

Sermon scripture: Jonah 1:1-3

Title: Toward the Face of the Lord / translated by Jiyun Kang

1. The Sign of Jonah

What do the following figures have in common? Peter, Pinocchio, and Jonah. The answer is: a fish. There is probably no one who does not know the story of Jonah in the Bible. Jonah's story is as famous as the story of David and Goliath. When we think of Jonah, we immediately think of the fish, because the impact of the story of Jonah inside the fish's belly is so great. But in fact, the Book of Jonah is not a book about a fish. Jonah holds a meaning much greater than the fish. This summer, I hope we can discover God's greater purpose through the story of Jonah. Jesus Himself also mentioned the prophet Jonah. In Matthew 12:38, Jesus speaks of "the sign of Jonah."

"But he answered them, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah (v30).

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (v 40).

The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here (v 41)."

From these words, we can see three reasons why Jesus mentioned the sign of Jonah.

First, Jonah's story is a story of repentance and transformation.

Second, through Jonah's resurrection (deliverance), Jesus proclaims that He too will rise again.

Third, just as Jonah's story tells of salvation not only for the people of Israel but also for the Gentiles, Jesus tells us that the gospel of salvation will be proclaimed to all nations.

Shall we now open the first chapter of Jonah's story, a story Jesus Himself considered important?

2. The Meaning of Jonah's Name

The first sentence of the Book of Jonah in Hebrew begins with the word "there was." What was there? If we translate the Hebrew word order directly, it reads like this: "There was the word of Yahweh upon Jonah (son of Amittai), saying." The word of Yahweh came upon the prophet Jonah. Jonah is introduced as the son of Amittai. The Hebrew word Amittai comes from Emet, meaning truth. Amittai would mean "one who seeks truth." The reason the father's name is specifically mentioned is to highlight that Jonah is not living up to the meaning of that name. His father's name means "one who seeks truth," but Jonah is failing to do so. In verse 3, we see Jonah running away from the face of the Lord. If one seeks the truth, should they stand facing God, or should they turn away and flee from Him? Of course, they should stand facing God and look upon Him. But Jonah is turning his back on God and is instead fleeing from the face of the Lord.

The name Jonah means dove. In the Old Testament, when a dove appears, it usually symbolizes the people of Israel. In Song of Songs 2:14 it says,

“My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”

Here, the object of God’s love is sung of as a dove.

In Hosea 7:11 it says,

“Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless—now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria.”

The people of Israel who do not listen to God are symbolized as a dove.

So the figure of Jonah is used to represent the entire people of Israel. Although the Book of Jonah tells the story of a single prophet, Jonah, he stands as a representative of all the people of Israel. The Book of Jonah exposes, through Jonah’s story, the attitude of God’s people, who were given the mission to proclaim the truth to all nations of the world. We must also see ourselves reflected in Jonah. You may have heard the saying: if you reverse Jonah’s name (요나 / Na-yo), it becomes “me.” It would be good for us to realize that Jonah’s figure is our own.

3. One Who Bears the Yoke of God’s Word

As I mentioned, God’s word came to Jonah, and its content is very simple. In other prophetic books, the word that comes to a prophet is extremely complex, detailing which nations or people have sinned and how God will judge them through the prophet’s proclamation. But Jonah is different. The entire prophecy given to Jonah is in verse 2: because the sin of the great city Nineveh is so great, go and proclaim that they must repent. In the Bible, “great city” is often used negatively because greatness can signify oppression, violence, and exploitation. In Revelation 18:2, Rome is called the great city Babylon:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!”

The entire content of the Book of Jonah is about how Jonah responds to this short prophecy commanding him to lead sinful Nineveh to repentance. Have you ever thought about what kind of person a prophet is? If God were to appoint you as a prophet, do you think you could follow His will? Even in the Bible, almost no one wanted the role of a prophet. Moses didn’t, Isaiah didn’t, and Jeremiah didn’t either. When God said, “I appoint you as a prophet,” they all felt burdened. This is because in delivering God’s prophecy, a prophet must make someone uncomfortable and may ruin their relationships. The life of a prophet is inevitably one of persecution and loneliness.

In Korea, seminaries are sometimes called Seonji Dongsan—The Garden of the Prophet. It means a place where prophets are nurtured. Today, the calling of a pastor, who must proclaim God’s word, is closest to the role of a prophet. Becoming a pastor requires years of study and training: four years of undergraduate study, followed by three years of seminary, and then two to four years of full-time ministry experience before ordination. After nearly ten years of preparation, one is ordained. At every ordination ceremony, the hymn 323: I Have Answered the

Savior's Call is sung. Both my wife and I sang it at our respective ordinations in 2011. The third verse goes:

"To barren valleys and empty fields, I will go with the gospel. The despised and scorned cross, I will carry. Without a name, without a light, I will serve with gratitude."

This hymn reflects a firm resolution to obey whatever God commands. Many pastor candidates shed tears singing this song—not only because the journey has been difficult, but because they deeply feel the irresistible call of God. They are then robed and given a stole, a narrow and long strip of cloth. The stole is not for show; it symbolizes the yoke. It is the yoke of the pastor, who can no longer flee God's face and must proclaim His word. The prophet's destiny is to bear the yoke for God's joy. Jonah seems unable to accept this destiny.

4. Can One Flee the Face of the Lord?

The Bible portrays Jonah, who cannot accept the destiny of the prophet, as one who flees from the face of the Lord. Nineveh was an ancient city near present-day Mosul, Iraq. From northern Israel, one would have to travel about 1,000 kilometers overland to the east, passing through Syria, to get to Nineveh. But Jonah heads to Joppa, a port city, to take a ship westward and flee by sea. He boards a ship bound for Tarshish, a city in Spain. Joppa was a city of the Phoenicians, who became wealthy through Mediterranean trade. Jonah boards their ship, heading for the hotspot of the day—Spain's Tarshish. Jonah not only flees the face of the Lord but chooses the opposite direction. The irony unfolds as the son of truth departs from the path of truth. Have you heard the phrase "fleeing from the face of the Lord" before? We all know the story of Adam, who, after sinning, hid from God in the garden. This is a characteristic of when sin comes between us and God. When we love someone, we want to face them. But when something comes between that love, we turn away. Sin makes us turn our backs on each other. Sin is called "the power that alienates"—the force that drives us apart. Jonah, who turned from God, can be called a "second Adam."

Can we hide from the face of the Lord? Psalm 139:7-8 sings:

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there."

We cannot flee God's face; rather, God accompanies us and protects us wherever we go—even in the depths. Jonah surely knew this yet stubbornly turned his back and fled from God's way.

5. Children Who Follow the One Who Calls

We have all left our hometowns. For various reasons, you are living as a sojourner here. Some of you may have heard God's call and mission directly, like Jonah: "Go to Rochester, Minnesota!" But most of us probably didn't hear God's voice directly—we somehow ended up here. Maybe your husband suddenly asked, "Shall we move to America?" Maybe a professor suggested, "How about a postdoc in the U.S.? I've arranged a spot for you." Maybe you searched the job market yourself. In any case, you've come here according to your own circumstances.

Just last week, a young adult newly arrived from Michigan joined our church. Many come and go, but I believe all of it happens within God's plan and providence. I believe God has called us here so that we would be here. We are people who have come in response to a call. Sometimes God's calling feels unfamiliar and burdensome, but when we deny that calling, life can become difficult. We must remember that we are here because of God's will. Three years ago around this time, I received a call from One Heart Church confirming my appointment. I had never been to Minnesota and had barely heard of it. But, as I sang at my ordination, I came with the heart that says, "Having answered the Savior's call, I will go wherever He leads." Like the hymn that says, "If You speak, Lord, I will go; if it is not Your will, I will stop," I came here. I came trusting in the one truth: that the God who called me is good. The God who called you here is good and the Father of true truth.

We are all children of Amittai. We are people who believe that God is truth, who seek truth, and who follow God. But if those who should follow truth turn their backs on God, that is an irony. If we love God, we must face Him. We must not turn our backs on Him. The force that makes us turn from God, the force that alienates us from God, is sin. We must not let sin come between us and God. We must have a fierce resolve not to stray from truth but to follow God.

And one more thing we must never forget: wherever we are, we cannot flee from the Lord. Remember that God is always with you—in your workplace, in your home, in every place and moment of daily life. May you spend this week remembering that God is with you and walks with you. I pray in our Lord's name that you will not flee from God, but that you love Him, seek His face, and go toward His face.