

Sermon 12th July 2020

When Lucas was growing up, he loved to play hide and seek. At one stage it became an obsession with him with every activity turned in to a protracted search for where he had hidden himself this time. Although initially he struggled with the concept that just because he couldn't see us didn't mean we couldn't see him. Once Lucas had grasped the concept that he needed to hide all of himself, not unsurprisingly how often he practiced, he became very good at finding those obscure, never used before places to hide. Lucas obsession was for me and Gillian an annoyance and inconvenience at bath time or bedtime or dinner time or any other time Lucas chose to hide from us when we just needed to get on. However, when we left the house, Lucas's obsession became a bit of a nightmare. He would dash ahead and try to hide in the most ingenious places. It became so bad we bought reigns for him simply to stop him running off to hide from us. The strange thing was Lucas actually wanted Gillian and me to find him, He became frantic if we didn't find him within a minute or two. For Lucas, the important thing was we searched for and found him.

Contrast this with Jonah who was playing hide and seek with God, only Jonah didn't want to be found. The profoundly sad thing about Jonah's game of hide and seek with God was that it would have disastrous consequences for other people and eventually himself. You could title this mornings sermon "Don't play hide and seek with God because people will suffer". It is easy in a way to look at Jonah's disobedience and only see the suffering it caused him, three days in the belly of a fish before being vomited on the seashore wouldn't have been fun. But by focusing on Jonah's suffering you ignore the suffering of the sailors on the boat and the suffering that the Ninevites would endure if they had no opportunity to repent.

To quickly recap from last week. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach a warning that that God was going to "overthrow" or destroy the city due to its sin. Jonah refused to go because he understood that although God's message was one of judgement, God's hearts intent was a gracious and compassionate call to the Ninevites to turn from their sins and be saved. Jonah disobeyed and ran from God not through fear of the Ninevites but because of hatred of them.

So how did Jonah's disobedience hurt those around him, well let's start with how his disobedience effected the Ninevites. By withholding God's pronouncement of Judgement Jonah was also withholding Gods offer of salvation. Jonah wanted to see the Ninevites suffer and be overthrown. Jonah's thinking probably went something like this "I am the prophet of God and if I don't preach to Ninevites they will not have an opportunity to turn from their wickedness and God will destroy them, job done"

Jonah was so determined not to obey God he decided to run away, well sail actually and hide in the farthest and most remote place he knew of Tarshish some two thousand miles in the opposite direction from Nineveh. I think Lucas might have admired Jonah's effort to hide from hide. Before we move on it is important to understand that Jonah had cause to hate the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire which was a by word for unimaginable cruelty and torture. In Jonah 4:11 God say of the Ninevites that they do not know the right hand from their left hand. A more contemporary rendition of this phrase could be there moral compass was broken, they don't know right from wrong. Some of the sins of the Ninevites are listed in the Book of Nahum and include plotting against God, witchcraft, prostitution, plundering and enslaving other nations and the list goes on. Worse than this the Ninevites actually turned these sins in to virtues in which they boasted. Archaeologists have found, in what remains of Nineveh, reliefs on walls of buildings recounting in great details the torture of women and children of those nations they conquered, exalting the men who committed these horrors.

Without God's prophet, Jonah going to Nineveh to point out the sinfulness of the Ninevites actions they would have no opportunity to repent and cease their sin. So, Jonah's decision to flee from God's meant not only would the Ninevites face God's judgement but also, the nations around them would continue to suffer under their oppression. Jonah's disobedience would cause continuing suffering for many, many people.

When Jonah fled from God and headed for Tarshish he was completely focused on his needs and desire to get away and hide from God. He certainly didn't consider what

the consequences would be for the sailors aboard the boat bound for Tarshish. In fact Jonah didn't really seem to care about himself either. In the midst of a storm that was so ferocious that it terrified seasoned sailors so much that they threw their cargo in to the sea to save the ship he went to sleep. He slept through the noise and confusion of the sailors desperate attempt to save the boat, he slept through the violent pitch and roll of the boat, he slept through the sound and the fury of the storm, he slept ignorant of the sailors desperate prayers for salvation from the storm. Jonah's decision to play hide and seek with God was threatening the lives all those around him.

It took a pagan, the ship's Captain to remind him this man of God, this prophet of his duty "*How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.*" There is no evidence from the text that Jonah did pray to God for the storm to cease, Jonah appears to be indifferent to his and the suffering of those around him.

In desperation the sailors cast lots to determine who is to blame for what they realise is a storm of supernatural origin. As the lot falls to Jonah the sailors ask where he comes from and Jonah answers "*I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" The sailors respond with incredulity, they ask "*What have you done?*" This wasn't a question asking what Jonah done to anger God, Jonah had already told them he was running away. "*What have you done?*" could be paraphrased as "How could you have been so stupid you put all our lives at risk." Whilst it may have escaped Jonah's notice it hadn't escaped the sailors that Jonah was trying to run from the God who created the sea by escaping by sea.

The sailors in desperation ask Jonah what they can do calm the sea. Here was an opportunity for Jonah to show his compassion for those he had put in harms way. All it would have required was Jonah to tell the sailors to turn the boat around and head back to Joppa and the storm would have been calmed. But no, he still refused to obey God, "*Pick me up and throw me in to the sea*" he says. This apparent self-sacrificing offer in no way show that Jonah had developed compassion for the sailors. The truth is that Jonah preferred death to obedience to God. Jonah could not be sure that having himself thrown into the sea would indeed calm the storm and save the sailors. In fact, as the sailors themselves understood, this act could bring even more

judgement and calamity on them for murdering a man of God. This is the point where Jonah chooses disobedience and death over everything and everyone else. Jonah had developed a death wish. He had become as the Ninevites, his moral compass had broken, and he no longer knew right from wrong.

Contrast Jonah's callous disregard for those around him with the sailor's compassion for Jonah. Rather than casting him into the sea they tried desperately to row to land to discharge the cause of their misfortune. However, the storm grew wilder and they were left with no option but grant Jonah's death wish.

Before they cast the errant prophet into the sea, they prayed to Jonah's God Yahweh asking for forgiveness for throwing Jonah into the sea. As soon as they cast Jonah into the sea something remarkable happens, the raging sea grew calm. This is when they got really, really scared and they turned from their own gods worshipped the one true God, Jonah's God Yahweh. This echoes Mark 4: 35 – 41 when Jesus calms the storm, it was after Jesus calmed the storm that the disciples got really, really scared.

Isn't it ironic that God uses Jonah's efforts to hide from Him, Jonah's disobedience, to show Himself to a group of pagans? A group of pagans that having seen His power in the storm turn to Him and worship Him.

This story is full of irony. When someone knows God but chooses to disobey Him, that person begins to demonstrate even less compassion for others, less faith in God's sovereignty, and less fear of Him than pagans normally do.

Jonah was however unaware of the irony. Jonah's disobedience had reached its final inevitable sorry conclusion, his death. Well that is where the story would have ended apart from God's intervention, God provided an Uber ride for Jonah, but that is for next week. For Jonah, his disobedience meant three days suffering in what must have been the worst Uber ride ever.

God rescuing this disobedient, callous and death seeking prodigal Prophet mirrors His heart desire to rescue the cruel and callous Ninevites from their sin. A heart's desire again expressed when God sent His Son, Jesus in to the our world two thousand odd

years ago with an express Mission to seek and save those lost in their Sin, those whose moral compass was broken, those who didn't know their right hand from their left.

Disobedience and suffering are irrevocably linked, the only outworking of our disobedience to God is suffering for all. Yes, God can bring good from our disobedience but that is hardly the point, the point is that our disobedience causes the suffering. Jonah's disobedience would have inevitably led to the Ninevites being destroyed, the sailors drowned, and his own death had God not rescued Jonah. It was God seeking and finding his earned Prophet that led to the Nineveh not being destroyed, the Ninevites repenting, the sailors worshipping Him and Jonah not becoming a permanent resident of Davey Jones locker. God ultimately redeemed Jonah's disobedience but, oh the suffering it could have and did cause for those around Jonah.

The Israelite nation spent forty years wandering and suffering in the wilderness because of their disobedience in not crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised land at the first time of asking. We all each and every day stand at a metaphorical Jordan, do we take that step of faith and step into the river and obey God and the blessings for those around us, or do choose to disobey and see those around us suffer. The question is who are you Jonah or Joshua? This week you have a choice either to disobey God and see those around you suffer or to trust and obey and bless those around you.

How many of you have heard of Mordecai Ham? Well I have a bit of homework for you this week, what was the results of Mordecai's obedience to God to go and preach.