Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Last week we saw that having been commanded by God to go to Nineveh (Israel’s enemy), and preach repentance, Jonah disobeyed and fled in the other direction because he didn’t want Nineveh to repent.

So do you boys and girls remember what type of bird we called Jonah? A Pukeko. And this is because rather than make like a Gannet and lift off and soar on the currents of obedience, Jonah made like a Pukeko and buried his beak in the soil of disobedience. And the reason we chose a Pukeko is because Pukekos can fly, and occasionally do fly short distances, but they prefer to stay on the ground. And this makes Pukekos a good illustration of us Christians – we can obey, and we do, sometimes, but much of the time, we either disobey or fail to obey perfectly.

Well, we are going to continue with the Pukeko analogy today. Did you hear the joke about why the Pukeko crossed the road? He wanted to show his friends that he had guts. And I am sure you have seen a dead flat Pukeko on the road because it has been run over by a car. Yes? And that is what usually happens when Pukekos try and cross the road. Well, Jonah continues to act like a Pukeko in this passage because when he asked to be thrown overboard, he thought it would end with his death. But what Jonah doesn’t take into account is that God has plans for Jonah, and He wasn’t going to let Him get out of His calling, as we shall see in the next passage. But that is why I have called this sermon **Providence pursues the Pukeko**.

And as we watch the providence of God pursue Jonah, we are going to see that God’s sovereignty – God’s total control over every aspect of creation, including all that we call ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ – is a key message of the Book of Jonah. And we will see this in the storm and the physical and spiritual situation of these sailors and Jonah. But there are also important lessons to learn here about how we discern God’s will, and that our behaviour can have significant consequences for others. But we shall also see wonderful images of the Lord Jesus Christ here. And we will see all of this and more in our two main points, which are **God’s sovereign activity** and **the Sailor’s Spiritual journey**.

1. So we begin with **God’s Sovereign Activity**.
   1. And we see this first in the interplay between God and Jonah in vv1-4:
      1. Look again at how v1 begins: “*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the Son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh*.” So what was God’s will for Jonah? Was it unclear? No. It was black and white, crystal clear, unambiguous – Go and preach in Nineveh. And Jonah knew this. But what do we read at the beginning of v3? “*But Jonah*…” And we know what happened next; he disobeyed and fled in the opposite direction. And I want to make two comments here:
         1. The first is that right here we have **the absolute essence of the gospel**. Our chief problem as human beings began in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve – God said, “Don’t eat the fruit of tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Again, His will was crystal clear! So what happened next? But Eve and Adam… And ever since then this has been our natural response to God’s revealed will – God says, You shall do this and you shall not do that. But we…
            1. So parents, think of all of the times that you have given your children very clear commands only for them to disobey you. It’s hurtful, isn’t it. Well, as we saw last Sunday afternoon, God is our Creator King and He is good, and His law is good. So when we disobey His law or fail to keep it as we should, we are committing what we called **cosmic treason** – rebellion against the good, Creator King. And because God is the good, Creator King, any and every sin deserves His infinite wrath.
            2. But the message of the gospel is that God poured out His infinite wrath on His beloved Son, Jesus, so that He could show us mercy and forgiveness. And we see that foreshadowed here when Jonah is thrown into the raging sea and it becomes calm so that the sailors can live.
            3. So the very heart of the gospel story is here in Jonah – we see our sin in Jonah’s rebellion, “*But Jonah*…” and we also see our salvation in one man being sacrificed so that many may live. So Jonah is pointing us to Jesus!
         2. But there is another very important doctrine unfolding here. And it is the **doctrine of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility**. If we could have asked Jonah if He was being forced by God or anyone else to flee to Tarshish, he would have said, No one is forcing me to do this; this is my choice.
            1. And the Bible is absolutely clear that God does not make people sin: **James 1:13-15**, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire*.”
            2. So Jonah is responsible for this sin and we are responsible for our sins – we choose to lie or steal or disobey or lose our temper. And we know this.
            3. But the Bible also teaches that God is sovereignly in control of everything, including sin and evil. We see this with Job and God giving Satan permission to torment Job but within certain limits. We see it in how God speaks about Babylon as His instrument of punishment against Israel. We see it in how the Bible speaks about God hardening Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not let the people of Israel go.
            4. So can you see the tension? God is sovereignly in control of everything, including disasters and disease, and when humans act wickedly, but man alone is responsible for his sin. And it is a topic we could easily speak about for an hour, because to our minds both of those things cannot be true at the same time. It is question asked in **Romans 9:19**: If God is sovereign then “*why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?*” But Scripture rebukes that question and will not allow us to blame God for our sin; it is our responsibility.
            5. But what the story of Jonah helps us to see is that **evil ultimately serves God’s good purpose**. Because God is good, whatever He does has good as its ultimate goal. So even evil serves God’s good purpose. And just to be clear, that doesn’t make evil good; evil is bad, but it ultimately serves God’s good purpose.
            6. It is why **Romans 8:28** says, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good*.” And all things has to include evil.
      2. So let’s see how this is so in the story of Jonah. As we come to v4, God had given Jonah a command and Jonah had rebelled and disobeyed and fled on a ship to Tarshish. What happened next? “*But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a might tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up*.”
         1. Now, I know that it is not meant as worship, but do you know what insurers call natural disasters, like earthquakes or floods or hurricanes? **An Act of God**.I am sure they are trying to come up with a ‘better’ term now, because we all know that this is actually just science, ha ha! But in calling these things Acts of God they are absolutely right! “*The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea*.”
            1. The word **hurled** is used in Kings to describe what King Saul did with his spear when he was angry with David – he hurled his spear at David. And it was only because David ducked out of the way that he was not pierced, because spears can be thrown very accurately. And that is the exact imagery here – God hurls this storm directly at Jonah.
         2. And there are many places in Scripture that describe things like storms as acts of God:
            1. Think of the crossing of the **Red Sea**. We read, “*The Lord drove the sea back by a strong East wind all night and made the sea dry land*.” And then, once the people of Israel crossed over and the Egyptians were in the sea, “*The Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea*” by bringing the waves crashing down upon them.”
            2. Think of **Job 38** where God says, I send the rain, I send the snow, I cause the thunder, the flood, the sand storm.
            3. Think of **Psalm 46:8**, “*Come, behold the works of the LORD, how He has brought desolations on the earth*.”
            4. Think of **Amos 3:6**: “*Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?*”
         3. This storm was an act of God in order to bring about His plans for Jonah and these Sailors and the people of Nineveh.
         4. In Q/A 27 of the Catechism, we confess that “Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, Heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty; all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.” And in the question before we confess our trust that “He will turn to [our] good whatever adversity He sends [us] in this sad world.” This is the truth being declared in the Book of Jonah. Do you believe this? Do you believe that Covid-19 and whatever other adversities you are enduring come to you from the hand of your Father in heaven and that He will turn them to your good?
         5. But before we move on, **note what this storm tells us about Jesus**. For this part of Jonah’s story must surely remind you of another sea and another storm and another boat and another person sleeping? Do you remember that story, boys and girls? It was on the Sea of Galilee. And a storm arose and the disciples thought they were going to drown. Jesus was sleeping. So they woke Him up, and called on Him to save them. And He said, “‘*Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’ Then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm*.” And the disciples said, “*What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?*” If it takes God to send a storm, then it takes God to calm a storm. Therefore? Jesus is God!
   2. Well, before we continue to our next point, there is one other lesson we can learn from Jonah as we think about God’s sovereign activity. And it is a lesson that we do well to learn. It is this: **The way to interpret God’s will is not by a feeling of peace or ‘doors that open,’ but by what God has written in Scripture** (repeat).
      1. What was God’s will for Jonah? What He had commanded Him to do – Go to Nineveh and preach. So what did Jonah do? He disobeyed and fled. But look what happened. And the way v3 is written is kind of like this: Can you believe it? There was a ship going to Tarshish. There are never ships going direct to Tarshish. What a stroke of good luck. And, to top it all off, the amount they wanted for the fare, was exactly what he had in his pocket? It was like it was meant to be. So it’s no wonder that when this storm came, Jonah was fast asleep in the boat. It had all worked out so well for him. So surely Jonah was entitled to think that He was in God’s will. I mean, the Lord had ‘opened all the doors’ for Jonah. And he had such peace about what he was doing that He was able to sleep during a wild storm! But was Jonah in God’s will? No He was not!
      2. And congregation, I cannot count the amount of times that I have tried to counsel people about sinful behaviour only to hear them say, But I have prayed about this and I have peace, and the Lord has opened thus and so door for me. And I am talking here about situations like wrongful divorce or romantic relationships with unbelievers or leaving the church or moving somewhere where there is no Reformed church. God says, in black and white, I hate divorce, and do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, and obey your elders, but that is ignored because of a feeling of peace and a sense of open doors.
      3. **Deut. 29:29** says, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law*.” Let us seek God’s will in what He has written and not our feeling of peace. Let us be like the Lord Jesus who said, “*My food is to do my Father’s will*,” which for Him meant all the commands of the Old Testament.
2. So there are many, important gospel lessons in God’s sovereign activity with Jonah. And this continues as we turn our attention next to **the Sailors’ Spiritual Journey**.
   1. You just heard me refer to God’s sovereign activity with Jonah. This storm was sent because of Jonah’s disobedience. But there were consequences for these sailors who found themselves in the midst of a storm like nothing they had ever seen before.
      1. And this is one more example of a consistent message of Scripture, which is that our decisions and choices can have consequences for others. Think of Achan who stole some things at Jericho, which led to him and his sons and daughters and oxen and donkeys being stoned to death. Think of King David who conducted an illegal census of the people of Israel, which led to the death of 70,000 Israelites as the Lord’s punishment.
      2. Now, in the ultimate sense, no human being is a guiltless sinner. So in that way we can say that Achan’s sons and daughters, and the 70,000 Israelites, and these sailors deserved whatever misfortune came their way.
      3. But we are also right to think of them as innocents caught up in the sins of others – Achan’s sons and daughters didn’t steal the goods, the 70,000 Israelites didn’t conduct an illegal census, and these Sailors were not fleeing from God. These sailors were in danger because of Jonah’s actions.
      4. So this raises two points of application for us to consider:
         1. The first is a kind of global point: **1 Peter 4:17** says, “*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.*” A couple of weeks ago I mentioned an article I had read that reviewed four sermons each from the nine, largest, self-proclaimed evangelical churches in the USA. And the reviews were shocking – no gospel, unclear gospel, no sin or judgment or need for repentance, no sense of why Jesus needed to die for us. And based on God’s rejection of OT Israel’s empty worship, such that He sent them into exile, I asked if it might be that God has hurled Covid-19 at the church, to exile us to our homes so that He does not have to hear one more word of what we are trying to pass off as worship for a few months? And if that is so, 4 million people have caught the virus and 270,000 people have died because of the worships sins of the church. Sobering! Let us pray for reformation!
         2. But the second point is narrower, and it is this: Are you a source of blessing or curse for others? Knowing that your response to God’s commands can have consequences for those around you, are you striving to obey God’s commands so that those around you experience God’s favour and not His curse? And this is especially important for those in positions of leadership, like husbands, and Fathers (and Mothers), and Office-bearers; your behaviour has consequences for your wife, your children, the members of the church. Are you striving to obey God’s revealed will?
   2. Well, as we come to v5, we see that the sailors were afraid. So they cried out to their pagan gods and they hurled the ships cargo into the sea to make it lighter. And although they were pagans, notice that they **prayed first** and then got practical. For I know with myself it’s often the other way round. I try and sort it out first and when that doesn’t work I remember to pray. Is it like that with you too? And then the captain noticed that Jonah was sleeping so he woke him, so that Jonah could pray to his god also.
   3. And then we see in v7 that they **cast lots**. And this was essentially like rolling dice to see whose fault it was that this storm had come. And you can’t get more random than casting lots/roiling dice right? It is why one day you slaughter everyone else at Monopoly and the next day you end up penniless. Those dice are so unpredictable! But **Proverbs 16:33** says, “*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD*.” Even the roll of the dice comes under God’s total sovereignty! So obviously Jonah rolled five 6s or five 1s or drew the short straw or whatever else the lot was.
   4. So the sailors said, in v8, “*Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?*” And here we get to see **some delicious irony** ☺ Do you see what they ask Jonah to do? Preach! This man who did not want to preach to Gentiles in Nineveh and fled from the Lord has been invited to preach to Gentiles on a boat ☺ And Jonah’s sermon and the response of his ‘congregation’ will be our concluding point. So let’s do our sermon review:
      1. And first off, it had **good content**. “*He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."”*
      2. And we know this was good content because of the sailors’ **fearful response**. We read in v10 that they were “*Exceedingly afraid*!” Literally, the original Hebrew has it, the men feared with a great fear. Why? Because Jonah worshipped THAT God! These men who travelled all around that region had clearly heard about the God of the Hebrews, Yahweh; the God who had sent the plagues on Egypt and crushed Pharaoh in the Red Sea, and destroyed the city of Jericho, and Kings Sihon and Og, and the Amorites. And now He had it in for Jonah and they were caught up in it. This God is the God you don’t want to mess with. And yet, here was Jonah telling them that He was trying to run away from THAT God, as we see at the end of v10. So they say to Him “*What is this that you have done*!” And notice that it is not a question; it is a statement. They are effectively saying, What sort of idiot tries to run away from THAT God? Look at what you have brought upon us!
      3. So that brings us to the **shocking conclusion** to Jonah’s sermon. Think about it, what should Jonah have said next? He should have repented himself and called on them to repent and believe. Right? He could have said, If we turn back and I go to Nineveh the storm will stop. But there was no desire to repent in Jonah. He still wanted to flee from THAT God. So he said, in effect, Throw me over and I will die and that will be that and you will be OK. Jonah was saying, I would rather die than do God’s will.
         1. What a picture of sin’s obstinacy and stubbornness. And it looks so foolish in others, doesn’t it. But many of us have chased sin down long paths before the Lord in His grace brought us back, just as He did with Jonah.
      4. Well, to their credit, at first, the sailors refused to do what Jonah said. They didn’t want to make THAT God more upset than He already was. So they rowed harder still. But it didn’t work. And so, in v14, they did what this disobedient prophet of the Lord had told them to do. “*They called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you*.” And then they threw Jonah overboard “*and the sea ceased from its raging*.” And look what we read next: “*Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows*.”
         1. You know what **four things characterized a son of Israel**? He called on the Lord in prayer, He feared the Lord, He offered sacrifices, and He made vows as an act of worship. And these Gentiles do all four – they call on the Lord, they fear the Lord, they offer sacrifices, and they make vows. Now, these Sailors did not have the OT with all of its ceremonial detail, but they got the heart of it. And you know what? I believe that we will get to meet these sailors in heaven. They had become sons of Israel. They were converts to the God of Israel. This event had changed them forever. They were now men of faith who trusted in Yahweh as their God.

And this brings us right back to where we started and God’s sovereignty. As a result of Jonah’s disobedience and a storm and loss of cargo and a pathetic sermon, these Sailors entered the kingdom of Jesus Christ. So evil ultimately served God’s good purpose! And we will see more of this as we continue with Jonah, who at this moment is sinking in the sea! But I pray that this will be an encouragement for you to trust in God, even when you cannot make sense of your difficult circumstances. Your Father in heaven loves you and He is working out His good purposes in you and through you.

And praise God that even faithless Jonah points us to Jesus Christ who gave up His life that we might be saved and brought into the kingdom of Christ. Amen.