Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the beautiful parts of life in West Auckland is the abundance of bird life. And I want to start this sermon by talking about two types of bird in particular.

* The first is the Gannet. And I assume that most of you will have taken a trip out to Muriwai to see the Gannet colonies there. Gannets are amazing flying birds. Their large wingspan and relatively small body, and the thermal updraft wind currents at Muriwai, means they can sit in mid-air for ages or soar great distances with one flap of their wings. And of course, they come to NZ, I believe, from South America. So they are incredible flyers.
* But over the fence from us is a family of Pukekos. And Pukekos, unlike Gannets, are not very good at flying at all. They are able to get over the fence from the neighbours side to ours, so they can feast on our Feijoas, but it involves a whole lot of flapping, just to get up to the top of the fence, where they seem to kind of rest and catch their breath for a bit, before sort of flapping and falling down to other side. So in comparison with Gannets, it really is a stretch to describe a Pukeko as a flying bird.

And I know this is just a silly notion, but let’s imagine that we came across a Pukeko that could talk. And we asked the Pukeko to describe itself flying, and it said, Well, when I fly it is an amazing thing to behold. I spread my wings and drift in the current, and with the smallest flutter I can soar up to great heights and slowly float down. And I can zoom down to the waves and catch fish and effortlessly lift off to climb to my nest. Well, we would have to tell that Pukeko that it is kidding itself; that when it comes to flying it is not a graceful Gannet but a pathetic Pukeko.

And the reason I have spoken about Gannets and Pukekos is that when it comes to living according to God’s will, I suspect that most of us see ourselves as Gannets when in truth we are like the Pukeko I just described. We think we soar for long periods up in the high currents of obedience when in actual fact we are most comfortable walking around on the soil of disobedience, with the occasional furious flapping that gets us a couple of feet off the ground for a few moments. And what keeps us planted in the soil of disobedience are things like peer-pressure, worldly desires, fear of men, being more attached to the things of this world than we are to Christ, a lack of trust, thinking that we know better than God, and our love of the comfortable, just to name a few.

Well, I am pretty sure that this is the first time in history that Jonah has been called this, but beginning today we get to spend a few weeks with **the Bible’s ultimate Pukeko** – Jonah. And assuming you know the story of Jonah, I am calling him that because when called to lift off and soar with obedience, Jonah first buried his beak in the soil of outright disobedience, and then, when he did ‘lift off’ and obey, it was more like the pathetic flight of a Pukeko than the graceful soaring of a Gannet.

And there will be many challenges for us in this sermon series as we see ourselves in Jonah. We will need to pause, frequently, and see how we can be just like Jonah. But there will also be nuggets of gospel gold as we see God’s great mercy and patience, and His sovereign rule of all things, in the story of Jonah.

So we will begin today with the historical context of Jonah’s time as necessary ground work that helps us understand what unfolds in this story, and then we will unpack Jonah’s decision to flee to Tarshish. So first of all the **theological situation** of Jonah and then the **faithless decision** of Jonah.

1. So we begin with the **theological situation** of Jonah.
   1. And it may not seem significant, but the first word of Jonah, “***Now****,*” is already revealing. The Hebrew word that “*Now*” translates also begins the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, Esther. And these books record the history of God’s people, Israel. Those of you who know the old King James Version of the Bible will remember this phrase, “*And it came to pass that*,” which is how the KJV translates this Hebrew word. And the point is that Jonah is history. What we read in Jonah just as certainly happened as Joshua, the crossing of the Jordan on dry land, Jericho, the Sun standing still in the sky, and the people and events and miracles of Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, and Esther. And this is important because many people, including Bible scholars, like to write Jonah off as some sort of fable or myth, because no one could be swallowed by a whale and survive for three days inside – guffaw! Uh uh! But what we read in Jonah really happened!

* 1. So what happened? Well, the first thing we read is that “***the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai***.”
     1. And thinking biblically, is this a good thing? Whenever we read that the word of the Lord came to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is that a good thing? It certainly is!
        1. In **1 Samuel 3:1**, for example, we read this: “*Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision*.” And that was clearly a bad thing. So it was good that the Lord raised up Samuel as a prophet for His people.
        2. And in **Amos 8:11** we read, *“"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land- not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD*.” And this famine of the word was clearly a sign of God’s displeasure. And that famine of the word came after the prophet Malachi. He lived and prophesied around 450BC. But after him, there was no prophet of the Lord until John the Baptist and then Jesus. So that was a period of around 400 years with no word from the Lord.
        3. So before we carry on, let us be very thankful that we have access to the faithful preaching of the Word of God; we need it! And we need it because it is the word of Christ; the word of life; the word of wisdom! But in **Revelation 2** the Lord warns churches that if the word of Christ is not received with eagerness and obeyed, then He will remove it.
        4. So the fact the Word of the Lord came to Jonah was a good thing.
     2. And this is **not the first time** that the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Turn back for a moment to **2 Kings 14:23**. There we read, “*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.* [Note what it says next] *And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD* [So Jeroboam II was a wicked king]*. He did not depart from all the sins of [*The first Jereboam] *Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.* [But look what the Lord did!] *He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash*.”
        1. So Jonah was the one called to go and tell King Jeroboam that the borders of Israel were going to increase, which meant prosperity and peace. What a wonderful sermon to be called to preach – the Lord is going to bless you; there will be amazing church growth!
        2. And **what was the reason for this blessing**? It was not the righteousness of the king. In fact, Jeroboam, we are told, was a very wicked king. And when the king was wicked, so were the people; we see that time and again in the history of Israel. No, the reason for this blessing was God’s love for and patience with His people. V26, He “*saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter*.” This was God’s mercy on display; this was a demonstration of His willingness not to punish them, which is what they deserved, but to show them great kindness, which they did not deserve! It is something we see again and again in God’s dealings with Israel. And the mercy of God will be a prominent part of the story of Jonah, and it is a prominent part of God’s dealings with us, in Christ, as we shall see.
        3. And make no mistake, **Jonah, as the Lord’s prophet, would have known all about the undeservingness of the king and the people**. He knew that Jeroboam and Israel were getting what they did not deserve. And we can be sure that he hoped that this wonderful blessing would wake the people up to their wickedness and cause them to repent and seek the Lord.
        4. But is that what happened? Sadly, no. The ‘good life’ did not bring the king and the people to right worship and repentance; it brought them to even greater wickedness.
           1. And there are **parallels in this for life here in NZ**. I know that NZ is not OT Israel; it is not a theocracy with God as its direct King. Nevertheless, NZ has experienced a rich heritage of the preaching of God’s word since Samuel Marsden’s Christmas Day sermon in 1814. The message of Christ the Saviour and King has been heard many times in NZ churches. And NZ has enjoyed economic prosperity and peace. But what we *don’t* see today is right worship and repentance, and what we *do* see is rampant idolatry, sexual immorality, and injustice, and increasing corporate greed, pollution, abortion, abuse, euthanasia, and unbelief. May the Lord be merciful with us!
     3. But **now the word of the Lord came to Jonah again**. And as Jonah heard the call of the Lord, and was reminded of the previous time it had come, we can imagine him wondering what the message he will have to deliver this time will be? And knowing how wickedness had increased in Israel, his first assumption would surely have been a message of judgment for Israel, like the message of other prophets of this time; a much tougher sermon to deliver to the king or the people than the last one! But no! That was not the sermon he was called to preach or to whom he was to preach the message. The Lord said, “*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me*.”
        1. Wow! What? Nineveh? The capital of Assyria! Assyria was the dominant political and military power in that region. Israel had already been defeated in battle with Assyria under King Ahab, and had been forced to pay a yearly tribute for some time afterwards. Assyria had had its own internal struggles for a while but that was in the past around 750 BC, which is when Jonah lived, and Assyria was beginning to flex its world domination muscles again. And this was where Jonah was to go and preach the Lord’s sermon!?

1. Well, that brings us, secondly, to the **Faithless Decision** of Jonah, who chose instead to head to Tarshish, rather than to Nineveh. And if you imagine a map, from your perspective, Nineveh would have been up and left, and Tarshish was down and right! It was the opposite direction to where he should have gone. And the big question is why? Why did Jonah disobey? What was he thinking?
   1. Well, we began the sermon by discussing birds. And this is where I have to introduce a third bird into the picture, which is a **dove**. In **Hosea 7:11**, Ephraim, which is another name for Israel, is described as a dove. We read, “*Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria*.” Ephraim was looking for allies at that time but there was no rhyme or reason to where it was looking – here, there, and anywhere. And if you have ever watched doves fly, that’s how they fly – all over the place. And Jonah literally means dove; his name is dove. So his name is already revealing – what he did made no sense.
      1. And this comes out in a phrase that is repeated twice in v3, **Jonah fled away “*from the presence of the Lord*.**” Does that make any sense? Of course it doesn’t!
         1. Think of **Psalm 139**: “*O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways … Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you*.”
         2. You cannot flee from the presence of the Lord! As one well known and old hit song has it, “There ain’t no hiding place from the Father of creation.”
         3. Something that people today are very concerned about is **privacy**. And I am not saying that privacy is unimportant, but it can be the case that concerns about privacy are a cover for ‘I don’t want anyone to know about my sin.’ And so, for example, people use online privacy tools to hide illegal downloading or pornography. But while you may keep your sin hidden from those around you, you are as much a silly dove as Jonah if you think you can keep your sin hidden from the Lord. He sees all. So remember that when you next contemplate sin, the Lord sees all.
   2. So Jonah’s decision to flee to Tarshish was silly, but I have described it as **faithless**. Why?
      1. Was it **embarrassment** perhaps? Was Jonah scared of looking like a fool preaching to passersby on Nineveh’s streets?
         1. For isn’t this often our excuse for not evangelising? We are embarrassed to tell family or friends of workmates about the Lord Jesus because they may laugh at us. But Jonah was not embarrassed. And neither should we be. Jesus has promised to be with us even to the ends of the age!
      2. Well, did he think it was **a waste of time**, then? I mean, Nineveh? A godless, wicked, pagan city, who did not know God or have His law. Surely, no one would listen?
         1. And this is another excuse we use, isn’t it. What is the point writing a letter to our MP about wickedness? They won’t listen! What is the point confronting my relative or school friend about their sin? They won’t listen. What is the point inviting the homeless and prostitutes and druggies to a free meal at the church hall and telling them about salvation in Jesus Christ? They won’t listen!
      3. But here we are getting very close to understanding Jonah’s faithless choice.
         1. What does the Bible teach us about the character of God?
            1. When Moses asked God to reveal Himself, **Exodus 34:6-7** says that the Lord began by saying, “*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*.”
         2. And how does God reveal Himself to people? Through the preaching of the Word. **Isaiah 55:10-11**, “*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it*.”
         3. So put that all together and we see why Jonah did what he did. Jonah was sent to Nineveh not to proclaim judgment but to call them to repentance. And God uses the preaching of His word to bring people to repentance. And God is a God of mercy who does not treat people as their sins deserve. So Jonah knew what would happen if he preached repentance in Nineveh; they would repent. But Jonah didn’t want them to repent.
         4. And if you think I am doing a lot of psychologising and guessing and reading between the lines, I am not. Turn over to **chapter 4:2**. This is after the people of Nineveh repented. Look what Jonah said, “*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster*.”
         5. Jonah fled because he knew that if he preached, they would repent and God would forgive them. And from Jonah’s perspective, Israel had been hearing the word of the Lord for 150 years, by the prophets, and it had not repented. So if Nineveh repented, the favour of the Lord would be on Nineveh, the enemy of Jonah’s people, and the displeasure of the Lord would be on Israel. And Jonah had a pretty good idea where that would lead – invasion, and who knows what else, of Israel. And just so you know, that is exactly what happened. Less than 30 years after this time, Assyria invaded Israel and took the people into exile.
         6. But at this moment, the way that Jonah figured it, if he, as the Lord’s prophet, went as far away as possible from Nineveh, Nineveh’s guilt would increase and it would give Israel more time to repent without being brought to that place by Assyrian invasion.
         7. Do you see what Jonah was saying to God? I know better how to run this world than you do. My plan of salvation is better than yours.

Do you see now why I have called Jonah the ultimate Pukeko? Rather than be a Gannet that lifts off and soars the long flight path of obedience, he buried his beak in the soil of outright disobedience. He wasn’t even, yet, a silly, flitting dove!

And that brings us to our major point of application: **What sort of bird are you**?

The word of the Lord came to you the last two Sundays. In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, we saw the miracle of the disciples obeying the command of the Lord Jesus to put their fishing net on the other side of the boat where they would catch many fish. And we heard that with that miracle the Lord Jesus was saying to us, Go and catch fish; go and make disciples; go and evangelize; go and call on people to repent and believe in Jesus as the Son of God and their Saviour.

And what we have seen from Jonah is that God is a God of mercy who does not treat us as our sins deserve, and that repentance comes through the preaching of the Word. And this is possible because God poured out His wrath on the One who did not deserve it – the Lord Jesus. And ever since then, when people have heard this message they have repented and believed in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.

* It happened on Pentecost Day, with 3000 people, many of who had cried out for Jesus to be crucified just a few weeks before then!
* And in Acts 6 we read that in response to the preaching of Peter, “*Many of the priests became obedient to the faith*.”
* And in Philippians 1, Paul said, “*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ*.”

God uses the message of the cross and repentance to bring people to faith in Christ. So you are to go and preach repentance to your neighbours, family, workmates, schoolmates, teammates, hobby enthusiasts, park walkers, and politicians.

Expect resistance. Not everyone will be glad to hear this message. But expect repentance! Don’t be a Pukeko! Be a Gannet! Amen.