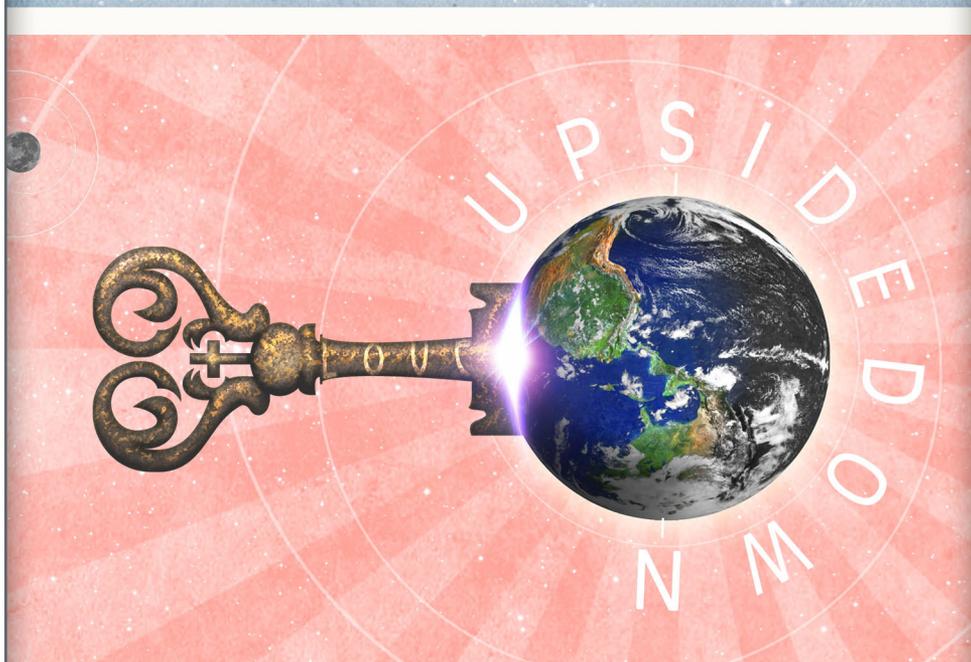


GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

May 15, 2016



Discussion Guide

Engaging Our World

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (Graciously thank group

members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- If you want something done, do you feel it is easier to woo or command? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background of the

Assyrian nation and how it relates to the book of Jonah.

- Read Jonah 1.1-3 aloud. Read the text once more, seeking to experience the text as Jonah.
- As Jonah, what reasons might you have for not obeying God's call?
- Do you feel that people today might respond to God similarly for the same reasons today? Could you elaborate?
- Read Jonah 3.10-4.11 aloud. Read the text once more, seeking to experience the text as Jonah.
- What reasons did Jonah have for not obeying God? Seek to find as many as possible.
- If you could sum up Jonah's reasons in a single word or phrase, what might it be? Could you explain?
- It might be said, that Jonah's reluctance hinged on an unwillingness to extend covenantal love to people not like himself. Do you see this same unwillingness in the Church today? What forms does it take? For what reasons might the presence of this unwillingness exist?
- Do you ever experience this same unwillingness? In what ways? Could you elaborate?
- What might the extension of covenantal love to your fellow person look like? In what ways, if any, might this change your message and demeanor?
- Consider closing by praying using Galatians 5.22-23 as a guide. Ask the Holy Spirit to form the wonderful fruit of covenantal love in you and consider opening your life to him so that he might do this work.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

ASSYRIA

The ancient nation of Assyria was located in what is now northern Iraq along the Tigris River. It was one of the first major empires in the ancient world to experiment with Imperial rule with some of its practices being imitated by the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman empires which followed. The history of Assyria might be divided into three periods or distinct empires with the third period (911-612 B.C.) being the one with which readers of the Old Testament are most familiar.

The Assyrians were a fierce people bent on the expansion of their empire. In this quest, they developed one of the first standing armies in history and developed cutting edge tactics and siege engines. However, the might of the Assyrian aggression came not from its army but from tactics meant to intimidate its enemies before the arrival of any campaigning army. In their quest for expansion, the Assyrians made extensive use of psychological warfare. Three tactics come to the fore in their use of this form of intimidation. First, the Assyrians engaged in the practice of total war. They completely devastated cities and countryside, including animals, as punishment of nations which did not yield to them. Second, the Assyrians practiced deportation. Once an area was conquered, the choice people of the land were enslaved and deported to Assyria. The able-bodied were forced to serve the Assyrian army, and the poor and weak were left in the land thus eviscerating a nation of any chance of rebuilding. . . or rebellion. Finally, the Assyrians were exceptionally cruel. Many of these cruel acts are depicted on ancient steles celebrating Assyrian victories. For instance, Ashurbanipal, the grandson of Sennacherib was known to tear the lips and hands off his enemies. In one inscription from a temple in the city of Nimrod we discover the fate of the leaders of the city of Suru on the Euphrates River, who rebelled from, and were reconquered by Ashurbanipal. It reads, "I built a pillar at the city gate and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up inside the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes." Likewise, Tiglath-Pileser was known to flay victims alive and make piles of skulls. Reports of these exploits and more often preceded the arrival of the Assyrians, striking fear into the hearts of people.

The people of Israel encountered the Assyrians during the height of their third empire and endured the full force of their attempts at expansion. The northern kingdom of Israel was ultimately overcome by the Assyrians and deported in the late eighth-century B.C., but before this the Israelites had at least three major encounters with the Assyrians. Israel first fought the Assyrians at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. which probably resulted in a draw. Later, King Jehu of Israel fought the Assyrians in 841 B.C. and was forced to pay tribute to Assyria. In 732 B.C. King Ahaz of Jerusalem called upon the Assyrians to help repel the aggression of King Pekah of Israel (2 Kings 15.27-29; 16.5-9).

This resulted in the Assyrian sacking of Israel which hastened its demise at the hands of Assyria in 720 B.C.

THE TEXT

JONAH 1.1-3: *THE CALL TO SPEAK UP*

The book of Jonah is short, only some forty eight verses, and yet it holds one of the most intriguing invitations of God to his people within the Old Testament. The book is written as historical prose but probably should be classified as historical allegory; that is, the historical events are used to make a spiritual point. Little is known about the prophet Jonah other than he prophesied during the reign of Jereboam II, King of Israel (793-753 B.C.). Jonah is identified as the son of Amittai with his hometown being Gath Hopher. What he prophesied is not explicitly stated, though it seems to have had nationalistic roots concerning the expansion of Israel (2 Kings 14.25).

The book of Jonah begins suddenly, almost like a runner coming out of the blocks with the narrative not slowing down until the end which is open. This open ending is not a mistake on the part of the author but a literary device which invites the reader to complete the story by choosing how they might respond to God's invitation.

The narrative begins with God inviting Jonah to go to the great (important in the language of the Old Testament) city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. God gives Jonah the task of preaching against this city because the wickedness of the city has come to God's attention. The English translation may be a bit too strong at this point as God is not inviting Jonah to condemn the city but rather to inform the Ninevites of their wicked behavior. Such a task was too much for Jonah which is not easily understood. The Assyrian people were cruel and Israel had twice now faced their power. It would seem that this nationalistic preacher would jump at the chance to check the behavior of this enemy nation, but he instead jumps on a ship and heads the opposite direction to the city of Tarshish, probably in Spain. Jonah refuses to heed God's call to address non-Israelites in his prophetic role. If Jonah stands as a metaphor for Israel then we see that this book is about Israel rejecting its prophetic role to the nations.

JONAH 3.1-5: *THE CALL TO RESPOND*

God pursues Jonah, and with the compulsion of a

storm and the help of a large fish, Jonah is deposited once more upon dry land. Whether time passes or the narrative continues immediately is not known. What is clear is that at some point, God renews his invitation to have Jonah speak to the Ninevites about their wickedness. This time, God promises to reveal what Jonah should say. Convinced that flight is pointless, Jonah obeys and treks to Nineveh. The city of Nineveh is described as being large, taking three days to travel through it. The language probably implies traveling through the city of Nineveh and its suburbs which had a circumference of about fifty-five miles. The city of Nineveh proper only was about eight to twelve miles in circumference. Jonah traveled a single day's journey into this area and proclaimed the short message that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days. While Jonah has technically obeyed God, his reluctance to obey God once more comes to the fore as Jonah makes no sincere effort to ensure the entire people of the area hear God's message. Once again, Jonah's reasons are hidden. It would seem that a prophet such as Jonah whose message was about the expansion of Israel would delight in a message of the destruction of Nineveh. What Jonah is reluctant to do, the gossip network does for him. Word spreads about the simple message of Jonah and the city repents, throwing itself upon the mercy of Jonah's God.

JONAH 3.10-4.11: *ONE THING LACKING*

When God sees the response of the Ninevites, he relents and does not destroy them. Within the narrative, this appears to have been God's plan from the beginning. He had threatened but not decided to destroy them. When the city responded, God did not need to act upon his threat. Rather, it appears God had used the threat to lead the Ninevites to repentance, something Jonah cannot stomach. Jonah responds to God's mercy by accusing God of the same wickedness God had accused the people of Nineveh.

Jonah admits that he had known from the beginning that God's plan was to call the city to repentance. Quoting Exodus 34.6-7, Jonah notes that God's character could lead to no other outcome. What is important to notice is the mention of God's covenantal love (*hesed*) which appears last in the list of God's characteristics. This is probably the point which rankles Jonah the most. God was extending covenantal love to the people of Nineveh. Jonah could not tolerate this. What is now apparent is that this nationalistic preacher allowed his nationalism to influence his religion. He

wanted the destruction of Nineveh, not its rescue. He had not wanted to preach in Nineveh because he knew God would extend his covenantal love to them, and Jonah was not able to tolerate this embracing of the Ninevites. He wanted them destroyed, and if they were allowed to live then he would prefer to die. He could not imagine a world in which the Ninevites were spared.

This dialogue between Jonah and God seems to occur on the outskirts of the city with Jonah waiting for and not seeing the destruction of Nineveh. God invites Jonah to consider the correctness of his anger. When Jonah fails to respond, God teaches Jonah a lesson about compassion with a vine and then invites Jonah to consider the rightness of extending compassion. Jonah refuses to respond leading to a firm response from God indicating that the proper response is to extend covenantal love to all people (and animals!). If Jonah stands for Israel, then God is rebuking Israel for their lack of compassion for the nations around them and the open ending of the story makes space for them to respond differently.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

How do we engage our world? The people of God engage their world as God engages it, with love. What does this look like in practical terms? Growing up, I was taught that this meant telling the world just how much God hated their behavior. They were sinners and they had to know it. Funny thing about that approach. Those upon whom this message was poured did not respond, except by turning away. Was there something wrong with the message? As I look back, I have to respond both "Yes" and "No." The message wasn't wrong because it contained truth. The world is separated from God and it needs to know this. However, the message was wrong because it was delivered without love, without covenantal love. When we extend a message of truth with covenantal love we are inviting people to respond. We are longing for them to respond. We want them to experience life. But, as I look back, I am not sure that longing was there. The desire to accuse was present, as was the desire to condemn and vilify. The desire to have people respond to God? I am not so sure. Somehow the message of truth became an opportunity for people to vent their spleen upon the world and all that offended them. Standing in the present, I am not so sure there is ever really a place for venting our spleen, not if our desire is a response.

If we want people to respond to God, if we are really extending covenantal love there is no room for any desire for the punishment or demise of those to whom we speak. There is only room for an invitation, and this invitation, if it is real, is gentle and pleading. It speaks truth, but only in a way which invites restoration. I am learning to speak in this way. I am finding that when I approach people in love, with covenantal love, my demeanor, my feelings for people, even my understanding of their actions softens. . .and people respond.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do we engage our world? We tell it how wrong it is, or at least that is what we have been told. But why must the world know this? Before you answer, pause and think. No, really think. What is your motivation? If our motives are anything other than covenantal love then we are a people who are speaking truth but not in love. Chances are our message is harsh and our demeanors are harsher. Certainly God wants people to know where they stand with him and God's people are invited to be part of this. We see this in the book of Jonah. However, God's purpose is to invite people back to himself. God approaches people for the purpose of extending covenantal love. When love is present it changes the message. No, it doesn't change the content but it certainly changes the delivery and the demeanor of the one who proclaims it. Let's think for a moment. Do we really want people to respond to God, or do we just want them to know how wrong they are and how right we are? Do we have love for the world around us? This week, consider prayer walking through your neighborhood. Prayer walking is just walking slowly with Jesus, allowing him to call to your attention things which you do not normally see, allowing you to see them as he sees them. Walk throughout your neighborhood and allow Jesus to give you his eyes, to see with his compassion, to understand what it is to see the world through the lens of covenantal love.



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