

What's Your Point?

A Sermon Expositing Jonah 3:1-5, 10

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

“What’s your point!?”

That’s what my friend, Josh, said just before he proverbially and literally took his ball and went home.

Josh lived in the house just behind mine growing up. Our friendship was built on proximity more than commonality. We were inseparable except for when we were very separable. But we were glad to have one another. Most afternoons you could find us out in one yard or the other building a fort, jumping on the trampoline, or shooting hoops as we were that afternoon. Josh said something or did something, I don’t really remember what it was, because that’s not what this memory is about. Whatever it was, changing the rules of the game we were playing, or saying something mean, or whatever I only remember that it stoked a zeal within me. Something wasn’t fair or right or kind and in an instant it boiled over and I lashed out. In this memory what I said and what he said are indistinct, but the tone and tenor are clear. Josh rebutted, I answered, he doubled down and then came my monologue. I read him the riot act. I told him what he’d done, why it was wrong, what its consequences were for the game we were playing, how it might affect our friendship, how it would affect *any* friendship, and I let him know exactly how I felt about – whatever it was he’d said or done. When I ran out of things to say or breath to say them there was a pregnant moment in which Josh looked at me, wounded. I looked back, angry and finally Josh said, “Yeah? What’s your point?” and he picked up his basketball and walked home. The question echoes in my memory in the same way it echoes through the centuries in the book of Jonah.

What’s your point?

I don’t remember what my chief complaint was or what I said about it, because that isn’t what that memory is about. So too are the details of the chief complaint in Jonah left unsaid and Jonah’s prophetic utterance against it unheard. In the entire book of Jonah there is never a mention on the lips of God or the prophet of what the “wicked” Ninevites have done to anger God. How timely that in the midst of a collection of sacred texts often used to measure what is righteous, ethical, or just; this one little book puts those judgements in the *background* in order to *foreground* one person’s *response* when those things, whatever they may be, are violated. Let me try that again. How timely is it that today we get to pause from labeling what is wicked in the sight of God and instead consider what a faithful response *to wickedness* looks like.

Jonah’s first response of course is not faithful at all. That’s the most commonly known part of the story. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell them of their wickedness, he refuses and flees and somehow gets swallowed by a big fish for his *unfaithful* response to God in the face of said wickedness. Faced with the choice of how to respond Jonah doesn’t merely keep quiet, he runs the other way! And we know why don’t we!? Because facing down and calling out what is wrong comes with a cost doesn’t it? Just one week removed from celebrating the life of one who lost his life for speaking out against systemic poverty, racial injustice, and war

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

we can see clearly there is a cost to speaking up against wickedness. Obviously that is why Jonah fled Nineveh. He was afraid. He didn't have the fortitude to call it like he saw it! Right?

You see, this is the problem with chopping the Bible up into little bits and focusing only on the special effects. If all we know about Jonah is that God told him to go prophesy against Nineveh and instead he ran away and got eaten by a fish then we're apt to draw in a theme from other biblical prophets and our own experience. It's an important theme – speaking up for what's right is costly and sometimes it is scary; but isn't what's happening in Jonah. Jonah wants us to see *another* thing about responding to wickedness. Today's reading begins Jonah's second chance to go to Nineveh and lo and behold it goes just fine! The people hear his words, are chastened, repent, and end their evil ways and God doesn't smite them after all. {dusts hands off} Well that was easy.

Except Jonah's still not happy. In the next chapter he prays to God and his true feelings come out, he fesses up to his intent all along. "I didn't want to go to Nineveh," he says, "not because I was scared to give them a tongue lashing. I didn't want to go, because I knew you'd do this, God! I knew you'd let 'em off the hook and they don't deserve to be off the hook those wicked people running around doing their wicked things all the wicked time!"

Ooohhh. Now we see. Jonah wasn't afraid to go, he just thought the wicked people were getting what was coming to them. Jonah's sin wasn't an unwillingness to call out evil; his sin was...

Ugh. This one is hard friends. This is one I didn't want to hear this morning, it's too close to home. If ya'll don't mind I'm just going to preach to myself for a minute. I don't mind if ya'll listen in though.

Jonah's sin wasn't an unwillingness to call out evil; his sin was not opening up a way to grace.

Ouch.

Jonah's a better man than I. The guy who got eaten by a fish because of his disobedience to God is a better man than I, and here's why: It is true that Jonah didn't want to do what God asked of him, but not out of a lack of faith, rather he did it because he had *every* faith that if he did what God was asking him to do it would lead to grace. That means he wasn't willing to do what I do... {hands out} maybe what we do... all the time. That is to name the things we think are evil just for the sake of naming the evil. To poke it in the eye, to prove that it's wrong, to Facebook blast it into oblivion, to give it a dose of its own medicine, to shame it into submission and watch in writhe in agony.

Here's my confession, and if you resonate with it too you can make it yours also: Far too often, feeling a genuine call by God to stand up for what is right, that is a genuine call to be prophetic, I don't run *from Nineveh*, I take off running *to Nineveh*. I can't wait to get there and give them a piece of my mind, but I forget that the very point of prophetic speech is to open a way to grace.

The biblical witness and the witness of Christian tradition are unmistakable. To follow in the way of Jesus is to call out wickedness and to do it specifically, to live prophetically. But the caution of Jonah is to remember that the hope of prophetic living lies beyond the prophecy itself in the redemption of behavior or policy or status quo or in reconciliation. These hopes should shape the way we engage the wickedness in the world around us, not for the sake of scorched earth, but for the sake of redemption. That's the whole point!

I don't know that whatever Josh did back then was particularly egregious or even that it wasn't my fault, but I do know that it triggered a strong sense of justice within and I felt compelled to say something. It won't be the last time that happens, but I shall hope from here on to consider his question first rather than last. Before I choose my words, before I consider my actions I'll hear his voice in my mind asking,

"What's your point?"