

Prophetic Living - Running Away From God

Jonah 1:1-17

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"The fish was *thiiiiissss* big. I'd show you, but it got away just before I hauled it into the boat."
 Ah - the proverbial tall tale from the fisher climbing out of the boat.
 To which the best response is probably, "Sure. Whatever."

It gave rise to the movie *Big Fish* a couple of years ago about a father who told whopping tales, and a son trying to reconcile himself to what was truth and what was fiction in the life of that old man - trying to do it before dad died.

Over the centuries people have taken to looking at *Jonah* that way, a whale of a tale. **OR** they get all preoccupied with demonstrating its historicity - looking for other accounts of people swallowed by sea creatures and surviving, how long could it last, etc.

All of which misses the point.

Over the next few weeks we're going to work our way through *Jonah*. And we will receive it as a biblical mirror onto our own lives.

The book of *Jonah* is read in Jewish Synagogues on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. And after the reading, the liturgy calls for the people to respond, "*We are Jonah*."

Yes, we are *Jonah*. The book is about us. He is not a prophetic hero who escapes a close call and single-handedly transforms an evil empire. He's a fallible believer, an incomplete human being, a "yes-but" kind of player in the Kingdom of God....

....just like every one of us.

We are *Jonah*.

God works on *Jonah*. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working. Carving away at his character, right to the very last verse of the narrative.

Just like he keeps working on us. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working on us. Carving away at our character, right to our very last breathe.

Over the four chapters of this short bible book we see *Jonah the Prophet* as:

Prodigal;
 Praying;
 Preaching; and
 Perturbed.

We're going to take one each week.
 This week - *Jonah the Prodigal Prophet*.

Read with me from the Word Of God -

Jonah 1:1-17, p.859 (Old Testament)

Let me say it again - *We are Jonah*.

You are.
 I am.

For in every bit of the way that God has called his children to the sacred believer offices of Prophet, Priest, and King we stand together with this Old Testament Prophet.

We are all called to prophetic roles for the Kingdom of God.

So, wipe your mirror clean and have a peek.

Focus with me on the first verses:

*1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,
 2 "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."
 3 But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.*

Jonah, Jonah - fleeing from the Presence of the Lord.
Aware.
Deliberate.
Paying for it.

Jonah - he had a premonition that his ministry might succeed. And, in fact, it does. He's the only successful prophet in the whole Old Testament! But it means risk for him. It means he'd have to change his attitude towards people for whom he had nothing but revulsion. The Assyrians were known as cruel and sadistic. They had enslaved or murdered many Israelites. Their twisted sexual practices were well known.

Today we'd have to ask, how do you tell a Tutsi to preach to a Hutu? Or a Kurd to a Sunni?

Go to Ninevah?

And - what if they listen? What if they change? Then what? Hug them, smile at them and welcome them into the family of God?

Of course, there's always the possibility that he gets arrested, or worse.

Jonah's emotions would have run between focussing on the difficulty, the danger, and the disgust he would have felt.

Jonah didn't want to have to face any of those possibilities. Better to turn and run. Go find some distraction somewhere else. Anything but that. Find something less demanding, less risky, more predictable.

And there's the reflection back at us.

When God places an opportunity - or, to ratchet things higher - a clear calling before us that is demanding or risky, that doesn't have a clear payback presented, how many of us don't get the urge to ignore it, at best, and to perhaps turn and run more often than not?

Tempted to run away.

Notice - away from the Presence of the Lord. Ah, it is the sin of Eden all over again. The sin of hiding from God's calling in the cool of the evening.

What's one of the things that we pray for here in Church?

Lord, fill this place with your Presence.

Lord, grant us your Presence.

What do we talk about in theological terms when we celebrate Holy Communion? The Real Presence of Christ working renewal, healing and faith through the celebration.

Psalms 68:4 calls to us:

Sing praises to God and to his name!

Sing loud praises to him who rides the clouds.

His name is the LORD -- rejoice in his presence!

Psalms 89:15 sings out:

Happy are those who hear the joyful call to worship,
for they will walk in the light of your presence, LORD.

Here at Calvin we often sing - *"Be still for the Presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here... How awesome is the sight, the radiant King of Light..."*

In that Presence there is life, there is healing, there is peace. When the Presence of God was taken away from Adam and Eve the curse settled on them. Sin moved in and took over. Life was replaced by death.

That presence is gift. Found in worship. Found in prayer. Found in quiet contemplation. And found in moments of obedient risk-taking.

But the presence of God is NOT a given.

You can run away from it.

Doesn't mean you can run away from God - as the Psalms ask:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

No more than Adam and Eve could hide from God in the Garden of Eden can we or Jonah hide.

But run from the Presence.

Run away from intimacy.

Run from personal, real connection with the Lord?

Oh, yes, we can try to shut it all down.

And so Jonah goes to Tarshish.

What and where is this place?

1 Kings 10:22; 22:48 speak about large sea going vessels as “ships of Tarshish.” Ps 48 & 72 and Is 60, among other passages, indicate Tarshish as a trading centre of considerable wealth.

It would seem that Tarshish was a glittering place. A happening place. A place of opportunity and progress.

Ninevah vs Tarshish - not a real hard call to figure out which side of the fence had the greener grass! And it seems to have lasted, because Romans 15 tells us that St. Paul also wanted to go to Spain. Interesting, isn't it, that the Bible's account suggests that he, too, was prevented from going there.

Running is not hard.

Finding some sort of glittery distraction from the Presence of the Lord - very easy. All kinds of opportunities will present themselves as easily as the ship passage to Tarshish presented itself to Jonah.

In that day organizing a trip like this was a big deal. Could take many weeks or months to arrange - if at all. Jonah seems to have hitched a ride rather quickly.

If it was based on circumstances alone you'd almost want to argue that this trip was in line with the will of God:

He found money for the trip.

He found a boat making the trip.

The boat had room for him.

Sailing winds were favorable.

One open door after another!

Ah, yes - not hard to kid ourselves into thinking God approves our misbehavior. After all circumstances are right for it.

Friends, when we're trying to get away from a task that the Lord is laying before us, it's amazing how many diversionary opportunities, glittery opportunities, will present themselves.

Right there, they'll be.

They make distraction a real temptation.

They make avoiding the call of God very possible.

Someone has called Satan the “travel agent of distraction.”

He loves to make it convenient for us to ignore God or be too busy for God or get side tracked from God's call on our lives. He loves to walk us down the path where the Real Presence of God fades.

The Real Presence - where God gets right into our space.

It's when He is right there.

It's when His challenge to us is very real.

It's when we KNOW that following Him is going to mean real consequences for our lives - and not all of them simple, neat or risk-free.

As followers of Christ God places a call on our lives to be His agents of Good News in a not-very-good-news world. He calls us to be prophets. That's part of what the whole Micah Challenge is all about. If you were here this morning you'd have heard about it. You can find lots of info on the CRWRC web site,

www.crwrc.org

When God calls us, it is not always to glittery places, fast paced places, high action places.

I know that as a pastor this is a common temptation I wrestle with, as do most of my colleagues. It's easy to click to a web site, or pick up a magazine with descriptions of all kinds of glamorous sounding ministry opportunities. Grass looks incredibly green. Real green compared to the reality of everyday people with everyday challenges in everyday living situations; the every week routine of two sermons, the ringing of the phone and attending the meetings. And the temptation comes to brush up the ministry profile and fire it off to Duane Visser's office, or answer the appealing looking ad in the back of *The Banner* or *Christian Courier*.

Not that moving is all wrong - pity those poor churches presently vacant, if that were the case! But it's very easy for the pastoral eye to begin roaming too quickly and too easily when God's call is to stay put and focus on ministry in these very common, very ordinary, not always shiny places.

How has God called you? Is it an uncomfortable call?

Perhaps to become a little more bold in your Christian witness at work?

Perhaps to give of your time as a volunteer with an inner city ministry?

Perhaps coming out on Tuesday evening to investigate what being part of a Social Justice Advocacy ministry at Calvin might be like?

Perhaps opening your wallet a little wider to a certain ministry?

Perhaps beginning to visit a nursing home or hospital to share love with the lonely and elderly that linger there?

Perhaps heading off to Seminary?

Perhaps recommitting to your local congregation instead of heading out to do some church shopping?

It's easy to say you're too busy, or to wander off after something that seems more appealing. But what does God **really** want? Is it was is first of all convenient or safe or appealing to you?

Our Saviour said that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

That's true for individuals.

It's true for us as a congregation.

This is His Word!