

LOOKING FOR A SIGN

DATE: SUNDAY, 26TH APRIL 2020 | SERIES: JESUS - PART 5

MATTHEW 16:1-4

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red," and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.' Jesus then left them and went away.

START TALKING

1. What stood out to you from Sunday's message?
2. When you get lost, do you:
 - a). Stop and ask for directions?
 - b). Consult a map?
 - c). Prefer to figure things out on your own?
3. God's heart is always to save people - in this case, the people of Nineveh. Who of your friends or family who are not yet saved (or living out a meaningful faith) would you like the group to pray for tonight?

START THINKING

1. Read Jonah 1:1-3 and Psalm 139:7-12.
 - a). What was foolish about Jonah's belief that he could flee from God?
 - b). In what ways can you relate to Jonah's disobedience?
 - c). What do you think Jonah was thinking as he fled to Tarshish?
2. In what ways does the knowledge that God is everywhere bring you comfort? Is this something you often think about?

START SHARING

1. Have you ever felt like Jonah in that you didn't do what you sensed God was calling you to do? Jonah's solution was to try to run from God. In what ways have you avoided obedience to God's prompting in your life?
2. Steve said that idols are not always bad things - often, idols are good things that we look to, to give us what only God can give us e.g., our careers, family, children, spouse, achievement, some cause, your own physical attractiveness, romance, human approval, power, comfort, financial security... During this lockdown period, what personal idols have you put your hope in or depended on to get you through? What do you need to do to make that right?

START PRAYING

From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. Jonah 2:1. There may be people in your group who are feeling a little like Jonah in this season - stuck in the belly of a whale, seaweed wrapped around their neck, and smelling like who-knows-what! Perhaps their situation seems hopeless and beyond any level of restoration. Spend time praying with and for them, and encouraging them in Christ.

START DOING

What will you do this week to obey God's call to take His message to the lost? Who will you begin praying for? Ask God to reveal to you the message you are to share (be sure it includes His grace and mercy).

SUMMARY

OF SUNDAY'S MESSAGE

This Sunday, Steve shared an encouraging message of hope based on the story of Jonah. A sign points to something. Signs give direction, and depending whether we're following the correct sign or not, they take us in the right or wrong direction.

In Matthew 16:1-4, the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign (from heaven). Now, this was not the first time He'd been asked for a sign, but in this case, they were testing Him. Trying to get Him to validate himself – to prove that He was the Messiah – as if the miracles He'd performed were not already signs enough. Although Jesus could have easily impressed them with a sign, He knew that no miracle would convince them otherwise as they had already decided not to believe in Him. By using the sign of Jonah, Jesus was referring to His own death and resurrection. (See also Matthew 12:38-42).

Jonah was a Hebrew prophet living in Israel. God gave Jonah a mission to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria - a great but evil empire and Israel's most dreaded enemy at that time. The Assyrians flaunted their power through numerous acts of heartless cruelty, so when Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria and to tell the people to repent, he ran in the opposite direction! He buys a ticket and boards a ship travelling across the Mediterranean to Tarshish. From there... a huge storm comes up and threatens to sink the boat; Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard to save themselves, and then he's swallowed by a big fish and spends three days in the belly of the fish before the Lord commands the fish to spit Jonah up on the shore. God then gives Jonah a new call to go to Nineveh and deliver the message of judgment.

Side note: Many people struggle with the story of Jonah and how a fish could have swallowed him. The fact that Jesus believed the story (He refers to Jonah in Matthew 12 and here in Matthew 16) makes the story even more important than we realise!

In the story of Jonah, we see three signs: Reluctance, Repentance, Revival.

1. Sign of Reluctance

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. Jonah 1:2-3

God's eye is on every nation – not just Israel. Given what we read above about the Assyrians, it's highly likely that Jonah would have been very unwelcome there; so it's somewhat understandable that he took a 180 degree turn to what God had told him to do and headed for Tarshish.

Jonah doesn't discuss this with God – he just goes in the opposite direction from what he assumed was a dangerous place to a place

that he assumes is safe. But it turns out that Jonah's choice was far more dangerous than where God wanted to send him - he runs away from Nineveh and into the storm! The lesson we can learn from this is that the safest place right in the centre of God's will. The greatest threat to Jonah was his own disobedience.

Jonah's reluctance is a warning sign to us that disobedience to God's will (which at times may seem scary) is very dangerous for us. Inside everyone of us lives a Jonah that is wired with the desire to control our own lives and destiny. Left to our own devices, we are likely to choose the Tarshish route, taking us away from God's will. We need to come to a place of full surrender. We need to be cautious never to pick the easiest path but instead choose to be at the very centre of God's will. In our current season, God is giving us guidance, and we need to take heed of what He is saying to us.

2. Sign of Repentance

After the fish spits Jonah up, God gives him word again to go to Nineveh to deliver a message: *'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'* Jonah 3:4. This time Jonah is obedient to God's call and goes to Nineveh and preaches the message.

In Matthew 12, Jesus says: *Someone greater than Jonah is here!* (speaking about Himself). Jonah is a sign of Jesus coming to preach repentance. Jesus' message is not always the easily palatable one. Embedded in Jesus message of repentance is a call (not once-off but continuous) to turn from our idols to Him.

There are two aspects to repentance: a turn in direction and a change of mindset. In the Old Testament, the message of repentance was always to turn from idols. An idol is:

- Anything in our lives that is more fundamental to our happiness, meaning in life or our identity than God is.
- Anything we love more than God or rest our heart in more than God.

An idol can be our careers, family, children, spouse, achievement, some cause, your own physical attractiveness, romance, human approval, power, comfort, financial security... These are all good things; therefore, our idols are usually not bad things. An idol can be a good thing, misplaced. Idols are often good things that we look to, to give us what only God can give us. They are created things that we look to, to give us only what the Creator can give us.

In our current time of isolation, our hearts tend towards our idols - they are the things we think about most, or worry about the most or fear losing the most. But in the middle of all this, Jesus says repent! Turn away from your idols. It means us letting go of something smaller to take hold of something greater. (We can't take hold of Him when holding on to our idols.)

What idols do we need to put away? What do we fear losing? What

spaces have our minds drifted into? Maybe this time of lockdown is one of Jesus' greatest gifts if it takes us away from our idols and returns us to Him.

3. Sign of Revival

When Jonah reached Nineveh, he preached God's message, and there was a city-wide revival, and God relented and did not bring about the destruction He had threatened to. (Jonah 3:6-10)

This story should remind us that there is no city, no region or nation that God can't reach; no heart too hard that God cannot change. And it's a sign to us that God wants to bring our hearts back to Him.

David Wilkerson who authored the book *The Cross & the Switchblade* and started a ministry to gangsters and drug addicts shared this prophetic word in 1986: "I see a plague coming on the world, and the bars and church and government will shut down. The plague will hit New York City and shake it like it has never been shaken. The plague is going to force prayerless believers into radical prayer and into their Bibles and repentance will be the cry from the man of God in the pulpit. And out of it will come a third Great Awakening that will sweep America and the world."

New York City is currently the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our nation and the nations of the earth are in desperate need of a great awakening. People are far more interested in pursuing their lives and the pleasures of the world than the will of God. There is no greater time than now for God to pour out His Spirit on the nations of the world; to use us – passionate Christ-followers – to carry the message of His love, repentance, forgiveness, hope and purpose. God will use this time to stir people back to Him.

The story of Jonah is a sign that we shouldn't give up because God can soften the hardest hearts. It started with a personal revival in the heart of Jonah. Do you need a personal internal revival?