

More Than A Fish Story: A Journey Through the Book of Jonah – Running From God

Jonah 1:1-16

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If you grew up a Christian or a Jew, there are a handful of stories you almost certainly heard as a child. You know the ones. Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath, Daniel and the Lion's Den, and, of course, the story of Jonah. Most of these stories have one or two exciting events that captured our imaginations as children, so we still remember them today. But I would venture that most of us don't remember what faith lesson we were meant to learn from those stories - if we ever knew in the first place.

For example, if I asked you, "What do you remember about Jonah?" You would almost definitely say, "He got swallowed by a whale." And that is true. But why did he get swallowed by the whale? How did he end up in the ocean? What happened after the whale swallowed him? And, most importantly, why was his story important enough to end up in the Bible?

It might surprise you that I happen to think there is a lot in the Book of Jonah that is relevant to our lives right now in the contemporary United States. So, that's why I've chosen to kick off the summer with a four-week sermon series on Jonah and what he has to teach us about ourselves, about God, about evil, and about grace.

The story starts out with God calling Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and warn them that God is angry about their evil ways and will punish them if they don't repent and change. Now, Jonah is a prophet, and this is exactly the sort of thing God calls prophets to do. God calls them to do an assignment - usually to give a warning to people who are behaving badly. Usually, those are the people of Israel, but this time is different. Jonah is called to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

Of course, when we remember those childhood Bible stories, we usually think of the main character as a hero. David defeats Goliath. Moses leads the people to the promised land. Noah builds an ark to save a pair of all the living creatures from the flood. But then there is Jonah. Honestly, Jonah is, in some ways, kind of a jerk, which makes him almost comical. He's got a bad attitude. He complains a lot. He's just not very likeable, but he is very relatable.

When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah does what a lot of us do when someone calls that we don't want to talk to. He doesn't answer. Instead, he runs. God says, "Get up and go to Nineveh" and Jonah gets up and goes in the exact opposite direction. Nineveh is east of Israel. Jonah goes west. And he runs - he runs as far from Nineveh as he can. This is a Forrest Gump kind of run. He runs toward Joppa, and when he runs out of land to run on, he gets on a boat to take him to the very farthest known place in his world - the coast of Spain.

So, clearly, Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He is not interested in warning the Ninevites that God is mad and they better change. The question is why not. But, before we address that question, let me ask you another. When has God called you and you've run away? Maybe you once felt called to join the Peace Corps but talked yourself out of it. Or maybe God nudged you to

serve the homeless or people in prison or LGBTQ+ teens but, whatever the call, you found reasons to not answer. And what about right now? Today? Could God be calling you to participate in a protest or speak out against racism or step in when you see immigrants bullied on the street? Will you answer or will you run? Even though we know how high the stakes might be, many of us, just like Jonah, will choose to run.

So, back to why. In Jonah's case, fear is a pretty likely motivator. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians had already destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. They were infamous for their brutality in warfare. Rev. Kevin Larson writes, "They (the Assyrians) would rip off the lips and tear out the tongues of their victims. They would dismember and flay their prisoners alive. They'd make family members of the deceased march around with their loved ones' heads on poles. That's the reputation of the Assyrians." So, maybe we can't blame Jonah for running. Imagine, if you can, walking into a place where the people are known for their heartlessness and cruelty and saying, "Oh, by the way, God is really unhappy with all the evil you are up to, so you better stop and repent of your ways." You are unlikely to be well-received

Another possible motivation for Jonah is how he feels about the Assyrians. You don't necessarily have to have been personally impacted by the cruelty and greed of others to be enraged by it. Jonah was an Israelite. He might really hate the Assyrians and think they deserve whatever punishment God would give them. If so, he certainly wouldn't want to be the messenger who warns them and saves them from God's retribution.

Rev. Larson points out one other possible motivation for Jonah, and that is comfort. Up until now, Jonah has had a pretty cushy life as far as prophets go. While other prophets were imprisoned, exiled, or even murdered, Jonah hasn't faced any trials nearly this extreme. In fact, all we really know is that he helped out King Jeroboam the 2nd reclaim some towns that had been usurped by the Syrians. Otherwise, his life as a prophet was pretty quiet and peaceful - whatever troubles there were in the world, they weren't at his doorstep. So, why would he go looking for them?

I wonder, as we contemplate these reasons why Jonah might have run from God's call, if any of them sound familiar to you. Have you ever been afraid of answering God's call? Afraid of being attacked, verbally or physically? Or of losing your job or your status or your friends? What call from God leaves your stomach turning when you think of responding?

Whatever his motivations, Jonah runs to Joppa and gets on that boat. No sooner have they set sail than God whips up a nasty storm that tosses the boat to and fro, panicking the sailors as they try to keep the boat whole and the passengers safe. While they are frantically throwing cargo overboard and praying to their individual gods, Jonah is down in the belly of the boat fast asleep. He doesn't want to acknowledge the consequences of what he has done. If he's sleeping, he doesn't have to see them. He can be blissfully ignorant, but that means he is also spiritually apathetic. Not my problem, he thinks, as he fades into his dreams.

Finally, one of the crew members wakes him. They cast lots as a way of revealing who is responsible for angering their god and bringing on this terrible storm. The lot falls to Jonah who finally acknowledges his own culpability. He is the one who has rebelled against his God. He is

the reason for the storm. To save the boat and all who are in it, he tells them they should throw him into the sea. The sailors try to row to land but to no avail. Finally, tossing Jonah into the swirling sea seems the last resort. When they finally do the storm immediately stops and the sea turns calm again. All of the sailors begin to worship Jonah's god, the God of Israel.

What Jonah learns, and what is a lesson to us when we try to run from God's calling on our lives, is that you really can't run away from God. God is with us always. God is present in our every day - even in the mistakes we make, the responsibilities we ignore, the moments when we hurt ourselves or others. God pursues us, seeking the opportunity to connect with us again with mercy and grace.

This truth is expressed with such beauty in Psalm 139.

Lord, you have examined me.

You know me.

You know when I sit down and when I stand up.

Even from far away, you comprehend my plans.

You study my traveling and resting.

You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.

There isn't a word on my tongue, Lord,

that you don't already know completely.

You surround me—front and back.

You put your hand on me.

That kind of knowledge is too much for me;

it's so high above me that I can't reach it.

Where could I go to get away from your spirit?

Where could I go to escape your presence?

If I went up to heaven, you would be there.

If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!

If I could fly on the wings of dawn,

stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—

even there your hand would guide me;

even there your strong hand would hold me tight!

If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me;

the light will become night around me,"

even then the darkness isn't too dark for you!

Nighttime would shine bright as day,

because darkness is the same as light to you!

I don't know what you might be running from in your life. I don't know where God will call you in these coming days and months and years of turmoil. What I do know is that no matter what it is and no matter how you might respond or resist, God is with you, always. And when you are ready to face your fears, God will walk with you.

May it be so. Amen.