermon out—and the whole city right up to the King confesses and repents.

We are in verse 5: "the Ninevites believed God" (just take note—they believed God, not Jonah. Remember in God's story, God gets the glory). A fast is declared, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. The king too. The king himself repents, takes off his robe, covers himself in sackcloth and makes a decree: everyone repent now!

And then our words of the series, verse 9: "Who Knows? Says the King. God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." Unbelievable. A pagan King is thinking about God. How does he know what to think?

I think the best explanation is that God had been in the city long before Jonah preparing them for this moment. Nineveh was ready—all of them—to repent and believe. So, God gathered up Jonah and said "Let's go. These people are ready to hear the good news."

And even though Jonah seems hardly the best candidate for the job (remember, he doesn't even like these people), the

Word of God comes through him, and the whole city responds. I'm reminded of Jesus in Luke 10:2: The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." There are so many who are ready to hear the word of God. The wonderful thing about God's story is that we get sent to be the harvesters (if we'll go). God does the work. We share the good news.

My daughter, Maggie, has been part of a musical production for the past 4 months. They just wrapped up their last public show last night. It was a fun show. Interestingly enough, it's the musical *Seussical*—a delightful Dr. Seuss tribute.

Two weeks ago when the cast was in the midst of their dress rehearsals, I would always arrive a few minutes early. The director would be sitting in front of the cast giving her "director's notes." Cat in the Hat—I need more volume. The Who Family—I can't see you in in scene 3. Move over two steps. In the song, "It's Possible" I need you all to care deeply about the reality that "anything is possible." Tech team—Horton's microphone needs to be louder. It was fun to listen in.

The final chapter of Jonah, I think, is a lot like the "director's notes." God and Jonah have a conversation about what's happening. I suppose with Jonah's attitude at this point (spoiler alert: God is going to save the city, and Jonah is angry that God is going to do that), we could change the title of this sermon from "Who Knows?" to "Who Cares?"

God wants Jonah to care about Nineveh. To care about a world outside of himself that is on the fast track to hell. He wants Jonah's heart to be responsive to what he sees, to care about his fellow human beings. He wants to plant His heart into Jonah's heart—a heart of compassion. You see, the irony of this story is that Jonah knows God's heart. He can recite from memory the name of God passed down from generation to generation. "The Lord, strong and compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2).

In his head he's got it right. But he doesn't want a heart like God's. He prefers to be angry, and pouty, and self-focused and hot tempered. He's done what God has asked him to do—he's played his part in this amazing drama of redemption. He's gone into the depths of death for three days, and come out alive. Jonah knows God, has been saved by God, but his heart is a stone-cold mess when it comes to those on the outside.

In this story, it's the pagan, Ninevite King who exhibits great faith in God. He's the one who asks "who knows what God might do?" Jonah ends his own story staring at a vine a mile away from the city where God is at work—stewing about his own lack of comfort and angry that God will save the wretched city. OUCH! The story of Jonah is a story about being sent. And the internal battle perhaps we all feel at giving our lives away for the sake of the other. Sometimes it feels easier to have a heart of stone rather than a heart that cares. A heart that takes instead of a heart that gives. As God's people, we can easily slip into a posture of scarcity. If I give God's blessing away, there may not be enough for me. Jonah seems to be living in that small and grabby place.

But the story of Jonah is also a story about God's abundant love for the world, the whole world. Specifically, for those not yet part of God's people.

God shows us that He has more than enough love to save



Jonah in the belly of a fish, save a crew of sailors and the entire city of Nineveh. God has time to sit with Jonah on the hillside discussing dead vines, sneaky worms and angry hearts AND to count every person in Nineveh, and all their animals and bring them all to safety.

Our story ends with a question: God asking Jonah, "should I not be concerned for Nineveh?" Should I not care for this world I have made and everything and everyone in it? Who knows how Jonah responds to that question? It's not recorded.

But here's what we do know...we know a God who pursues relentlessly, who doesn't give up on anyone, who calls whole cities to repentance and changes the course of their lives. A God who replaces our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. A God who will ultimately give Himself in Jesus Christ to a world in need of a new story.

I don't know where you are this morning, but I, probably like you, know what it's like to have a hard heart, to throw a tantrum in front of the Lord, to say no, to pout and stew, to walk away from an open door, or better yet—to shut it.

And not in any particularly dramatic way—but just in the day to day. Life is hard. Every one of us navigates a set of challenges that are not easy. In these past few weeks of studying Jonah, I identified more with Jonah than I was comfortable with. I decided to coin a new phrase for our family—or at least for me. In those moments I find myself in, where I know the right thing to do. I know I need to say I'm sorry. I know I'm being stubborn. And it's not what I want to do—what I realized is that I could say this: "I'm having a Jonah moment. I'll get back to you shortly."

But being in a Jonah moment is a temporary space—a place where I know God is working on me. It's not a final space. But it's a moment of realization that I need to be rescued as much as those around me. It's a prayer to the Lord to intervene, even if it takes a storm and a big fish, to soften my heart and get me back on track.

But Jonah's story is also a word for us, as the people of God. A heart-check, if you will. Do we care? Do our hearts break for a broken and lost world so much that we say, "Here I am, send me!" If God can use Jonah to save a whole city, and Jonah doesn't even care, who knows what God can do with a church who does care, who loves with the love of Christ and is passionate about God's mission to seek and save the lost.

I close with this:

*And God says to us, "I'm thinking a thought.*

*I'm sending you out with a plan and a plot.*

*This city I love doesn't know My whole story.*

*You are the ones I have placed downtown with My glory.*

*Every work place and school, every street name and pool.*

*Every person you meet, all the people you greet...*

*They all need to be loved, with the love that I love,*

*They need to know Jesus has come from above.*

*I am sending you...go. Please don't say no.*

*Although if you book, you're not off the hook.*

*You were made to be sent with My love for the world.*

*I will love you and call you to the ends of the earth."*

*For who knows what God can do,  
with a church that loves Jesus and the whole wide world too.*

## STUDY GUIDE

### WHO KNOWS? • JONAH 3:1-10

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Jonah 3:1-10. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Read it one more time together. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What stood out to you in our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- What brought Jonah to the point of obedience?
- Read Jonah's message to the Ninevites in verse 4. What is the content of Jonah's message? What do you think was the attitude of Jonah as he preached in Nineveh?
- What is our attitude when God reaches through us to those we think undeserving or ungrateful? Where does this attitude originate?
- God's story breaks into ours. It's a story of grace. Re-read verses 8 and 9. In your own words, what is the king of Nineveh saying? How does the king's behavior contrast with that of Jonah's?

Going Deeper: What word, phrase or thought from today's passage or from your time together is God lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

God's grace flows through us to others. We are blessed to be a blessing. Who are the Ninevites in our world? How does God want us to connect with them?

Spend some time praying for those who are far from God. Ask God for a heart like His.

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Jonah is a wonderful example of God's unending, untiring grace even when we resist that grace. Briefly describe how you have seen God's grace bring a "turn-around" in your life.