

Sermon 2-21-10¹
Luke 8:22-25
Jonah 1:4-16
Saved in the Storm

On Wednesday evening we began our journey with Jonah, hearing the story of his call. We heard the Word of the Lord coming to Jonah saying, “Arise to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it.” Jonah surely heard that call, but he chose to run the other way. He was supposed to travel east to Nineveh, but instead, Jonah rejected the Lord, going in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Rather than trusting in the will of the Lord, Jonah attempted to get as far away from the presence of the Lord as possible. But like any good Israelite, he knew he couldn’t escape from under God’s reign and power, but at least he could escape to a place where people were unfamiliar with this God and he could forget all about his call as a prophet of the Lord. And so, fleeing from the Lord’s presence, Jonah found a ship that would take him to Tarshish, paid his fare and set out to a land far from the Lord’s call and claim. If only it were that simple.

You’d think a prophet of the Lord would know better than to try and run away from his problems and responsibilities. You’d think a prophet would remember the words of Psalm 139, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me...where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” Yet Jonah does run, but he doesn’t get that far.

Shortly into their journey across the Mediterranean, we’re told that the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea and a storm came that tossed the ship to and fro. The crew becomes scared beyond belief. They did what any person does in a panicked situation: they

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turned to their pagan gods and prayed. But nothing worked. Then they began taking all the non-essential cargo and hurled it over the sides in the hopes that it would lighten the ship and keep it from breaking apart. All the while, Jonah was fast asleep within the ship's hold. He couldn't be bothered by the storm for he was content with the choice he had made; he was content with his willful attempts to resist God's call. But his sleep didn't last too long.

As the sailors aboard the ship panic, the captain comes below deck, probably to remove any unnecessary items. Coming upon Jonah, the captain wakes him up and orders him to start praying like everyone else. The only thing is, Jonah doesn't start praying. He's so fed up with what God has done that he refuses to join his prayers with the others.

As he arrives on the deck, the sailors decide they will cast lots to see whose fault the stormy weather is. Low and behold, the lot falls on Jonah. And it becomes a comical scene if you think about it. Here's Jonah, running away from God's call, hoping to find some respite on the boat, but the boat is stopped halfway along the journey and now his dilemma is discovered by the crew of the ship. "Why has this happened to us," cry the sailors. "What do you do for a living? Where did you come from? What's your hometown? Who do you worship?" If only Jonah realized that running away never solved anything.

Do you have a Tarshish? Do you have a place that you know is the exact opposite of the place where God wants you to go? Do you have a place where you try to hide your sin; try to mask your attempts to run away from God's call and claim? Eventually, you know, that place is going to be found out. When we're honest with ourselves, we know that our Lord knows our faults and our fears; he knows the depths of the powers of sin. Yet, rather than turning to him, we try to hide; we try to run away and sometimes we can't even see how foolish it is to run. The Lord who extends to us an irresistible invitation for our lives

out of his abundant grace will eventually keep us from running. Jonah tried to run and God used a storm to keep him from going anywhere; God didn't ignore it. If you're on the run from God's call and claim, and if you've ever been on the run from God's call and claim, you know that he snaps us out of our pipe dreams and fantasies, he breaks through our illusions and our running to reveal to us the depths of his love and his claim upon our lives. He reminds us that running never solves anything.

A drunken husband sneaks up the stairs quietly. He gets to the bathroom and looks at his face in the mirror. It's not pretty. And so he takes out the Band-Aids and begins to bandage the bumps and the bruises he received in a fight earlier that night. He then proceeds to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he was able to pull one over on his wife. When morning comes, he's awakened by a slap upside his head. Groggily, he opens his eyes to see his wife standing over him. "You were drunk last night, weren't you?" "No honey," the husband protests. "Well if you weren't then who put all the Band-Aids on the bathroom mirror?" Running is useless. Pretending that everything is just fine-and-dandy leads to a dead end. Try as we might, just because we ignore him doesn't mean we can escape God's call nor can we flee from his presence. This was the hard lesson that Jonah, and us, have to learn. There are times when we want to escape, and in doing so, we end up doing everything wrong.

Following the questions of the sailors, Jonah replies, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord Almighty, the God of the cosmos who made the land and the sea." And in the moment, the others knew what Jonah had done. They could recognize that he sought to flee from the presence of the Lord. And so they ask him, "What will we do to you to make this stormy weather go away?" And Jonah said, "You better throw me over the side." But then

men protested and started rowing hard in the direction of land only to learn that it wasn't working. They were stuck where they were. And so finally, after a moment of prayer to Jonah's God, to the Lord God Almighty, they threw him over the side, and storm went away.

Some authors assume that Jonah had a death wish and that's why he let the sailors hurl him over the side. I don't think that's the case at all. Jonah recognized that he couldn't run anymore. It was time to repent, to stand up and live into who God had blessed him to be; to repent and live into the person God had called him and empowered him to be. Jonah couldn't escape from the Lord's presence and neither can we.

Lent is often spoken of as a season of repentance. While we have a lot of negative images about the meaning of repentance, images supplied from the left or the right as a means of inspiring fear or dread, the real meaning of repentance is literally to turn around. Lent reminds us to stop running away from God, to stop running away from the call of discipleship and disciple-making, to stop escaping to our personal Tarshish's where we try to hide our sin and our disobedience; Lent reminds us to turn around and see the blessed arms of our Savior outstretched over us, rebuking that sin and disobedience within us while calming the storms and opening our lives to a new future. We look to the One whose voice stills the raging winds and waters, not only of the world, but also within our lives. In Lent, we turn around and look to the One who became sin for us, who penetrated into the depths of our brokenness and came to be one with us when we try to run away. We turn to the One who by his cross and resurrection freed us from the slavery of sin and the cords of death that we might be obedient disciples. In Lent, we cease running away in the midst of the storms, because God has reached out in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of

the Holy Spirit to save us in the midst of the storms and to set us upon the paths of his righteousness.

Out of the freedom of his grace and love, God invites us to turn around, to stop endlessly running, and, like Jonah, respond to God's call for our lives. His is the power to call us, to save us, and to lead us to respond to his gracious will. What are you running from? What are you trying to hide? Friends, turn around and lift it to the Lord in prayer, return to his Word, and the glory of our blessed Savior, who calls us forth from darkness into the light of his life; who assures us that in everything we say and do it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives and reigns within us—so much so, that the life we now live, we live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loves us and gives himself for us. In this way, we no longer pursue our goals, our wills, our choices, but are empowered to turn around and embrace Christ's will and call for our lives. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.