

Jonah **... and the Free Will**

The idea for today's sermon came when I did my first wedding. No, nothing illegal, so that Tim had to do his first excommunication. The couple was already married, so it was just a renewal of vows. And Tim knew about it.

It happened inside Camp Pendleton. Christopher was about to start his career with the Air Force. When we talked about that career, he had strong interests to go abroad with his family. Maybe Ramstein in Germany, or Italy, or somewhere else.

And I thought: These are strong wishes. You are allowed to have them. You are allowed to work for them. But in life not everything manifests as you wish. Especially if the Air Force has a significant word about it.

And this brought me to Jonah, and to the God of the Old Testament. And to a question: Did this God change over time?

Every prophet in the Old Testament complains, especially Jeremiah. Nobody wanted that kind of job. At least they complained in the beginning, or felt too weak, too young, too old, too whatever. Even Moses complained: "I cannot speak in front of Pharaoh. I am not good at talking." But all the prophets did their job. Except Jonah. He runs. He probably thinks: let somebody else do that work.

The Bible tells us almost nothing about Jonah's life before this story. No calling narrative, no background, no "before he was a prophet he was a...". The book just opens: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai" (Jonah 1:1).

2 Kings 14:25 is the only other biblical mention of him. He is a prophet from Gath-hepher, a bit southwest of Nazareth, son of Amittai. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II that Israel's border would be restored "from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah." The distance is in essence from the Red Sea at Eilat or Aqaba to the city of Hama in Syria, north of Damascus. And that prophecy came true.

And then God sends him to the enemy.

God tells him to go to Nineveh and tell everyone to repent within forty days. Otherwise, total destruction. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, in today's northern Iraq. The Assyrian empire is the new rising economic and military star, and Israel's enemy. Nineveh is the last city on earth Jonah wants to see repent. He has to walk into the capital of the enemy and preach about another God and another faith.

Consider how that would look today. Someone shows up in Washington, Beijing, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro or Tokyo and tells everybody: "Repent! Convert to my faith. You have forty days" (Jonah 3:4).

At no point is Jonah's will actually consulted. It is overridden. The call, the run, the storm, the fish, three days of darkness, until he complies. God's logic seems simple: Resist, and the consequences will compel you anyway. Your fate is decided. You are just delaying the paperwork.

That made me think. How much does God interfere with our own will? And when did that change in the New Testament with Jesus? God made us with a free will. That does not match.

"God's will" is a tricky phrase, and it is used and abused in many ways. Sometimes to manipulate others. Sometimes to give your own wish more value and more weight.

The Jonah God did not disappear. We still preach him to each other. In our YMCA group in the 80s, we tried something new because attendance was dwindling. The old preacher disagreed. We had some good arguments. Mainly that we were living in the 80s, and things were different from the late 40's and early 50's after the war. In the end he pounded his fist on the table and said: "God will not tolerate this." I thought, God has other things to do than interfere here. At least we were not doing anything immoral.

In a very fundamentalist Christian environment, I once witnessed a proposal. Well, not really a proposal. A young man wanted a girl to become his girlfriend. She felt awkward. He argued: "God told me during long prayers on my knees, through his angels, that you will become my wife." She said: "Not that I know of." He said: "Are you disobeying God's will?" And that was more or less the end of it.

Then I see people who just let life run as it is. But they complain all the time. The relationship is not what I want. I hate my job. I want this or that position. But things never manifest. I prayed that God would help me get... fill in the blanks.

I myself was unhappy about my job for a long time. No prospects. Every year you hear: "Your visibility in the company is low." And therefore no raise, and no new project. I was asked to cancel my vacation to do testing abroad. You know how that manipulation goes: "We are a team." No recognition.

Maybe I should have stood on a table and peed on the floor. Visibility, yes. But this would have some not so entertaining consequences. I did not get any hint how to improve things, or even how to get a new project. But life does not work that way.

I always wanted to go abroad in my professional life. But it never happened. I tried. Nothing worked. I heard: "If life gives you lemons, make margaritas." Or: "God helps those who help themselves." Not really helpful.

Needless to say, I prayed. I tried several things. I pushed on doors, but none would open. I went to business school to switch from R&D to product marketing. I got my second degree, but I did not have the experience. Nobody wanted a 42-year-old in a junior product manager position. Our own marketing department told me: from R&D to marketing, impossible.

In 2011 I finally got a call to California for a project manager job. But three days before my flight to Los Angeles, I broke my foot. Job gone. Opportunity gone.

I finally accepted that God had different plans. At least I asked what those plans were. "Show me." Now, I have to be careful here. Because that sounds like Jonah. A plan already decided, doors closed from the outside, and me delaying the paperwork. Maybe. I do not know. But when I look back, nobody held a storm over my head. I was free the whole time. I just could not see where the open door was.

I was not mad or disappointed. Not in the end. I started making margaritas. I got my truck and bus driver's license and drove tourists on the weekends. Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria. I like traveling. And then I decided to move back home and take care of my parents. Buy a motorhome. Work three days a week in the company, about two hours away, and the rest from home. Maybe expand my network. Look for another job in Switzerland. Retire early. Life is good while gulping down my margaritas. The liver grows with her duties.

Jonah is unhappy with his task. But did he dislike being a prophet? The text in 2 Kings gives no hint of reluctance there. It is not prophecy itself he resists. It is this specific assignment.

Jonah did not run because he doubted God's power, or because he was scared of Nineveh. He ran because he correctly predicted that God would be merciful, and he did not want that mercy extended to Assyria.

Assyria was the great imperial threat looming over Israel in this era. It was brutal and expansionist. It was the empire that would eventually destroy the northern kingdom entirely (2 Kings 17). Jonah, the patriotic prophet who had just delivered good news about Israel's borders, is sent to save the people who would later conquer his own nation. He would rather see fire fall on Israel's enemies than see them spared. Most prophets never explain their motives. Jonah does, explicitly, in Jonah 4:1-3. After Nineveh repents and is spared, he becomes "greatly displeased, and he was angry."

Maybe he is as angry as we sometimes are when life does not deliver what we expect. The company does not collapse after I am fired, or after I leave voluntarily. My partner, wife, husband, girlfriend does not come back. I do not win the lottery. The washing machine, the car, the water heater, the water pipes ... They all break down. The house is flooded. And God does not help at all.

Jonah delivers the entire recorded message in one line: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" No altar call. No theological explanation. No invitation. No mention of God's mercy or of the possibility of avoiding judgment. Just the flat announcement of coming destruction. The city was so large it took three days to cross, and Jonah goes in only "a day's journey." He delivers that single line, and he says nothing about grace. He announces doom, not the offer of repentance. He does not say "repent and be spared." He just says "overthrown." The Ninevites work out the possibility of mercy themselves, without being told that it exists. Jonah gives them the bare threat, and they respond with a hope he never offered them.

Consider if I did the same here in San Diego. "Repent, come to our church on Sunday. Otherwise you are doomed." I am certain there are some folks waiting for that: "Hey, come here. We have a special jacket for you. With buttons on the back."

Compare that to the energy we usually associate with effective preaching, the kind Tim studied for years at Harvard. Passion, persuasion, care for the audience. Jonah has none of it. He clearly does not want it to work. And it works anyway. Completely. But that logic means your life is predetermined. God has his plan. You cannot do anything. Just let it run. Some people live like this.

And then, for what purpose did God give us our own free will?

In the New Testament, picture of what God does with Jonah changes, or gets a better explanation. Maybe prophets were not needed anymore, at least not those figures from the Old Testament. Something shifts with Jesus. Look at how he actually deals with people who tell him: No. A rich young man comes running, kneels, and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him: "Sell what you have, and follow me." The man's face falls, and he walks away. And Jesus looked at him, and loved him (Mark 10:17-31).

It does not say: "Jesus, looking at him, struck him with a storm." It says he loved him. And let him leave. No fish. No three days in the dark. The invitation stood, and so did the refusal, side by side.

Later, after a hard teaching, many of Jesus' followers turned back and stopped walking with him (John 6:60-66). Jesus does not chase them down. He turns to the twelve who stayed and asks them: "Do you want to go, too?" That question is the whole theology in six words. Not "you'd better not." Want to.

And there is a moment where Jesus stands over Jerusalem and grieves: "How often I have wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37-39, Luke 13:34-35). Jesus does not force the resolution. He grieves it.

God promised Jeremiah: "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." I take it that this is offered to everyone. (Jeremiah 33:3)

I dreamed that I would get a chance to work abroad for a couple of years. Like my parents, when they went to the Micronesian islands. For my family, that started a lifelong journey. For my father especially. The Bible translation he was asked to lead opened a university career in cultural anthropology that he had never dreamed of. My parents traveled over the years to remote places, and they have seen things you cannot book in a travel agency.

There is a common Christian version of an old prayer: “Be careful what you wish for. You might get it.” Which means God may answer the prayer, but the answer may require far more than you anticipate.

When Carlsbad finally called in April 2015, I had already made my future plans. I had come back from five weeks in New Zealand. The bus driver season had just started. I planned to move home and then retire as early as possible. So my first answer was no. Not now. Maybe next year. I still remember the phone call. A late Thursday evening, April 30, just before a holiday. Nobody was in the company anymore. And I had five minutes to decide. Yes or no.

It brought me friends, a church, my wife, an interesting job at the FDA I never thought I could do, our own company, and finally American citizenship. And I believe Jesus would not have been angry if I had said no. Some things did not work out as I wished.

Jesus is not the puppeteer, pulling strings until we land where he wants us. It is not “comply, or be compelled.” We tried everything to save this church and to stretch our funds as far as possible. We did not win the lottery. We did not get a donor who would simply write a check for one million dollars. That door stayed shut, and I do not have a good explanation for you. But a shut door is not the same as a punishment. We knocked honestly, and we were allowed to.

Jesus offers this instead, in Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me.”

I believe Jesus would not have been mad if I did not take the chance in 2015. He would probably say: “That is okay. I can work with that.” Similar to what we have outside on our wall: “Jesus didn’t reject people. Neither do we.” We are allowed to dream, to pray, and to hope that Jesus helps the next doors to open. We have to push and try. Some doors stay shut. But it is up to us to push.

Christopher may get Ramstein and Germany. He may get Italy. He may get an air base in the middle of nowhere, that he never asked for. He is allowed to want his dreams, and he is allowed to push on that door. And if it opens to somewhere else, that place may be where his life actually starts. Mine did. I had five minutes on the phone, and I almost said no. “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”

That is the difference between the coercion Jonah got, and the love Jesus has for the free will God gave us.

Amen.