Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Obadiah & Jonah

Obadiah: Justice, Betrayal, and the Complicity of Silence

I. Historical Context. Obadiah is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible (21 verses). It addresses Edom, Judah's neighboring nation, following Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Edom is condemned for celebrating Judah's suffering, participating in its plunder, and obstructing the escape of survivors.

Background: Obadiah's condemnation of Edom is connected to the saga of Esau and Jacob. Edom is traditionally descended from Esau, while Israel descends from his twin brother Jacob (**Genesis 25–36**). The conflict between Edom and Judah is therefore framed not simply as a political betrayal, but as a familial one. The story of two brothers becomes the story of two nations, suggesting that the deepest betrayal may come not from strangers, but from those who share our history, identity, and kinship.

II. Obadiah 1–9: Pride and Power

- No nation, institution, or religious community is beyond accountability.

III. Obadiah 10–14: The Sin of Standing By

- Edom watches Jerusalem's destruction without intervening. And, hands refugees over to the Babylonians.
- Silence is not necessarily neutrality. Refusing to intervene in another's suffering can become a form of complicity.

IV. Obadiah 15–21: Judgment and Restoration

- "As you have done, it shall be done to you" (v. 15).
- Judah's fortunes are reversed, and restoration is promised.
- **Justice theme:** Restoration requires accountability. The text also raises difficult questions about whether liberation can be imagined without reproducing the violence of one's oppressors.

V. Critical and Inclusive Questions

1. When does silence become complicity?
2. What responsibility do we have toward those experiencing injustice?
3. Can communities that have experienced oppression become agents of oppression themselves?
4. Is reconciliation possible without accountability?
5. How do we pursue justice without reproducing the harm we condemn?

VI. Central Theological Insight. Obadiah reminds us that injustice is sustained not only by those who inflict harm, but also by those who watch, celebrate, benefit, or refuse to intervene. Betrayal is not always an act of violence. Sometimes it is simply the decision to stand at a distance while someone else suffers.

VII. Applied to Today's Climate. Obadiah offers a sobering question for the American church:

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What happens when Christians not only remain silent about the suffering of immigrants but support and celebrate their detention and deportation?

Edom's sin was not simply that it failed to rescue Judah; it eventually helped prevent the escape of those fleeing violence. When Christians celebrate the removal of vulnerable people, particularly those seeking refuge or safety, they risk confusing national allegiance with Christian faithfulness. **Obadiah challenges the church to consider whether it has become a witness against injustice or an enthusiastic participant in the suffering of its neighbors.**

Jonah: Mercy, Belonging, and the Limits of Compassion

I. Introduction: More Than a Story About a Fish

- **Jonah, one of the Twelve Minor Prophets, is narrative fiction, not a collection of prophetic oracles.** Unlike Isaiah, Amos, or Micah, the book is a short, artfully crafted story about a prophet rather than a record of a prophet's spoken messages. **The book contains only one prophecy (3:4):** "Forty days more, and Nineveh (N. Iraq - imperial power associated with violence, oppression) shall be overthrown."
- **Ricoeur/Borg's "second naivety" and Brueggemann's post-critical approach:** from precritical naivety (reading the stories as literal history), through critical questioning, to a post-critical "second naivety," Jonah invite readers to move beyond the debate over historicity and be moved by a story's truth without needing it to be factual. **A post-critical reading does not reduce the text's validity to whether a fish swallowed a prophet**, but opens up another way of seeing God and the world.
- The story explores the tension between divine justice, human judgment, repentance, and mercy.
- **Jonah's message is not simply whether Nineveh deserves forgiveness, but whether Jonah can accept a God whose compassion extends beyond the boundaries of his own religious and national imagination.**

Central theme: God's compassion is not confined by the boundaries human beings establish around belonging.

Critical Application: Christians often use Jesus' reference to Jonah (**Matthew 12:40**) as prophetic proof of the Resurrection: 3 days in the fish, 3 days in the tomb. Yet by conventional Gospel chronology, Jesus was entombed approximately 36 hours, not 72. Matthew is using Jonah typologically to establish Jesus 'identity and significance, not to provide a chronological account. The parallel is theological symbolism, not historical correspondence—a distinction often lost when symbolism is recruited as proof.

II. Jonah 1: The Prophet Who Refuses the Outsider. God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and announce judgment against the city (1:1–2). Jonah runs in the opposite direction, boarding a ship bound for Tarshish. A storm threatens the ship, and the foreign sailors respond with prayer, concern, and efforts to preserve life. Although Jonah possesses religious knowledge and identifies himself as a worshiper of the Creator, the foreign sailors demonstrate remarkable compassion and moral responsiveness.

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Justice and inclusion: The mariners, or "outsiders," demonstrate moral clarity before Jonah, the "religious insider" does. **Religious identity does not automatically produce moral faithfulness**. This narrative challenges assumptions about who possesses spiritual authority and who demonstrates compassion.

III. Jonah 2: The Prophet Who Receives Mercy. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. His prayer for mercy includes "yet you brought up my life from the Pit" (**2:6**) Jonah experiences divine mercy despite having resisted God's command.

Justice and inclusion: Jonah readily receives the compassion he struggles to extend to others, exposing the inconsistency of accepting mercy for oneself while resenting it for someone else.

IV. Jonah 3: The Outsiders Who Repent. God gives Jonah a second opportunity to fulfill his commission. Jonah announces Nineveh's impending destruction. The people believe God, fast, and put on sackcloth; the king removes his royal garments and calls the people to turn from violence and wrongdoing (**3:5–9**). God relents from the announced destruction (**3:10**).

Justice and inclusion: Nineveh's repentance specifically addresses violence and wrongdoing. Notice, the outsiders are recognized for their moral transformation without first becoming members of Israel. God's response demonstrates that divine compassion is not restricted to the boundaries of religious identity.

V. Jonah 4: The Religious Insider Who Resents Mercy. Jonah becomes angry when God spares Nineveh.

4:3-4 "And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." [4] And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah acknowledges that he anticipated God being gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love (**4:2; compare Exodus 34:6–7**). Jonah does not misunderstand God's character; **he resents the extension of that character to people he considers undeserving**. God provides a plant for Jonah's comfort, it dies, Jonah grieves its loss. God contrasts Jonah's concern for the plant with God's concern for the people of Nineveh (4:10–11).

4:10a, 11a "Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, [11] And should I not be concerned about Nineveh?"

Justice and inclusion: Jonah receives mercy but resists extending it. The story ends without revealing whether Jonah changes his mind. The reader is left to consider God's final question.

Four Questions for Reflection

1. Who determines the boundaries of belonging, and whose authority establishes them?
2. Whose repentance counts, and what does meaningful transformation look like?
3. Can justice exist without mercy? Can mercy exist without accountability?
4. Can those who have experienced mercy become gatekeepers of belonging for others?

VI. The Larger Theological Challenge

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Jonah offers a powerful warning about the possibility of receiving mercy without allowing that mercy to transform our treatment of others. The story challenges religious communities to consider:

- Receiving mercy does not guarantee extending mercy.
- Religious knowledge does not necessarily produce compassion.
- Repentance requires a willingness to turn away from injustice and violence.
- God's compassion may extend beyond the boundaries of our religious imaginations.

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