

Problem: What is faithfulness? What if we disagree with God?

-Temper-tantrum. I remember at one point witnessing a temper tantrum while running some errands at a store. The young boy became very unhappy with what appeared to be not being allowed to have a summer toy and began to scream, kick, and remain in place. The mom, obviously frustrated but who didn't give in, stepped away from the screaming child and let the tantrum take place. She made sure all of the things in the aisle were out of the way of the flailing young child arms as best she could and then slowly walked away but kept cleverly looking back. In other words, she separated herself from the argument while keeping a very watchful eye still to make sure the angry child was safe. Sure enough, with all of the screams and tears, the young boy followed mom out of the aisle, not wanting to be alone but still wanting to make his protest clear. After about 10 minutes, finally exhausted, the boy went back to the mother's arms and they both left the store without incident. I'm sure many of you parents out there have some similar temper tantrum stories.

-The book of Jonah in many ways is the story of a character who is good at temper tantrums. Jonah, a fictional character much like Job, is crafted by the Israelite community to explore certain questions of faith. In fact, it is believed that the Book of Jonah and the Book of Job were written around the same time: in either the 5th or 6th centuries B.C. when the entire nation of Israel's temple was destroyed (for the first time) and they were all forced to move from their homeland and live in the foreign Empire of Babylon. As you can expect, this isn't really what the Israelites expected, especially since the God of Israel was supposed to protect them and make them "the chosen people." What the heck??? Where are you God?? These are just a few questions that the people of Israel were asking in this foreign land. Thus, the story of Jonah is a story of temper tantrums and anger, of bewilderment and stubbornness, of argument and frustration. But most importantly beyond all of that, the Book of Jonah is a story that outlines faithfulness. What does it mean to be faithful to God when things aren't going the way you expect? What does it mean to be faithful to God period? That's the journey I hope you will take with me this next month as we read one chapter a week from this fascinating book. So let's begin and dig deeper into the theme of temper tantrums and faithfulness with Chapter One.

Solution: Many times, we can't control the outcome. But, we can make our voice heard and know we have more influence than we might think.

- I was having a conversation with the gentleman at Men's Breakfast who meet every Wednesday morning about humor in the Bible. "Wouldn't it be great if there were a couple of jokes in the Bible?," said someone. Well it's your lucky day! Because the Book of Jonah, believe it or not, is meant to be a comedy. Think of it as one of Shakespeare's comedic plays: full of ridiculous comparisons and ironic names. A great challenge is to keep track of these jokes as we go along.

-The first joke appears right off the bat in name of Jonah! "Jonah son of Amittai". For us, this just sounds like a foreign name so I will let you in on it. "Amittai" is derived from the Hebrew root word "to be faithful". So, Jonah's name is really: "Jonah son of faithfulness". Turns out that Jonah really doesn't live up to his name as he hears the call from God just like the other great prophets and then.....buys a ticket on a boat going in the complete opposite direction! It's his first temper tantrum! We can just see him saying: "No! Your love and forgiveness for those foreigners is not what I want to do, thank you very much!"

-Notice here, however, how God doesn't have a temper tantrum back. The storm that came over the boat was not out of God's wrath, but out of an effort to re-direct.

-Many in our culture would argue that faithfulness is going along a straight path and following God like some robot: when we fall out of line we meet God's wrath. But the Book of Jonah, in Jonah's beginning temper tantrum is, I believe, making a far more nuanced argument: faithfulness. Faithfulness lies actually in the back-and-forth interaction between us and God.

- When I am asked the question of "how did I become a pastor", I don't have the single revelation-being-kicked-off-the-horse moment where I decided "Aha! I must go to seminary!" Instead, it was a topic that kept coming up again and again and it was a constant conversation (in both actions and words) between me and God. "No, God, I want to be a music teacher." "OK God, I'll think about it." "Yes God, I feel the call, but now is not the right time, but I know it will come." To quote one of my favorite story characters of all time, Gandalf: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that has been given to us." Faithfulness is about interaction and decisions at multiple points along the road. Faithfulness is about never taking our eyes off one another in that interaction, even when the decision of the other party is not to our liking. Interestingly, even in Jonah's temper tantrum and decision to go away from Nineveh, even in his anger towards God, he keeps an eye on God when he tells the captain: "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

-Though his decision to run away was challenged by God and though the book makes fun of "Jonah's faithfulness" and basically doing "everything wrong", an interesting note in this chapter is that something goes right. "So [the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." (verse 16). Jonah's success rate as a prophet in Chapter 1 starts out pretty well! His actions already, ironically, led to some converts! The joke's on him! You never know the outcome of interaction, even interaction of disagreement.

Implication: Do we allow ourselves to be swallowed by the fish or do we remain on the boat?

-What ways can you see yourself in Jonah and Jonah's faithfulness towards God? What ways can you see our church as Jonah?

-The most common thing I have heard since I arrived as pastor here is "we need more young people at church". We aren't the only ones by any stretch, young people (meaning those of the millennial generation and younger) are not coming to church as their parents do or did. This is frustrating and not supposed to happen. The younger generation is supposed to take over the things that the older generation is wanting to hand off. It's supposed to be a smooth transition, but it isn't turning out that way. It puts a lot of pressure on many churches and pastors.

-This may be our calling by God to minister to the Ninevites, a call that is frustrating and hard to understand. Sure, these millennials are not our enemies, but they act differently from what the church is used to. We might be tempted to be like Jonah and say No way! Our church is what it is and if they don't like it, then that's their loss! That's not really good. Or we might be tempted to be like Jonah and go in the complete opposite direction: change everything! Pianos are out, drums are in. Paraments are out, smoke machines are in. Vestments are out, flashy shirts are in! That's not really good either.

-Thus we are faced with decision. How do we faithfully reach out and include younger people without changing who we are? How do we faithfully do church that's relevant for these younger people and our community? The only way I know how to move forward is to keep the interaction with God going. Keep our eyes peeled for what God is up to. For it's only in that interaction with God: the push and pull that we will be able to make a difference.

- Some things are not going to go well at all. Some things might go OK. Some things might go AMAZINGLY WELL.

-Here's the thing: we won't know the full scope of our work nor do we know what will be completely successful or not? Jonah by many standards was the worst prophet ever and ended up in the sea, but he moved a group of sailors closer to God. That's the power and amazing thing about this whole God thing. May we be able to see ourselves in Jonah (temper tantrums and all) and never forget how to interact with God. Amen.