

Friday Communion Service

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[0 : 0 0] So, we are preparing tonight and tomorrow, preparing ourselves for a communion service, for a service on Sunday morning where, as a church, we gather together to break bread together, to share from a cup of wine together. And in doing this, we are proclaiming a death.

We are announcing that Jesus Christ, that the second person of the Trinity made flesh incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, died. And this is what we are announcing together as we proclaim His death. And yet, a communion service isn't a funeral service. It's not a normal obituary.

We're not simply announcing that someone, even a great someone, the greatest someone, has died full stop. A communion service proclaims a death, but a death like no other.

So, when Paul is telling Christians in 1 Corinthians 11, in this classic passage about the Lord's Supper, how we think about this and explaining to us what we're doing as we have this kind of a service together, he tells us that for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes, until He comes again. We proclaim this death until the one who died comes again to us. So, the death that we are proclaiming on Sunday morning is the death of someone who is coming back, someone who will return, someone who is presently alive and awaiting His return to us.

So, we're proclaiming a death. But what we're proclaiming is a dying that could not be contained by death. In breaking the bread and in drinking the wine, we are announcing to the world around us that the Savior we worship died, yes, but that also He rose again. The Lord's Supper reminds us and it announces to the world that we Christians worship a living person, Jesus Christ who was dead and is now alive. We don't just follow a man who lived and died and is no more and who left us with ideals and with an example and that's it. We worship a living person. The Lord's Supper reminds us and it announces to the world that the God we worship is the master of life and death. And even more than that, that the God we worship became a real human being and that He shared in even our darkest experiences. He even entered into death, although He was bigger than death and it could not contain Him. The Lord's Supper reminds us and it tells the world around us that because of the resurrection of this person, of Jesus

[3 : 1 8] Christ, the gospel offers us a completely new way of thinking about life and death. Most fundamentally, if we ask, how can I know that death is not the end? Jesus is there to tell us, I died, I entered it, I emerged from it to bring about its own end. The Lord's Supper offers us a God who died, who rose again, who is greater than death itself, a God who in Christ does not give death the last word. And because of that, communion makes Christianity, the Lord's Supper makes Christianity fundamentally a religion of hope, centered on this, that even in the darkest, most final of circumstances, life triumphs over death. The resurrection of Christ offers us a God who has destroyed death from the inside out, a God who took on death by dying, by entering death itself, and by being the one who could not be contained by it.

So the death, but also the resurrection of Christ, which we proclaim until He comes, are of fundamental importance to our Christian faith. Doesn't Paul tell us, if Jesus has not been resurrected, then our faith is completely in vain, and we are just fools who should be pitied more than anyone else. If you read the book of Acts, the story of how this, how the early church's message spread and expanded across the known world at that time, what is it that they preach? It is not actually limited to preaching on Jesus' death. The center of their message is Jesus' resurrection, that the Jesus who died has, is alive again. The resurrection is that important, and if we, if we don't get that, the resurrection, then we haven't really understood the Christian faith at all, Paul says.

So if we want to understand then the significance of this resurrection, this thing between we proclaim His death and until He comes again, what should we read? And tonight to try and help us do this, we're going to think about the story of Jonah. So we've already looked at chapter one, and maybe the link there isn't that obvious to you. Maybe you're thinking, well this is an Old Testament story, and it's about a man who is swallowed by a whale and spat up on a beach. How could this story be important in understanding the death on the one hand and the resurrection on the other of Jesus Christ? I thought the important thing about the story of Jonah was he was really disobedient to God, and he's an example of that. But if we think like that, we're missing something of tremendous importance. When Jesus spoke about His resurrection, He spoke about Jonah. And when He tried to describe the significance of His resurrection for us, He spoke about Jonah. So this evening I'd like us to focus on Jesus on the one hand and Jonah on the other. I'd like us to focus on two resurrected people, two resurrected men. And we'll do that in three points. So firstly we'll look at why Jesus understood His resurrection through Jonah.

Then we'll look at how Jesus is like Jonah. And then lastly how Jesus is unlike Jonah. So firstly why Jesus understood His resurrection through Jonah's story. And more generally, Jesus understood not just Jonah, but the whole of the Old Testament as pointing to Himself, as explaining the one whom God would send to save the world, Himself. The Old Testament isn't a random collection of stories with no common theme. They are individual stories that together form one great story. God creates a good world, the world is ruined by sin. God promises that one day someone will come who will save that world.

And from then on the stories gradually reveal more and more and more about the one who will come to do this, to save our world. Which is something that's kind of counter-cultural for people in the western world today to grasp and accept. In the midst of all these individual stories there's somehow a bigger story running over and through them all. But that is how Jesus sees the Old Testament. So when Jesus who sees Himself as that person, as the Savior, reads the Old Testament, He sees Himself revealed there. We know that from the road to Emmaus. So Jesus is walking with two really disappointed disciples to a place called Emmaus after His death. They don't know that it's Him and He asks them, you know, why are you so despondent? Why are you so down? What's happened? And they say, where have you been? Haven't you heard about Jesus of Nazareth? We thought He was going to save Israel, but then the Romans crucified Him. And then it says, beginning with Moses and the prophets, He explained the Scriptures to them. He opened up the Scriptures to them and told them how the Old Testament points to them. So Jesus sees these various people in the Old Testament who are positioned in the story by God to be like smaller versions of the true Savior. So Jesus thinks about

[8 : 57] Solomon and tells us explicitly that he is greater than Solomon. Jesus sees the wisdom and glory of this world leader, this king, and he knows that that all points in some way to himself who is wiser and more glorious, who is the true leader of our world. He sees King David and knows that he himself is the true king. He sees the temple and it's a lesser version of himself, the place you go to meet with God, the place you go to offer sacrifices to Him. But Jesus in His own person is both the ultimate sacrifice to God and the true meeting place of God and humanity. Or think of Old Testament stories like Daniel.

If you read it, it's the story of a righteous man in an unrighteous city. He's constantly tempted, but he doesn't disobey God. And yet as an innocent man, he is thrown to the lions.

And yet this time, and yet the lions, their rage, their desire to kill him is held back. And yet Jesus is the true Daniel. He's the truly righteous man in an unrighteous world, never disobeys God and is thrown to the lions. But with Jesus, the lions are never held back. Think of a story like David and Goliath. David goes out as a warrior on behalf of his people to fight against the leader, the greatest warrior of their enemies. And in an unlikely way, he kills Goliath, although he's small and vulnerable. Jesus is greater than David. He takes, as on the cross, he is the true warrior on behalf of his people, fighting on behalf of God's people. And he wins that battle by being killed rather than killing. Or a book like Hosea, where a prophet is called to love his unfaithful wife, where Jesus is greater than Hosea in loving the church. So, Jesus reads these stories knowing that they're actually talking about him. And when Jesus reads the book of Jonah, he also knows this book is all about me.

Hence why he speaks about how he will eventually give the sign of Jonah to the world. So, the question is, how is Jesus related to Jonah? Sure, a lot of you will know this story, but some of you perhaps less so. So, in a nutshell, the story of Jonah is that this man, Jonah, is called by God to take his message to the city of Nineveh, to this huge godless place. And he refuses to go, and he tries to go as far as he can in the opposite direction. So, he sets out for what is modern-day Spain, as far as you could go in the known world. God causes a huge storm to happen, and everyone thinks that they're all going to die. And Jonah is fast asleep in the boat, and he's awoken by a man saying, why aren't you calling on your God?

How can you sleep? Don't you care if we drown? Think about who else in the Bible was asleep on a boat during a storm when people awoke him saying, call on God, don't you care if we drown? Jesus Christ.

[12:12] So, they cast lots on this boat to work out which one of them is being punished by his God, and the lot falls on Jonah. He says, I'm a Hebrew, I'm running from the Lord, and it's because of him that the Lord is punishing them. So, he volunteers to die on behalf of the people on his boat, and he tells them, if you throw me into the darkness, if you throw me into this raging sea, you will live, you will be saved, if you throw me in. And the guys on the boat try not to do this, but in the end it's clear that the only way for them to be saved is for Jonah to die, is for the, for Jonah to be thrown into the sea.

And so, Jonah is thrown to his death, and everyone else is saved from God's anger. But as Jonah is thrown into the sea, God sends this great fish that swallows him, and he spends three days and three nights inside it. And after that, he is spat up on a beach as, as a resurrected figure, someone who has returned from, from certain death. So, he goes and preaches in Nineveh, and they seem to accept the message, and they repent of their sins. But then Jonah's personal faults become obvious in his reaction to this, because he's not happy about how they've repented and been saved. He would far rather that God destroy them than forgive them. He's basically racist, xenophobic, and he has no love for the Ninevites. To him, they're, they're just worthless pagans who don't deserve God's love. So, he's furious with God for sparing their lives.

And the story ends with Jonah as this tragic figure, alone, frustrated, miserable, looking at the city that he doesn't love. And then the story ends with God reminding him, aren't there 120,000 human beings, souls there, who are spiritually clueless? They don't know their left hand from their right. Should I not have pity on that great city? So, that's the story of Jonah in a nutshell.

But how then is that story, the story of this Old Testament prophet who gets swallowed by a whale, like the story of Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth who's put to death on a cross?

But Jonah isn't an allegory prefiguring Jesus. So, it's not that every detail in the story of Jonah represents something in the story of Jesus. A lot of the details in Jonah's story don't have a relation to Jesus. But the character of Jonah and the overall direction of his story is connected to Jesus, hence why Jesus speaks about himself and his resurrection in relation to Jonah.

[15:00] So, we'll move on to point two, how Jesus is like Jonah. Jonah is sent to the world with the gospel. Jonah, like Jesus, is sent by God into the world, to a particular place, Nineveh, because God was aware of the corruption in that place. So, he sent Jonah to Nineveh to bring them a message, to repent, to seek forgiveness from God and to change. Because God was at work to change Nineveh, to transform it. And at first, Jonah didn't accept that mission, but the fact remains that both Jonah and Jesus begin their stories with this compulsion from God to go, to take the gospel, to take this message of repentance and forgiveness to a fallen, a broken world. Jonah also sees himself as a sin bearer, as someone who explicitly says on the boat, this storm that's upon us is the wrath of God. The storm is God's anger, and I am the guilty one. I am the sinner on this boat, and I am the one who should be punished. Now, we'll see that Jesus is a very different kind of sin bearer, because he bears our sins, whereas Jonah was only bearing his own. But nonetheless, Jonah is a sin bearer. He makes himself the scapegoat for other people. You can live if I die. Jesus is the ultimate sin bearer.

On the cross, he says, in effect, this storm is the wrath of God, and I am making myself the guilty one. I take your sins. I take your guilt. I bear it. I carry it. I become it. And now I am the one who should be punished. If I die, you can live. Jonah says, throw me into the darkness, into the chaos, and you will be saved. That is a gospel promise. Jonah is offering salvation to others on the grounds that he himself faces the ultimate punishment. With Jesus in being crucified, in taking the full holy anger of God for our sins, Jesus is also saying, in effect, throw me into the sea. Throw me into the darkness and the chaos, and you will be saved. This is the gospel promise. If Jesus dies, we don't. If he doesn't die, we will.

Jonah being thrown into the sea is his crucifixion. Him spending three days and nights in the whale is his entombment. And Jesus makes that link really clearly. Although Jonah didn't actually die, the language he uses in chapter 2 speaks about it as being like death. He says, I am in Sheol, this Old Testament word for the afterlife. And Jonah being vomited up on the shore, appearing when no one expected that he was still alive is his resurrection. If you know both stories, you'll be aware also though that there are many ways Jonah is not at all like Jesus. And those are so significant that your first thought on Jonah is probably not. Wow, the story of Jonah is so like the story of Jesus.

And we're going to look thirdly at how Jesus is not like Jonah. And we should be very thankful for that in a lot of respects. So, thirdly, how Jesus is not like Jonah. Jonah was disobedient to God's call. So, we're comparing the two and at the start when we're saying how they like each other, they both have this call from God, this compulsion to go and take this message of repentance. Jesus is obedient, but Jonah is not. Jonah is told, go to Nineveh, preach the gospel to it, but he goes in the opposite direction. Instead of going to God's target people, he tries to go as far as he can go to make the greatest journey he can in the opposite direction, to Targis, to modern-day Spain, the edge of the known world for Jonah. God says, tell these people about my holiness, tell these people about my grace, but Jonah says no. He will do no such thing, and he goes in the opposite direction.

Jesus, on the other hand, is sent by his Father into this corrupt world, and he accepts his calling joyfully. Jonah was called by God to make a relatively short journey from Israel to Nineveh, and rebels by trying to make the longest journey he could make. Jesus was called to make an infinitely greater journey to reach his target people. He had to cross the divide of heaven and earth. He had to go from being eternal spirit to also becoming a cluster of cells in the womb of a teenage woman in an obscure place. He becomes a baby born in a stable. He becomes a refugee child in Egypt. He becomes a carpenter. He becomes a preacher. His life and his message are perfectly in sync. He becomes the sacrifice he offers for those he loves. In short, he himself is the good news. Jonah did not love the world to which he was sent. He was a proud Hebrew sent to a pagan people, to the Ninevites, and he doesn't love them. In fact, he hates them. When God tells him to offer the Ninevites the possibility of forgiveness, he refuses. He doesn't have good news for the Ninevites, precisely because he knows if they ask for forgiveness, God will give it, and he hates that idea. He'd rather guarantee that they stay lost and condemned by going to Tarsus instead and not sharing the gospel with them. And then when they do end up hearing the gospel and repenting, Jonah's furious. He said he was angry enough to die, angry enough at God. And he says to God, didn't I tell you this would happen? You'll forgive anyone. All they have to do is show this tiny bit of remorse, and then you forgive them. I knew you'd do this, God, and now

[21 : 38] I'd rather if you just let me die, as I don't want to go on. Jesus loved the world to which he was sent. He loved it enough to become a part of it. In that respect, Jesus is so different, is as different to Jonah as you could possibly imagine. Jonah didn't want to tell some people about God's mercy in case they ended up finding God's mercy. Jesus, on the other hand, wept about those who wanted to be distanced from God. Jonah was angry enough with God to die. Jesus was obedient enough to God to die, to die as a sacrifice, to lay down his life. Jonah was punished for his own sins. Jesus was punished for ours.

And we said before that Jonah is like Jesus in being a sin bearer. So, he tells the other men on the ship, I'm the one God wants. God is angry with me, so let him, so take me and throw me in the sea and your lives will be saved. And the huge difference between Jonah and Jesus, of course, is that in Jonah's case, he is talking about God being angry with him for the wrong that he had done. Jesus is also a sin bearer, but he makes himself the one that God wants. Despite never having sinned, he becomes sin in order to destroy it. So, what does this mean? Jesus links himself to Jonah and we see some really startling similarities, but we also see so many points where they're really different. It looks like Jonah's story contains some great things that point to Jesus, but that Jesus is also everything that Jonah failed to be. So, what do we do with that? How does Jesus himself bring that together? The fact that Jesus and Jonah are very different is the reason Jesus tells us that he's greater than Jonah and that in itself is tremendously good news for us. If you're going to pick an Old Testament story and say, you know know that guy Jonah, well, that's what I'm all about. That doesn't look very good for the prospects of

Jesus' followers. Imagine that you were worse than Jonah and you were coming to save the people when Jonah was a huge failure in so many respects. Well, Jonah at least ended up in Nineveh at the end when they heard the gospel. But even if Jesus was simply no better a savior and a prophet than Jonah, well, he'd still be coming with a message about God's grace, but really reluctantly. He doesn't love us. He doesn't rejoice when we hear that message and believe it and are set free and saved. Thankfully, when Jesus compares himself to Jonah, he tells us, I am greater than Jonah. My story is like Jonah's, but in every way that he failed to love God and to love his neighbor, I am greater. For all of Jonah's failures, think of my successes. His promise, throw me into darkness and you will be saved, is so much greater than Jonah's promise. Jesus' promise is for eternal salvation, for a completely new life, a promise that makes you a new creation.

Not just a promise like Jonah's, for salvation from one storm on the sea, for a few people on a boat. Jesus' promise is for everyone. It's open to everyone. His promise is to save you from God's judgment against your own sins. In Jonah, the men on the boat are innocent bystanders. They were the wrong men in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Jonah's almost death saves them. But at the cross, Jesus himself is the innocent party, but he isn't just the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's still the one saying, throw me overboard and you'll be saved. The fact, on the other hand, that Jesus and Jonah, though, are so similar means that Jesus tells us his resurrection is the sign of Jonah. People had said to Jesus, the Pharisees had said, give us a sign to prove that you are the

Son of God. So, Jesus tells them, the only sign I will give you is the sign of Jonah. What does that mean? Well, imagine for a moment that you were on the boat with Jonah. So, you're in the midst of this huge storm, and you know, you've had to throw everything overboard. You're doing everything you can to try and fight it, but it's just getting worse and worse. And then everything happens with Jonah. The lots are cast. It falls on Jonah. He's already told you he's running from the one who made this big sea. And he tells you, I'm a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, and he is angry with me. So, throw me overboard and you'll be saved. So, you try and roll harder and harder, but in the end, you have no other choice, and you have to throw Jonah in the sea. So, you do that. It's the middle of the Mediterranean. It's night. The storm is terrifying, and you throw this man out into the cold, dark water. No life jacket, no life raft, no one to rescue him. And you assume, don't you, that this is the end for Jonah. We'll never see him again. You throw him in, you lose sight of him, and that's it.

[27 : 27] Jonah is gone forever. This Hebrew guy on our boat brought this upon us. At that point, the most unlikely thing in your whole world would be that three days later, this man that you've just thrown into the sea will be standing on a beach on his way to Nineveh, alive. That he would end up there. That would be the most unlikely thing that you could possibly conceive of, and that he would end up preaching in Nineveh. In Luke 11, Jesus says that Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh. Jonah came to them in the end as a man brought back from the dead, a man who had spent three days and three nights in darkness in Sheol, a man whose very existence shook your world to its foundations. So, when Jesus says that Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, he means something like a miracle. When Jonah came to Nineveh, he was the most unexpected person in the world to them. He came to them as a resurrected man to tell them about God, the master of heaven and earth and life and death. And that's where we see the most profound connection between Jesus and Jonah. People tell Jesus, give us a sign, show us that you're the

Son of God. And he tells them, one day I am going to come to you in the same way that Jonah came to the Ninevites. I will be the person that you least expected. I will be the unlikeliest person in your whole world to come to you. You'll assume I'm gone forever. You're going to throw me into chaos.

You're going to cast me into darkness, into death itself. And then three days later, I will be back again as Lord over life and death, and your world will never be the same again.

So, as we prepare ourselves to sit at the Lord's table to proclaim his death, but also to proclaim it until he comes again. Because in the middle you have the resurrection, the sign of Jonah.

The question is, is the resurrected Jesus like that for us? Is he this, is he a sign to us? Is he a miracle to us? Is he the most unexpected person in our world? It's the one who has made everything fundamentally different, never the same again. Does his living reality astound you? As you proclaim his death, does the fact that he is coming again make you tremble and make you different? Like the resurrected Jonah did for the people of Nineveh. Are you simply proclaiming his death? Or are you proclaiming it that he is alive again? Let's pray together.