



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Majoring in the Minors: JONAH

“Belly-Aching Failures”

Dr. Matthew J. Hook

July 17, 2005

Max Lucado tells the story of a woman who had a parakeet named Chippie. She loved Chippie because he was such a happy little song bird. Chippie’s constant chirping seemed to brighten her day.

One day, the woman was cleaning the bottom of Chippie’s cage with a vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang. She reached for the telephone without removing the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner from the cage, which was a mistake. The vacuum cleaner nozzle got pointed in the direction of poor little Chippie, and he was suddenly sucked up into the machine.

When the woman looked back at the cage and realized what had happened, she was horrified. She dropped the phone, turned off the vacuum cleaner and ripped open the dust bag to get to her little bird. Chippie was a real mess, but he was still alive. She raced to the kitchen sink and turned the water on full force on Chippie. The more she tried to wash him, the worse he looked, so she took him to the bathroom and started trying to dry Chippie with her hair dryer – full force and high heat. Finally, she got the bird dry and put him back in his cage.

Several days later, a friend called and asked how Chippie was doing.

“He’s alive,” she said, “but he just sits in his cage and stares out into space. And,” she added thoughtfully, “Chippie doesn’t sing much anymore.”

We all know people who are a lot like Chippie. (We also know a lot of people like that woman!) We know people who once had a song in their hearts. But due to circumstances out of their control, and sometimes due to circumstances within their control, they discover that life isn’t easy. Sometimes it’s rotten. As a result, they aren’t singing much anymore.

Have you ever felt like Chippie? Have you been abused by people that you loved? Has your world been turned upside down? Have you lost your desire to sing? Has failure struck? The bad news is, if your world hasn’t been turned upside down, just wait. It will. The good news is, when it does, there’s still Jesus. There’s still God’s Word, which comes to us new each morning. The world can be hard, but God is good. Jonah’s story was recorded for people in just such circumstances.

Did you ever just WANT to have a bad day? Did you ever just WANT to do your own thing, no matter what was right? Did you ever want to have a really bad attitude toward someone or a whole group of “someones”? Have you ever felt like Jonah?

First, is Jonah’s disobedience in chapter 1. God wants to reach the Ninevites, who had been Israel’s enemies. Jonah hated the Ninevites. Jonah ran because he didn’t want God to give them a second chance. Jonah physically flees from God, to Tarshish, modern day Spain, to the point of the storm, where Jonah is still refusing God, yet the pagan sailors with him recognize God and worship Him! With events spinning out of control, Jonah would rather end it all, being thrown overboard, basically suicide by drowning, letting his crisis and his attitude claim his life. But as powerful as our crises and attitudes are, God as a greater claim on our lives.

In Jonah’s case, it was God providing a great fish to swallow Jonah. The Hebrew words don’t specify whale or what kind of fish, but numbers of documented cases exist of sea men swallowed by whales or whale sharks exist. Not that we have to “prove” God or the reliability of His Word.

Second, is Jonah's prayer in chapter 2. The heart of the problem for Jonah was his human heart. When your heart is wrong, then nothing else is actually right. Jonah literally was "*all tangled in seaweed at the bottom of the sea...as far down as a body can go.*" Can you picture the scene? I have a tough time, because I start feeling claustrophobic—in that fish's stomach. Pinocchio was NOT there to talk with. Gastric juices, 10s of feet of salt water between you and the surface air...think of the audio from reporters who were literally afraid for their lives, like on 911. "Oh God, oh, my God...help!, Oh Lord God, get me through. God I need you, please help me. I don't know where I am!" Sobbing, panting for breath, coughing, pitch blackness, in the confines of that space. There was no one there BUT God. Have you been that desperate?

Your heart problem may be sin driving your life, or bad blood, or circumstances that have wrecked your attitude, or difficult relationships. Whatever your heart problem, begin with reality, and start in with thanksgiving. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and 18 says "*pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" The best medicine for your heart problem is to give thanks in all circumstances. Now, sometimes you've got to start small, but eventually, God's Spirit can help you see even your crisis as God's refining, purifying fire. And then, after facing the reality, after beginning with thanksgiving, there's surrender. And that's what Jonah did. God is a God of second chances. God stayed with his runaway prophet.

Third, in chapter 3, Jonah obeys God and goes to Nineveh and tells them what God says: "repent." And they repent—from the king down to the lowest person. They confess their sin and turn toward God—just what Jonah doesn't want. God is a God of second chances! God is the God who is moved by a deep love for all peoples, not just Israel. With the people's repentance, God relents in his judgment. Repentance is a huge part of the Christian gospel. It's not just that God is love and Jesus showed us love, so we should love others. That's not the Christian Gospel. If that were it, every song from the 70s would be about God redeeming us from our sin, so we CAN love. We must love from our own repentance.

Fourth, in chapter 4, Jonah is angry with God. Jonah is so angry with God he goes out on a hillside to watch the destruction. He knows God is merciful, but he doesn't want mercy shown to the enemy of his people! He wants destruction. God's not through with Jonah. He grows that plant to give him shade, which makes Jonah happy. Then, God sends a worm which kills the plant, and Jonah is angry again. And God points out to Jonah that he cares more for a shade plant than for people.

Here's where the good news hits me today:

1. God stayed with his runaway. God disciplined Jonah, but only to bring the runaway prophet back to renewed fellowship with Him. You don't have to fear God's discipline. His only desire is for you to be in fellowship with him. You were planned for God's pleasure, not for his punishment. You know John 3:16. But do you know John 3:17? "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*"
2. God is a God of second chances. The second chance means that sin and disobedience don't have to disqualify us from serving God. God forgives us and RESTORES us. In the Old Testament, he did it through the blood of the lamb. In the New Testament he does it once and for all by the blood of his Son Jesus Christ.
3. God's never done with you. When you think you've gone beyond Tarshish, beyond the depths of the sea, away from God, far enough to escape God, you haven't gone far enough. Psalm 139:7-10 "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*" God's will is that not one should perish. No matter how deep the great fish dove, no matter how dark the inside of its belly, no depth or darkness was enough to drown out the sound of Jonah's prayer.

Jonah tries to make it about "us" and "them." You won't hear me preach too many "us" and "them" sermons. Jesus taught us "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). When we do, we reflect God's character. Jonah ran because he didn't want God to be a God of second chances; little did he realize that he was the one who needed the second chance!

I close with Chuck Swindoll's thoughts on Attitude. "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, a giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company,...a church,...a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the past. We cannot change the fact that people will act a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you;...we are in charge of our attitudes."

Church, attitudes are contagious. Is yours worth catching?