# SERMON SERIES:

# REDISCOVERING THE ‘GO’ IN GOSPEL

**“One Of The Hardest Words In The Bible”**

Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-4; 4:1-3

Last week we began a new sermon series entitled “Rediscovering The ‘Go’ In Gospel,’ and we looked at four Scripture passages that showed God commanding people to go. We said that when God tells us to go it’s not only for our spiritual growth and obedience (although that’s important). It’s because God has a plan to reach other people. And if we don’t go, we hinder God’s plan for those people.

I think the word ‘go’ is one of the hardest words in the Bible for Christians today. ***We sometimes joke that there are certain words you aren’t supposed to say in church. For example, you aren’t supposed to say ‘sex’ or you aren’t supposed to say ‘change’ in church.*** But it also seems that saying the word ‘go’ is tough, too. But why is that simple word so difficult for us? We know that Jesus commanded his followers to “…*go and make disciples of all the nations…*

(Matthew 28:19)*.* We intellectually understand that we’re to take the gospel where it’s needed. So why is going such a hang-up for us? Let’s turn to our Scripture reading this morning, Jonah 1:1-3. You’ll want to keep your Bible open because we’re going to look at a couple other passages there as well.

*The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: 2“Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.” 3But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish.*

You just have to love Jonah. He was SO much like you and me! God told Jonah to “…*go to the great city of Nineveh.”* As if the command to leave the comforts of home and family weren’t enough, God gave Jonah marching order for Ninevah. That was the capital city of Assyria, which was Israel’s enemy, and the dominant world power of the day. ***God wasn’t telling Jonah to go the convenience store and help someone buy gas, or to share his testimony at the local Lions Club meeting. God directed him to the seat of power of his country’s worst enemy. It would be like God telling us to go to North Korea or Iran.***

God wanted to give the people of Ninevah the chance to repent and be saved—so once again the command to go wasn’t primarily for Jonah’s benefit, but for the people of Ninevah. But Jonah had no intention of going! He was so determined to avoid going that he chartered passage on a ship heading the opposite direction--to Tarshish. That city lay at the southernmost tip of Spain—the last outpost of human civilization before the Atlantic Ocean.

**The word ‘go’ is hard for us because it calls for a level of trust that we’re not comfortable with, that challenges us beyond our comfort zones.** We’d much rather stay where we’re comfortable, where we know the rules, where everybody thinks and believes like we do. ***Remember last Sunday: we talked about the early church in Jerusalem in Acts? They had to be forced out of Jerusalem by persecution. In a short amount of time they had grown comfortable where they were and they knew all the rules. They weren’t going so God had to get them moving.***

Going forces us to exercise more trust than we might normally engage in. Yes, we trust God for this, that or the other thing; for salvation or healing or comfort. But we tend to be less trustful when it comes to going. It’s as if we aren’t sure God will show up. It’s easy to trust God in the calmness of the sanctuary on Sunday morning, but it’s tougher to trust him when he tells us to go. The trust that’s necessary for going stretches us. We don’t know who or what we’ll experience when we go. So we make excuses because going challenges our comfort zones.

Now let’s turn to Jonah 3:1-4. Jonah didn’t get far on his voyage to Tarshish. He ended up in the ocean and was swallowed by a fisherman’s dream catch, and enjoyed some lovely private time inside the fish, to reflect on what had happened. When Jonah changed his mind about going, the fish hacked him out.

*Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: 2“Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.” 3This time Jonah obeyed the Lord’s command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. 4On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”*

Once Jonah dried out, God commanded him a second time. So Jonah had learned his lesson and was ready to play by God’s rules, right? Oh no! It seems that Jonah hadn’t really learned his lesson after all. A city so large it took three days to get through it, and what did Jonah do? He walked through the gates, looked around, and…*shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”* ***It’s like Jonah was thumbing his nose at God: “Okay God, you’re going to make me do this, but you can’t make me like it.”*** Jonah gave an eight-word sermon. No call for repentance. No explanation. No grace. Just a frustrated prophet doing the absolute minimum to get by. And while most people would be okay hearing an eight-word sermon, I sort of doubt that was the limit of what God wanted the people to know.

**The word ‘go’ is one of the hardest in the Bible because our heart may not be into going.** Again, we intellectually know that Christians are supposed to ‘go’ with the gospel. But when it comes to putting one foot in front of the other, our heart often isn’t in it. We imagine every possible way things could go wrong. What if I meet someone I can’t relate to? What if someone asks me a question I can’t answer? What if someone gets argumentative, or what if someone rejects me? Our minds concoct all sorts of scenarios—believe me, I’ve been there!—and we can easily talk ourselves out of going.

But if God keeps pushing and we end up going anyway, we sometimes do so like Jonah. ***We do the absolute minimum in order to say “Okay God, I did what you wanted. I went to such-and-such a place. But I stayed in my car and prayed instead of going inside. I went, so there.”***

***I once heard a man say that passion for the lost fuels the spiritual vision.*** A passion to see lost souls reconciled with God through Jesus Christ should motivate us to go wherever and to whomever. And I truly believe Christians want others to know the Lord. But we want that to happen on *our* home turf, on *our* terms. Jonah certainly didn’t want to be in Ninevah; he didn’t want to deliver God’s message. And like a petulant child, he did the bare minimum necessary.So what happened next? Turn over to Jonah 4:1-3.

Despite Jonah’s attempt to sabotage God’s plans, the king of Ninevah heard the message. The king and the people repented. That’s exactly what God wanted! He didn’t have to pass judgment on them! There was celebrating all around…except for one bad-tempered prophet: *This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. 2So he complained to the Lord about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. 3Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”*

Jonah wanted to see the hammer fall on Ninevah. Jonah hoped they would spurn God, rejecting the half-hearted message he’d delivered. But instead God showed his characteristic mercy. And Jonah was ticked off! He was so angry and bitter that he wanted to die.

**The word ‘go’ is one of the hardest in the Bible for us because the outcome will rarely be what we expect.** ***I’d be willing to bet that if we could be assured that our efforts to reach other people wouldn’t be rejected or ignored, we’d go with a lot more enthusiasm. If we knew that things would turn out in a positive manner—if we knew that people would be converted or would come to church—we’d be lining up to go!*** But that’s not the way it works.

God sends us to build relationships with the lost and unchurched, and relationships take time and effort. ***One of my seminary professors was fond of saying “We live in a microwave world that has crock pot relationships.” In other words, our culture wants quick answers and instant results, but relationships take time to cultivate.***

The outcomes of going where God sends us will be varied. Sometimes things will go smoothly; other times they won’t. Sometimes people will respond with insightful questions; other times they’ll try to get away as quick as they can. Sometimes they’ll give us a chance to share; other times they’ll shut us down.

***I have a friend I’ll call Kyle. He’s been through a lot of bad stuff in his life: some of it has been done to him and some of it he’s done to himself. He’s not Christian, by the way, but in the three years I’ve gotten to know him, we’ve had some deep conversations about things such as death, heaven and hell, the Trinity, grace, and forgiveness.*** ***And there’ve been times when we’ve met for dinner and have never really touched on those meaningful life issues. We talked about less important things. And in those times I don’t try to steer the conversation around to God-talk every time. We enjoy fellowship and laughter and food together, and the Holy Spirit opens opportunities when appropriate. Sometimes the most holy and spiritual thing I can do when I’m with my friend is to just listen to what’s going on in his life and pray for him.***

‘Go’ is one of the hardest words in the Bible for us today. We live in predominately non-Christian culture, and going sends us to people and places that require deeper levels of trust in God. We make excuses because we don’t want to move out of our comfort zones.

‘Go’ is a hard word because often our hearts may not be into going. We imagine all sorts of things going wrong, or we imagine failing, and we have no enthusiasm for those God wants to reach. It’s not that we’re cold-hearted or callous about the eternal destiny of others--our hearts just find too many ways to avoid doing what God commands.

‘Go’ is also a hard word because there’s no assurance of what will happen when we go. No matter what we hope or anticipate, it will most likely not be that way. We have to be willing to accept the outcome that occurs, trusting that God is at work to draw people to himself. We don’t save anybody. That’s the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God gives us the message and words; God directs us where he wants that message to be; he empowers us to share that message. We’re to leave the results in God’s hands.

Where do you see yourself in Jonah’s story this morning? Are you anxious or afraid that your faith isn’t strong enough to go? Are you worried about stepping outside your comfort zone?

Does your heart and mind scare you with too many scenarios of things going wrong? Does your heart lack a passion for the lost? Are you concerned the outcome won’t be what you hoped for? Are you willing to accept whatever happens and trust God for the resolution? Which of these best fits your heart and spirit this morning? Let us pray…

*Jesus, forgive us for the times we have failed to go in obedience and trust. It’s so easy to push it aside, to hope that someone else will do it. We fear rejection or being laughed at. We dread being ignored or challenged by those who may not be receptive to your message. Many of us feel like we don’t know enough about you or the Bible or the church to go. Forgive us, Lord. We have you. We have our experiences and our testimonies. We have the support and encouragement of these around us. From this day forward, bring people into our lives who we can build relationships with—people who are broken and lost and overwhelmed and confused…just like we are. Prepare the way ahead and the places we are to go. Anoint them with your Spirit so that when we arrive, we will know that we are not alone. And prepare the people you have in line for us. Make them open and receptive to spiritual conversations, to friendship, to hope and grace. May we learn from Jonah how NOT to go, and may we learn from you, Jesus, exactly how we are to go. Amen.*