

Not a whole lot of love

In-depth studies in Jonah

Part 3 – LOVE?

November 27, 2011

1. The story so far

- God's plan is to bless the world (Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 60:1-3)
- Jonah represents an attitude in which the faith community is a **bunker for me** rather than a **base for mission**.
- There is no excuse not to be involved in mission because God creates opportunities for mission in the flow of our lives:
 - Can you pray for me? (Jonah 1:6, Ephesians 6:18)
 - Tell me about yourself? (Jonah 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15)
 - What should we do (Jonah 1:11, James 1:5)
- God is doing mission in the world – Amazing! (Jonah 1:16, Luke 10:2)
- Thanks for the fish! Chapter 2 is a prayer of thanks for deliverance composed inside the fish.
- And they repented! Chapter 3 tells how Jonah proclaims a message of repentance to Nineveh and how the King commanded the people to obey (we need to remember that the people of these days are deeply superstitious and a wild eyed prophet who has the temerity to risk death, and who may have looked a little funky as a result of being inside a big fish, is likely to be the kind of person who appears touched by the gods and should be obeyed).
- Before we go to the final chapter there is one issue we need to address.

2. The elephant Big Fish in the room

Many people find the idea of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish and spat up on dry land a little hard to swallow (so to speak).

- While there are some sea creatures who could swallow and spit out a person of small stature, such as a sperm whale, the big problem is that the digestive and respiratory systems are separate and it is difficult to understand how Jonah could breathe for the better part of three days.
- One way of dealing with this problem has been to interpret the book of Jonah as a parable rather than a historical event.
- The problem with this is that Jesus viewed the story as a historical event (Matthew 12:39-42) and I for one do not feel comfortable contradicting the Son of God.
- In my mind, if God makes planets, God can keep Jonah alive for three days. Which seems like a cop-out – explaining the implausible bits in the Bible with the line – well God did it that way! But the most important issue is not whether someone could survive in a big fish for three days, but whether or not there is a God who supernaturally intervenes in human history (Jonah 1:17). This is about God's capacity to break into our world and change things up.

(If you are interested in this kind of discussion we will be having a short series in the first two Sundays in January entitled, "How can we know?" which will explore the whys and wherefores of an intervening God.)

- It's interesting to note that for around 1,500 years, people believed the city of Nineveh was a fairy story, until archaeologist Austen Henry Layard discovered the ruins of Nineveh in 1847 at a place the locals called Nabi Yunus (which is Arabic for Prophet Jonah).



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3. Not a whole lot of love – Jonah 4:1-3, 11

- The loudest note in the book of Jonah is the thing that is missing – love for the people of the world – the book cries out for something or someone to change the hearts of, first, Jonah and then the believers that Jonah represents (Ezekiel 36:26).
- The answer to that cry was Jesus, who came to change our hearts – one of those heart changes was our capacity to love people globally (John 3:16, Luke 10:25-37).
- This centres around the cross out of which poured the power that changes human hearts (Hebrews 10:19-24, 2 Corinthians 5:19).
- Saul of Tarsus' heart was transformed to love non-Jews (Acts 9, Ephesians 3:8).
- Peter's heart transformed to love non-Jews (Acts 11:9-48).

4. Change my heart, O God

- Each one of us has a limit to the number of people we can love.
- Christ explodes that limit and makes it possible for us to care on a global scale with an infinite capacity to love that comes from God (1 John 4:7).
- Sometimes we feel guilty for not caring more deeply for others – but that is simply being human. Don't waste time feeling guilty – open your heart to the transforming power of God! (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- Being involved in mission is what the church was created for. Being involved in mission – whether its overseas in Zimbabwe, India the Solomon's or in local missions such as nursing homes, Jacaranda, Healing Centre, schools, refugee centre or simply its working out at New Life and hanging out with friends or workmates – mission is the most important work we can be doing on this planet – being a conduit for the love of God in this world (1 John 4:17).

Discussion questions

1. What do you think about the big fish issue? Does it bother you or are you OK with it?

Read Jonah 3 & 4

2. Describe Jonah's attitude in 4:1-3 & 4:8, where could such an attitude come from?
3. What is God's question in 4:4 and 4:9? What kind of values is God asking Jonah to question? What values in our society might God ask us to question? What values in our church might God ask us to question?
4. In chapter 4, verses 10 & 11, what is God saying about his relationship with all people on the planet? How does God characterise people? Does this include all living things? What does the last sentence in 4:11 mean?
5. I hope by now you realise that Jonah is not being congratulated for his attitude towards other people in the world, but heavily criticised. What kind of attitude towards other people in the world is God looking for in his people?
6. Do you experience cultivating a love for all people in the world difficult? Does it bother you?
7. Do our limits to love limit our capacity to do mission? How so? What does God seek to do about that?
8. What would you like God to do with your capacity to care for others? What are you going to do about it?