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Jonah 1:1-4
Minor Leagues:
Insights from the Minor Prophets
The Interrupted Life

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We are a few weeks into a series on the Minor Prophets. It's titled, "Minor Leagues: Insights from the Minor Prophets." I titled this late last summer when I planned out all the sermon series for the year, but the connection to the Minor Leagues of baseball turns out to be more appropriate this year than any of the last couple decades or so, because our own Major League Baseball team – the Seattle Mariners – is more like a Minor League team than ever.

The difference is that the Minor Prophets pack a major punch that can change your life. And so in this series we're looking to get some insights into what the message of each of the Minor Prophets is, so God would get through to us in a Major League kind of way.

And today we are looking at Jonah. Jonah is, without a doubt, the most memorable of the prophets, because it's a narrative, a "story" we might call it. The others are not like that at all. The prophetic word is preached through the life of Jonah and the lives of the people he preached to, more than through the actual words he says. In particular, what makes Jonah so memorable, is him being swallowed by a fish. This is pretty timely with our VBS this last week that was all about going "into the wild." So the fish is what most people remember about Jonah and then they love to debate whether it really happened or not. Unfortunately, what then gets lost in the midst of that debate is the major impact that God had through this minor prophet, and the impact that God could have still today in our own lives as well.

And so what I want us to take away from Jonah today is that God calls us to embrace the interrupted life. Some of the ladies at our church did a study on Jonah the last several weeks, and it was called, "Jonah: Navigating a Life Interrupted."¹ And that has inspired me to consider Jonah through this lens of the interrupted life. **God calls us to embrace the interrupted life and seek him in the midst of the interruptions.** We all have interruptions in life. I've got four kids, so interruptions are frequent in our household. One of those

interruptions – one of the more pleasant ones – has been the telling of jokes. Especially, when they were younger, they liked to tell knock-knock jokes. One of my kids, who I’ll allow to remain nameless, though she’s the younger of our two girls ☺ ... She loved telling knock-knock jokes so much when she was in kindergarten or so, that she would take *non*-knock-knock jokes and turn them into knock-knock jokes. So she’d say “Knock-knock” and I’d say “who’s there?” and she’d say something like, “What do you call a train carrying gum?” “A chew-chew train.”

But there was one actual knock-knock joke that my kids liked to tell that reminds us about the interrupted life. So let’s do this:

“Knock-knock!”

Congregation: “Who’s there?”

“Interrupting Cow”

Congregation: “Interrupting Co...”

“Mooooooooo!” (For those of you reading the sermon after the fact and aren’t familiar with this joke, the “moooo” is said before they can finish their line, interrupting them.)

This is what we see with Jonah. God interrupts his life – not for laughs, but to call him and send him into something new for God’s purposes. We first encounter Jonah in 2 Kings 14, where we read, **“Jeroboam was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher” (2 Kings 14:24).** So what we see here is that Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II, which was from about 790 to 750 B.C. Israel prospered in many ways under his reign, though their walk with the Lord got derailed by idolatry, and their financial prosperity was not experienced by everyone, resulting in a widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots. That’s what Amos preached against and we looked at his message a couple weeks ago and acknowledged its relevance for us still today.

Anyway, one of their areas of growth was in their borders, and what we see is that Jonah prophesied about that. One of his messages was that Israel’s boundaries would be restored to where they once were, and that is exactly

what happened. Reading between the lines, we can see that **Jonah was “successful” in his role as a prophet, and probably was among those who benefited from the material success of Israel in this time.** Things were pretty good for him, by and large. That doesn’t mean life was just perfect for him...but things were probably pretty good. And it’s into that “good life” that God calls him to leave his home and go to Nineveh. It interrupts his good life.

This is a little like the story of the guy who went golfing one beautiful Saturday morning, and was beginning his pre-shot routine on hole #1, visualizing his upcoming shot, when a voice came over the clubhouse loudspeaker. “Would the gentleman on the Ladies Tee back up to the Men’s Tee, please!!” The guy was still deep in his thoughts and his routine, seemingly impervious to the interruption. Again the announcement came, “Would the MAN on the WOMEN’S Tee kindly back up to the Men’s Tee.” Well, it finally registered with the guy that the announcement was directed at him. So he stopped what he was doing, turned, looked through the clubhouse window directly at the person with the mic and shouted back, “Would the person in the clubhouse kindly shut up and let me play my second shot?!”ⁱⁱ

I mean, if you’re playing golf on a Saturday morning, most of life is going pretty well for you, even if your first shot only went 10 or 15 yards. Jonah’s life is pretty decent as well, when the interrupting voice of God came to him to get off the tee box and go to Nineveh.

And Jonah’s immediate response is not just to ask God to kindly shut up, but to run away from God. It makes you wonder: what kind of a prophet is he, that he’d not follow God’s leading...that he thinks he can hide from God? But this also makes him quite relatable, because none of us follow God’s call upon us perfectly, either. **We all are susceptible to being comfortable in life and not wanting that interrupted.** And quite frequently, God calls us to step out of our comfort zones and trust Him. When you’re sitting in the lay-z-boy of life as comfortable as could be, it’s not easy to “trust God.”

So, going to Nineveh is *not* on his radar screen. This is a significant interruption to his life. I’m reminded of Proverbs 16:9, “In their hearts people

plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” And the steps the Lord is establishing is for him to go to Nineveh. But Jonah goes the other way: to the west, to the Mediterranean Sea and the town of Joppa, and gets on a ship headed to Tarshish. And as you may remember, the ship runs into a terrible storm, nothing is working to save the ship, until Jonah confesses to the others on board that he’s running from God and that’s probably why this storm is threatening their lives...and so he says they should cast him overboard, and the storm will calm down. The others on the ship don’t want to do that, but eventually they do. And then the storm calms down, Jonah gets swallowed by a big fish – in the Hebrew it’s not a whale – and then he’s spat out three days later, giving Jonah a do-over.

And God is persistent (surprise, surprise!), asking him again to go to Nineveh and preach against it, seeking to bring repentance and transformation. According to Chapter 3, and from what we know from other historical documents and archaeological digs, Nineveh was not a small town: For a time it was the capital of the Assyrian empire; Jonah 3 says it took about 3 days to walk across the city; some say it’s population (about 120,000 at this time) was the largest in the world for a period of 50 years or so. And to top it off: the Assyrians were the enemies of Israel. This is not friendly territory for which God is disrupting his life, and is undoubtedly a big reason Jonah went the other way initially.

And so Jonah goes into Nineveh very reluctantly because it’s a serious interruption to his life and his theology – especially his understanding of God’s grace and who God wants to reach and be in relationship with – and on the very first day he begins sharing this message, (spoken very blandly) “40 more days and Nineveh will fall.” We aren’t told what his countenance was like, but of all the biblical prophets, I suspect his was the most like Eeyore – Winnie the Pooh’s friend who’s always pessimistic and gloomy. The content of the message is not exactly inspiring even if it’s presented in an inspiring way; but as with all Biblical prophecy, it’s not so much about predicting the future as it is about trying to get people on track with God. **It’s about steering people onto a new course, by opening their eyes to where the negative direction of their current course leads.**

Well, much to Jonah's surprise: the people of Nineveh respond to the message. Even the king responds which undoubtedly helped get the rest of Nineveh on board, and they repent. And the result is one of the greatest revivals in the history of the Judeo-Christian faith, though it didn't get passed on to later generations and the city is completely overtaken about 130 later – it's one of the greatest collapses of a city in history – and then Assyria completely falls to the Babylonians another 10 years later or so. But in that moment, when Nineveh responded to Jonah's message, you'd think Jonah would be pretty stoked about this revival. What prophet didn't want the people to respond to the message? What church leader wouldn't like to see entire cities experience that kind of transformation? Can you imagine all of Kirkland loving God, following Jesus, and being filled with the Holy Spirit?

And yet in chapter 4 Jonah goes outside the city and has his own pity party, and grumbles against God for having grace and mercy on the Ninevites. Jonah is so bummed about this that he says he'd rather just die. He should be like Tigger at this point, but he's still Eeyore! God's activity in Nineveh is completely outside of Jonah's theological box and understanding of who God is, that God would actually *want* to reach Israel's enemies. And all of this – from the call to go to Nineveh to the grace God bestowed on them – is a *significant* interruption in his life.

You know, probably for most of us here this morning, we aren't actually so different from Jonah: we have things pretty decent in life, in the grand scheme of things. That doesn't mean everything's perfect, and I know there are a few here who are going through some really difficult and challenging situations – cancer, marital or other relationship challenges, death of loved ones, workplace struggles or loss of a job, and so forth. Those are interruptions in life that God doesn't necessarily bring upon you, but He's with you in the midst of it. And regardless of where a person lives, we all go through those kinds of challenges. But if you live in this community, the odds are pretty good that by-and-large you've got some things in life going in the right direction and there's a level of comfort and "success" that you have.

And into that place of comfort, God may speak a word to bring you out it for you to do something or for you to experience something completely

unexpected and that will interrupt your life in a significant way, but will be for God's purposes. Maybe you've never heard about the Good News of Jesus Christ, and you don't know about the abundant life that Jesus offers to you right now and into eternity. Maybe the idea of taking that step and surrendering your life to Jesus is completely foreign to you and feels like a serious interruption to your own comfort level or the plans that you have.

Or maybe you're already a devoted follower of Jesus and God is calling you into something new: A new area of service, a new season of Bible study, a new stage of life, a new job, a new relationship to work on, an opportunity to share with someone about your own faith in Jesus. These things oftentimes will interrupt our lives. And maybe we wonder what God is doing and whether or not we should really courageously step out in faith and follow him. That can be scary, and hard - right? As secular author Jeremy Goldberg has said:

**“Courage is knowing it might hurt, and doing it anyway.
Stupidity is the same thing.
And that is why life is hard.”**

That's partly why the life interrupted by God is challenging. But we actually *need* God to interrupt us to get us on stepping out in faith. It may not come in the form of an interrupting cow or a voice over the loudspeaker...but God will speak to you through His Word, through other people in your life, through a sermon, a song, or simply something that God puts on your heart. Somehow God will speak to you in a prophetic kind of way. We need that voice of the prophet getting us on the straight and narrow, calling us to courageous things and lovingly challenging us to step out in faith and follow the plans that God has laid out. Jonah shows us that even a prophet needs a prophetic voice spoken in his life; how much more do you and I?

And take a lesson from Jonah and learn from his mistake: that when you're following God's calling, go with joy. Celebrate what God does! No pity parties when God does what He says He will do. Jesus offers forgiveness to the criminal who sought it as they both hung on their crosses; Jesus even asked his heavenly Father to forgive those who crucified him – “because they don't know what they're doing.” No pity parties from him. So expect God to

bust open your boxes and move in life-interrupting ways. And then: embrace it and celebrate it, rather than doing what Jonah did as he begrudgingly went about the Lord's business and then complained when God was gracious to these people.

So how is God interrupting your life? Is he seeking to open your heart up to His love for you as a child of God? Is he inviting you into a deeper journey of faith that might upset your comfort level? Whatever it is: embrace it. Trust God more, step out in faith, and go on the journey with joy, knowing that God can work in you and through you to accomplish His purposes. God interrupts our lives for His purposes, and His purposes are always worth being interrupted for. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ It's a women's video-based Bible Study, published by LifeWay, written by Priscilla Shirer.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.jokes-news.com/search/interruption>