

RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD
Turn Tail and Run: Jonah
January 24, 2010

We've all done it before. We've all dug our heels in and refused to budge when we didn't want to do something—I mean *really really* didn't want to do something that we knew we were supposed to do.

I've shared with you all the story before of the time when I was five years old, and I *really, really* didn't want to sing a little solo with the children's choir during a worship service at Northway Christian Church. During the rehearsal the week before, my voice cracked and the other kids laughed and made fun of me. So I told my parents I was NOT going to sing. They said, Oh Yes You ARE going to sing.

All week long I insisted that I was NOT going to sing. All week long they said, "The choir is depending on you—you ARE going to sing."

When I woke up the Sunday morning of the performance, I had a fever of 101. Really. The thermometer does not lie. I had made myself sick so I wouldn't have to sing. Talk about digging my heels in and not budging! My sick bed was my ship to Tarshish, no doubt about it.

A youth pastor in Western Kentucky *really, really* didn't want to preach the Sunday evening worship service one night. For whatever reason, he hadn't been able to find the time to write his sermon. He wasn't prepared.

So right before the service began, he went into his office, called 911 and told the dispatcher there was a bomb in the church. State Trooper Larry Abel told the reporter from the Lexington Herald-Leader that when questioned, the youth pastor was cooperative and told the police he had made the call. The church was evacuated and a police search revealed no bomb. However, the 7 pm service was cancelled, and the young man did not have to preach. Talk about digging his heels in and not budging! The jail cell of the Calhoun County police department became this young man's belly of the whale. (Lexington Herald-Leader, August 8, 1996. c1).

We've all done it before, to varying degrees. We've all dug our heels in and refused to budge in the most creative of ways. Or we've done what Jonah did when he didn't *really, really* didn't want to do what God wanted him to do--we've turned tail and run.

The story of Jonah in our Hebrew scriptures is a favorite for children, but it is also descriptive of what we all do—child and adult alike--when God calls us to live and behave in ways that we don't want to live—ways that are counter-cultural, but especially counter-intuitive to our lives.

There are times God asks us to do something and we get defiant, stubborn, obstinate. Or, because we know that it's God who wants something of us, we do more than just dig in our heels—we turn tail and run, trying to hide from God's will, trying to avoid God's purpose.

What exactly was the cause of Jonah's obstinacy? We heard it read today. "One day long ago, God's Word came to Jonah: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from God as he could get." (The Message).

Why did Jonah not want to go to Nineveh? Was it because he was simply a reluctant prophet—unsure of his abilities, like Moses stammered in last week's text? Was it because he was afraid of people's response to him—that they would laugh in his face if he told them to shape up?

The truth is, Jonah didn't agree with God's will. Jonah knew the true will of God, the true heart of God—and Jonah didn't like it.

The cause for this disagreement between the prophet and the Potentate of the Universe had a long history. Bill Carl, former pastor of Dallas' First Presbyterian Church for many years, reflected on this text and reminded his readers that Nineveh was a city on the east bank of the Tigris River in Assyria.

The Assyrians were not too popular in Israel because in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., they plundered Palestine, looting and burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. In 722-721 B.C.E., the Northern Kingdom of Israel passed out of existence as a result of Assyrian conquest. In other words, Nineveh was the source of deep pain, a symbol of the genocide of a nation, the nation of Jonah's great grandparents. (Rev. Dr. William Carl, "Tickets for Tarshish", www.day1.com, Nov. 9, 2008).

To put it into perspective, imagine an African-American being asked to go preach to the Ku Klux Klan, or a survivor of concentration camp being asked to go preach to the Nazi leadership. "Go to Nineveh," says God. And Jonah says, "Anywhere, Lord; anywhere but Nineveh, to anybody but the Ninevites."

And so he turned tail and ran to Tarshish. Only, as we are finding out in our sermon series, we can't run away from God.

The most familiar part of the story happens next—when God sends a big storm upon the waters. On board the vessel, its crew prayed for salvation. Jonah really wasn't a complete cad. He knew he was the cause of their distress, and so out of concern for them he urged them to throw him overboard, knowing that only then would God still the storm

Then, in the part of the text that has grabbed our imaginations since childhood, we hear he was swallowed by a whale. He languished in its belly for three days and three nights, praying, pleading for salvation, before the whale threw him up on dry land.

Jonah had not even had time to dry off when God came to him and again told him to go to Nineveh. Rather than feeling grateful, Jonah was angrier than ever. This was exactly the type of behavior that God was always doing.

Jonah was all right with God having mercy on the sailors, who were innocent bystanders because of Jonah's sin. And, of course, Jonah was just fine with God having mercy on him—the turn-tail--while he was trapped within the belly of the whale.

But Jonah was NOT ok with God having mercy on the Ninevites. There are just some people who don't deserve God's mercy, in Jonah's mind, and the Ninevites certainly fell in that category.

This is really where the text goes to meddling with us this morning. It asks us the hard question: Are there people in our lives that we believe are not eligible for God's mercy? Are there nations in our world that we would rather see blown to bits, decimated by God's wrath, than offered God's forgiveness?

The lesson from Jonah hits uncomfortably home even for those who have accepted the message of Jesus Christ. We have to confess that we're ok with God's mercy, but only up to a point. Like Jonah, there are those people for whom we'd like to see God's wrath rain down upon their heads, giving us the satisfaction of witnessing divine retribution at work.

The most recent evidence of that was in the news the last couple of weeks, when the televangelist Pat Robertson remarked that the earthquake in Haiti was evidence of God's wrath on the people of that land for making a pact with the devil hundreds of years ago.

Most sane-minded Christians made an outcry against his statement, and yet if that earthquake had hit the mountainous area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, decimating the Taliban, wouldn't we have been tempted to make similar statements, feel a similar sense of satisfaction that Mighty Power of God's Hand was at work?

This is where the person of Jonah becomes uncomfortably real to us. This is where the holy text becomes more of a complex challenge than a children's Bible story.

Does God forgive people whom we don't feel deserve it? And more uncomfortable than that, does God ask us to offer forgiveness to people for whom we are not ready to forgive?

That, my friends, was the rub Jonah had with God. He didn't want to give the Ninevites a second chance, but it seemed as if he couldn't run away from his task without God hunting him down. With no other choice, off he goes, half-heartedly, half-hoping that no one in Nineveh would listen. He barely mumbled his warning: "Repent, or in 40 days the End of the World will be at hand." Then he took off to a little hillside on the outskirts of town to watch what he hoped would be God's fireworks display of destruction.

Instead, the whole town—even the King--comes forward singing, "Just as I am, without one plea." They repented. They cried out for mercy. They changed their hearts and their ways.

Jonah doesn't know what to do with that. He is angry with God for not meting out the justice he felt they deserved. He is angry with God for choosing HIM to be the one to offer the offenders a second chance. Jonah wants God to blow the whole place sky high. "Punish them, Lord. I am the righteous one; they are the sinners."

And yet, the ultimate word of God is that we are to be purveyors of God's peace, messengers of God's mercy.

This is a challenging word to live out, although it is echoed time and time again by the teachings of Jesus. We even mouth it every Sunday morning as we say the prayer he taught us to pray: Forgive us our Debts, as we forgive our debtors. We say it, but can we always do it?

Yunkyong Hill and I were talking yesterday about one of her favorite Korean films entitled "Secret Sunshine"—about the story of a woman whose son was kidnapped and murdered. During her grief and healing process, the woman became a Christian, and through her reading of the scripture decided to forgive the man who had perpetrated the crime. She went to the prison with Bible in hand, ready to release her anger by giving him the gift of forgiveness.

But when they met, he saw the Bible and said to her, "Oh, so you know about Jesus Christ. I, too, have discovered Jesus Christ. I have repented, and he has forgiven me. I am freed of my sins."

The woman was dumbstruck. The man was already forgiven, and she had had no part to play in it. In her mind, God had taken away the one act that was hers to give.

And so it must have felt to Jonah, and why he pouted and grumbled atop the hill that day after the people of Nineveh had repented.

In the movie, the woman left the prison without offering her forgiveness, and in the succeeding days, she began to mentally and emotionally breakdown.

It was only after she realized that while God was the ultimate forgiver of sins, that we, in order to live sanely in this world, must be able to share in that power with God for ourselves. Without being able to forgive, we live cut off, broken down, bitter lives.

When God chased Jonah down, it was as much for Jonah's sake as it was for the people of Nineveh.

When God chases us down, and we hear the invitation to forgive as well as to confess and ask for forgiveness, it is as much for our sake as for anyone else's.

An anonymous writer once posed: "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."

May God forgive me, and may Jesus teach me how to forgive, when I'm ready and sometimes even when I'm not. Amen.