Into the Storm
Jonah 1:1-17

So as we saw last Sunday, Nineveh was the city at the centre of the brutal Assyrian empire, and it was Israel's arch-enemy. And in v2 God calls Jonah, the prophet, to 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.' But in response, Jonah doesn't say a word. He doesn't go and preach, but neither does he stay and argue with God. God's call to Jonah is met with… silence. As one commentator (Nixon) puts it, that's like a bride standing at the altar, and when asked by the minister, 'will you take this man to be your husband?', instead of saying, "I will", she says nothing. And her family and friends are all sat there thinking, 'go on, say it', but she doesn't, she just stands there. Silent. But worse than that she then turns and walks down the aisle and out the church. And we hear God calling Jonah to go, and we expect Jonah to say 'I will' but instead the prophet doesn't say a word. Instead, all we hear is the sound of his footsteps heading for the port of Joppa.

And when he gets there, amazingly, he finds a boat going just where he wants, to Tarshish – to the edge of Jonah's world, he couldn't go any further. But as he turns his back on God, and walks up that gang-plank, as he thinks his escape is assured, Jonah's troubles are only just beginning.

The Downward Spiral
Now, I don't know whether you noticed it or not, but one of the themes of this chapter is 'going down'. God calls Jonah to arise, to get up, but for each step he takes, the writer tells us that Jonah goes down. Sure, v3, 'Jonah *rose* to flee to Tarshish' but from then on it's all downwards: v3, again, 'He went *down* to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish.' And what does he do when he finds the ship? 'He paid the fare and went *down* into it.' And then as the ship leaves port and heads out to sea, and the wind starts to blow, v5, 'Jonah had gone *down* into the inner part of the ship.'

Down to Joppa, down into a ship, down into the hold of the ship. Each step going lower and lower. And as the storm begins to strike, the writer tells us that Jonah (v5) 'had lain *down* and was fast asleep.' Now, is that the sleep of a man of incredible faith and poise? Can Jonah sleep like a baby because he's entrusted his life into God's hands and doesn't fear a thing?

Well, interestingly, the word the writer uses for Jonah being fast asleep comes from the same word that's used when God puts Adam to sleep in Genesis 2 and removes a rib to create Eve. So as the storm that threatens to consume Jonah and the sailors howls above him, Jonah's snoring is not a sign of incredible courage or great faith, rather by turning his back on God, Jonah's gone lower and lower until he becomes anaesthetized to the danger he's in. And it's not the outer turmoil of the storm that Jonah's escaping, but his inner turmoil; escaping into the oblivion of sleep where God can no longer make demands upon him.

But he still hasn't reached rock bottom. His descent continues as he is thrown into the storm and sinks below the waves: 2:6 'I went *down* to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.'

You see, Jonah is on the downward spiral, the descent into the ultimate sleep of death. And in his running down this spiral, Jonah's only hope for reversal, is that God will stop him, catch him, rescue him, and lift him back up.

Now, maybe you can identify with Jonah. Someone came up to me after last week's sermon and said simply, 'I'm Jonah.' And I said, 'I know, we're all Jonah.' And Jonah's descent is a powerful picture of the downward spiral we set ourselves on when we turn our backs on God, and refuse to heed His word, and walk away. Now, if you're not yet a Christian, you may not be able to identify a specific starting point to that, but you realize that like Jonah, your back is turned, and your relationship with God is broken. Or maybe you're already a Christian, but you're sat there and you know that you're running away. Maybe it began with a simple refusal to obey God on something and it's gone from there, but like Jonah you've tried to escape the felt presence of God, you've shut down on Him in your heart

Whatever the trigger, what Jonah teaches us is that if we keep on walking away, there is that slow descent downwards, that steady disintegration. Now, someone may try to quiet the inner turmoil that results by filling their life with work or relationships, or by drink or drugs, tragically – at the extreme - even with the sleep of death. But like Jonah, our only hope is that the God who loves us and pursues us, will stop us in our tracks and bring us back to Himself. And that is exactly what He did with Jonah and exactly what He wants to do with you.

The Ever-Widening Circle

Just picture the scene. The wind is howling. The boat is being tossed around on the immense waves like a toy made of matchsticks, the hull is creaking horribly, the sea's coming over the boat from every direction, and the pagan sailors are terrified and, in the words of v5, 'each cried out to his god.' And in the midst of all that chaos, where's the Lord's prophet? Where is the man of God? It's deeply ironic, isn't it? A bunch of pagan sailors are praying for their lives and Jonah, the servant of the Lord, is sleeping.

Now, one of the things that is so troubling about Jonah's actions – or inaction – is the fallout of his sin in others' lives. These sailors are losing their cargo, their business is going down the pan, worse than that they are in danger of losing not just their livelihood but their lives. And it's Jonah's fault.

You see, when we turn away from God, in big or small ways, it almost always has consequences for others. None of us can sin in a vacuum. And that is especially true for leaders, and you don't have to be a prophet for that to be true. It can be true in the church or your work place or our homes and families and marriages. Like dropping a rock in a pond, our sin can have that ever-widening circle of impact on others.

I don't know if you've had that experience of coming face to face with the consequences of your own sin in the lives of others, but it is deeply sobering as you realize, 'This began with me, with my sin and my stupid decision-making. Just like Jonah, I dropped the rock in.'

And it is recognising that ever-widening fallout of sin that prompted one writer to advise every pastor to carefully think through the repercussions in the lives of others if they were to fall in sexual sin. Think about the impact on your wife, your children, on the church, on people exploring the Christian faith, on the witness of Christ in the world. Whilst you can still think clearly, see the tsunami that would be created if you drop that rock into the sea of others' lives. But again, you don't have to be a pastor, and it doesn't have to be sexual sin, for that to be true. When we mess up, it's our wives, or husbands, our kids – or work colleagues, who suffer.

But how different is God. You see, if these sailors are in danger of losing everything because of Jonah; if Jonah causes these men loss, one of the remarkable turnarounds in this story is how God gives them grace. These guys start this journey as pagan idolaters – men worshipping any number of gods. But God uses this storm that He hurls upon the sea to bring them to a knowledge of Himself, and that is worth far more than their cargo. They start off fearing the storm, then they fear for their lives, but it ends, v16: 'Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly' and they worshipped Him.

And just as He does with these men, God will use adversity, circumstances in our lives that are bigger than us, that we can't sort, that we can't fix, to strip away all these other things that we might be tempted to rely on. For them, He strips away all these other gods; for us He may strip away our abilities, our resources, ultimately our reliance on ourselves, so that we might rely on Him and find Him to be of greater value than anything that might go overboard.

So whilst it may not feel like it at the time, God uses this kind of suffering for our good. In the book of Genesis, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. He ends up spending years both as a slave and then in jail for a crime he didn't commit. He had every reason to be bitter and angry and resentful towards his brothers who had robbed him of so many years of his life. And when the boot is on the other foot and he finally reveals himself to his brothers, as the prime minister of Egypt, they're horrified. But Joseph has learnt a lesson and he says to them, Gen 50:20, 'you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.' You meant this for my ill, you meant this to bring me down, but God has turned it around and has lifted me up. So whatever loss, whatever evil Jonah brings on these sailors, God uses it for their good, that they might come to know Him. And the same is true for us.

There may come a time when you're caught in the fallout of others' sin: you suffer, you pay the price of someone else's sinful choices or mistakes. But as you entrust your life to your heavenly Father, He will use these circumstances for your good. Now, when you're in the middle of it – it may not feel like that. Joseph still had to endure years of wrongful imprisonment. The sailors still had to watch their cargo sinking to the seabed with Jonah. But the apostle Paul is right, 'for those who love God all things [even unjust, undeserved suffering] work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28).

But if God is gracious to these pagan sailors, He is also gracious to His runaway prophet. And incredibly, that begins with Jonah getting caught.

Caught by Grace

The captain goes into the hold, probably to get more cargo to chuck over board, and catches Jonah fast asleep. Verse 6, 'So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god!"' It's a virtual mirror image, a parody of God's call to Jonah. God said in v2, 'Arise, go to Nineveh… and call out against it.' And the captain says, 'Arise, call out to your god!' So, here is Jonah, a prophet, being rebuked by a pagan. Interesting, isn't it, the tools of grace God will use in our lives! As Martin Luther wrote, 'not only the ship, but the whole world becomes too small for Jonah... he finds no nook or corner in all of creation… where he might crawl in.' There is nowhere for Jonah to hide from the God of grace who pursues him.

Now, whether you have known it in your own life, or seen it in others, it's remarkable how often God uses someone being caught for their good. At the time we might think it's the worst thing possible, we feel small and humiliated as we're forced to confront what we're really like, and face the consequences of our sin. But with time we realize, 'God that was your grace to me: pursuing me, catching me, even in my sin; that you might turn me around.' It's not for no reason that one mum in the church prays, "God if my kids are up to no good, I pray you'd catch 'em at it!" That's not malicious, that's God's love in the heart of a mum, for their good.

Well, having caught Jonah asleep, the captain wants him to pray. I mean they're in trouble and he wants to cover as many bases as possible. And Jonah must be thinking, 'Pray? If only you knew! The whole reason I'm on board is to escape this God, not pray to Him.'

Now, just contrast Jonah's response in the storm to that of the other prophet from Galilee, the one greater than Jonah. Remember that time when Jesus was in the boat with the disciples, and the storm comes up, and the disciples are afraid for their lives? What was Jesus doing? He was also asleep. But Jesus wasn't sleeping because He was running from the will of God, the whole reason He had come was to do the will of God. But, nevertheless, He's asleep in the storm, and the disciples shake Him and wake Him and ask Him, 'don't you care that we're about to perish? Don't you care Jesus?' It's a fascinating parallel with Jonah, isn't it? - as the captain shakes him awake, 'what are you doing you sleeper? Don't you care we're going to drown?'

Well, Jesus does care, and in a reversal of Jonah and the captain who asks Jonah to exercise his faith and pray, Jesus asks the sailors, the fishermen, 'where is your faith?' And He rebukes the storm and immediately it dies away. But Jonah can't do that, because he's the cause of the storm. And despite being asked to, Jonah never does pray. Once again he's silent.

And yet God is on his case.

Into the Storm

Now, when people face adversity, they'll often try two things to get their way out: religion and their own efforts. And the sailors try both. They pray to their gods, as someone today might pray to a saint, or light a candle, but when that doesn't work, they start jettisoning the cargo, they try and get through this in their own strength. And in a neat little play on words the writer tells us in v4 that 'The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea' and in v5 that the sailors 'hurled the cargo… into the sea.' But what the sailors discover is that God is a bigger hurler than they are. Like arm-wrestling Jeremiah on the youth retreat, God is in a different league when it comes to hurling power. And as Jonah and the sailors discover – you can't outrun one of God's storms. Instead, you've got to yield to it, and fall into His arms – because that's the only way to peace.

So, having failed to quiet the storm, the sailors decide to draw lots, because this storm is of such an intensity that someone must be to blame: v7: "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." And surprise, surprise, Jonah wins the lottery! Except the prize money wasn't what he might have hoped!

Now, just spare a thought for Jonah. Nothing's going right, is it? He leaves Joppa on a beautifully sunny day and now he's engulfed in an horrendous storm. He's been caught by the captain, when all he wanted was to escape his thoughts, and now the lot has gone against him. He's probably thinking, 'why does nothing ever go right for me, why can't things go my way for a change?' And yet it's all God's gracious intervention, isn't it? This is God's grace and love and mercy to Jonah, to help him come face to face with the idols in his heart, to have him meet the real Jonah, the Jonah God wants to change, and to bring Jonah back to the place where he can know the felt presence of God and hear His word again.

But for that to happen, Jonah has got to stop running and fighting.

Well, with the howling gale and the water coming over the sides, and the ship on the verge of breaking up, the sailors try to interrogate him: v8, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" I mean, you must be from some kind of evil people for this to happen? For the gods to want to wipe you out and take us with you, and for you not to try and help us in this storm, but to sleep and not even be bothered to pray, I mean you must be from the pit or something. Hey, you're not an Assyrian are you? You don't come from Nineveh do you? Because that would explain everything.'

O the irony of it all, as Jonah answers them, v9, "I am a Hebrew." Those are the first word's Jonah has uttered. That's his answer, it's the answer of his life, as we saw last week, that's what defines him – his race, his nationalism. He's a descendant of Abraham. And yet the offspring of Abraham were called to be a blessing to all nations: 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3). Not much of a blessing so far Jonah!

But, did you notice the one question he didn't answer? 'What is your occupation?'

Jonah can say who his people are. He can say who his God is. But he has no answer to 'what's your job?' Because what can he say – is he a prophet? He handed his security pass in when he got on the boat. All he can tell them is that he is running away from the presence of the God he fears. And the sailors response to that, v10, is, "What is this that you have done?" How could you do such a thing? Are you crazy? If He's the God of heaven and earth and the sea as you say, why on earth would you run from Him? It's a good question, isn't it? Why would we ever run from a God like that?

And then they ask him, v11, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" And God has boxed Jonah into a corner. He knows God is responsible for the storm. And he knows it's because of him. So Jonah has been forced to come face to face with his sin, with his rebellion and he knows he deserves to die. He knows the one thing they can hurl into the storm to stop it, is him. So he tells them, they must sacrifice him to save themselves.

But they don't want to do that. They don't want to be responsible for his death, so they try and row to land. But the writer tells us, v13, 'they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.' You see, it's not as simple as putting him on dry land and this time he goes to Nineveh, as if somehow he could put the clock back and pretend none of this happened. Because the problem is not the storm, the problem is Jonah's heart – that's what needs fixing. And for his rebellion and sin Jonah must pay the price, and he must give his life to save their lives. Jonah knows that the only way to appease the tempest of God is to abandon himself to it. It is his just desserts.

So, having prayed, the sailors pick Jonah up, and this time, v15, they 'hurled *him* into the sea.' And as Jonah sinks below the waves, 'the sea ceased from its raging.' The sailors' lives are safe, but Jonah's life can only be saved if God rescues him. Jonah can only be saved if God is gracious to one who doesn't deserve it. Verse 17: 'And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.' You see, the God who pursues, and uses storms to get hold of us, is also the God who rescues.

But what about us? Because we are all Jonah. Like Jonah, we would rather God judged our enemies than showed them grace. Like Jonah, we have these idols in our hearts, things that mean more to us than God. Like Jonah, we run from God, and turn our backs on His good commands. So, if like Jonah we can't just put the clock back and pretend these things never happened, and if we deserve our just desserts, if like Jonah we need rescuing, what hope is there for us? Are we doomed, like the sailors, to try and save ourselves by religion, or our own efforts, knowing they can never be enough?

And the answer is no. You see, Jonah had to be thrown into the storm for his own sin. But Jesus, the other prophet from Galilee, the true Hebrew, the ultimate blessing to the nations, threw Himself into the storm of God's wrath for us. At the cross, the Son of God died for us – He sank below the waves of God's wrath so that we, the guilty, might make it safe to land. Jonah is brought to the point of having to acknowledge his guilt, and realizes he must pay for his sin, and give his life to save others from the consequences of his sin. But Jesus had no guilt to

acknowledge and rather than save others from the consequences of His sin, He gives His life to save us from the consequences of our sin. The storm comes on Jonah and the sailors because of Jonah's rebellion. But it's because of us that the greatest tempest came upon Jesus. And He willingly threw Himself into it, that we might be rescued, so much does He love us. He is indeed the One Greater Than Jonah.

And if you can see that, and grasp what Jesus has done for you, then it will stop you in the tracks of the downward descent you might be on. It will be what makes you turn around and gives you the grace to repent and start walking back. It's where you'll find the forgiveness you need when your sin has caused others hurt, and the redeeming power that can turn that around. And it will give you the certainty, that whatever storm you face now or in the future, like these sailors, whenever things are stripped away, He will turn it for your good, because He is good and He loves you.