

FROM THE PULPIT OF FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

SERMON: “CONSIDER YOUR CALL” Part 4

September 13, 2009

“Jonah—Fleeing the Call that Cannot Be Escaped”

PRAYER: O God of relentless love, from whom we can flee, yet never escape, grant us grace by the power of your Spirit to hear your word in faith and to respond to your call and claim on our lives with willing obedience; through Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Jonah (selected verses)

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 12:38-41

She was a political science major in college. In fact, she did so well in her major that she received a silver bowl as the outstanding student in political science. After graduation, she headed to Washington, DC, where she found herself a place to live in a women’s dorm near the Capitol, and got a job as a congressional intern. Later she was hired by a management consulting firm, Drake, Beam, and Morin, to be a receptionist and to help with the out-placement of executives who were being laid off by IBM. She was paid way more than she was worth in that temporary position, as she would readily admit, but she didn’t complain. She loved life in the big city.

Then one night her parents, who were at the beach on vacation, received a call from her. She said, “I feel that like Jonah, I have been running away from something that won’t let me go. Maybe it’s just genetic, but I’ve got to give seminary a try.” She did, and she loved it. After graduating from seminary, instead of going into the pastorate, she chose to do further graduate work in political science at the University of Virginia. She now works for the GAO, the Government Accountability Office, in Washington, DC.

Does she regret her decision to attend seminary? Does she feel she wasted three years of her life? Not at all. She loved her years at Princeton and still feels that it was the best education she ever got. She did not feel called into pastoral ministry, but she did feel “that like Jonah” she had been “running away from something that would not let her go,” and she needed to at least quit running long enough to give it her best shot. I wonder, have any of you ever had a similar feeling--a sense of running from something or Someone you cannot escape?

Once again, let me say as clearly as I can that the call of God is not always and not often a call to ordained ministry. Like the Marines God calls “a few good men” and women into ordained ministry, but most often God calls ordinary people to use the skills and talents that are theirs to do ordinary things in God’s work of “making and keeping human life human,” in the wonderful phrase of Paul Lehmann. Most often the call of God is not to full time church work. It is a call to use your best gifts in the work that needs to be done to build up the human community with the justice and compassion God intends.

Over the past weeks we have been considering various aspects of the “call of God.” Throughout this year in youth activities, in worship, and in Wednesday night

programs we will be focusing on issues of **Christian vocation**—seeing the work we do as a response to God’s claim on our lives and a way of serving God in daily life.

This morning we have read portions of the most delightful story of the call of God in all of scripture. The book of the prophet Jonah is best understood as short story or an extended parable. The story is filled with delightful humor and rich irony. Don’t read it literally and get hung up on whether a “great fish” of whatever kind could actually swallow a man and then spit him back up alive. That would be to miss the whole point of the story. Read the story of Jonah for its delightful witness to the wideness of God’s mercy and the persistence of God’s call to share in God’s work of blessing “all the families of the earth.” (Gen. 12:3)

Like all good stories, Jonah begins with the Hebrew equivalent of “Once upon a time.” **“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai...”** Jonah’s name literally means **“Dove, son of Truth or Faithfulness.”** We will soon see how ironic the name is.

Jonah receives one of the most unusual calls in the Bible. The Lord declares, **“Arise, go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”** Go to Nineveh, and call it to repent of its wickedness! But Nineveh was not just the Middle Eastern equivalent of Las Vegas. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria--the arch enemy of Israel. Assyria was legendary for its violence and cruelty. The prophet Nahum declares God's judgment on Nineveh in these words:

“Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and booty... Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts.... I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle. Then all who see you will shrink from you and say, 'Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?'” (Nahum 3:1-7)

Nineveh in scripture is a symbol of violence and brutality at its worst. Think of it as home base for Al Qaeda, a training ground for terrorists. Nineveh represents all that was most feared and despised by the people of God.

So it is not at all surprising that, when God calls Jonah to **“go at once to Nineveh, that great city”** he runs just as fast and as far away from the call as he can. Jonah goes down to the port city of Joppa and books passage on the first ship heading for Tarshish, for Spain. Tarshish was the “last stop on the line.” It was the end of the earth, as far from Nineveh as Timbuctu.

When we first meet Jonah, he is a man on the run **“away from the presence of the Lord.”** He has received a call from the Lord that he is determined NOT to obey! Why not? Does Jonah fear what might happen to him if he were to obey the word of the Lord and go to the bloody city of Nineveh? Perhaps. For a Jew to be told to go to Nineveh *then* would be like telling an Israeli *now* to go to Iran and tell them to stop their nuclear program, or telling Mary Beck to go to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan to tell them to repent of their racism. Jonah, Son of Faithfulness, is called to go to Nineveh to

declare God's word of judgment on them for their wickedness. But immediately he flies off like a dove in the opposite direction to get as far "away from the presence of the Lord" as he could.

It is only at the end of the story that we discover why Jonah is so intent on fleeing the call of God. It is *not* because he fears what might happen to **him** in Nineveh. It is because he fears what God might do **through him** for the repentance and salvation of Nineveh.

"This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Jonah would rather drown in his own prejudices than respond to God's call to proclaim God's redeeming love for even his enemies.

But, as Jonah discovers, the call of God is not easily resisted, and never without serious consequences. With marvelous narrative artistry the storyteller depicts Jonah going down to the seaport of Joppa, then down into the ship. There he lies down and falls asleep, and soon is thrown down into the depths of an angry sea and into the belly of a "great fish." Jonah's attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord leads him down, down, down. Seeking to flee from the relentless call of God is always in some sense "a downer."

Jonah's attempt to flee from the Lord of heaven and earth and his persistent call proves impossible. For **"the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up."** Jonah and the whole crew of the ship are caught up in a "perfect storm" that threatens to sink them to the bottom of the sea.

Where is Jonah in the "perfect storm" at sea? What is he doing as the crew prays fervently to their gods and as they throw the cargo overboard to lighten the load and appease their gods? Jonah has "gone down into the inner part of the ship" and is fast asleep. The pagan sailors row frantically to save their lives and his, while Jonah is snoring away below decks, seemingly oblivious to what is going on.

Is it too much to say, or too obvious to say, that seeking to flee from the call of God can result in a deep drowsiness of the soul, a narcolepsy of the spirit? The more we turn a deaf ear to the voice of God, the deafer we become and the less able we are to hear what God would speak to us. The more we refuse to see the storms raging around us, the blinder we become to the plight we are in.

Jonah may be able to shut his ears and his heart to the persistent call of God for a while, but God has other tricks up his sleeve to accomplish his purposes—through ways as terrifying as a storm at sea, and as strange as "a great fish" being appointed to swallow whole this defiant prophet. Jonah discovers that, try as he way, he cannot escape the insistent call of God.

In one of the greatest of the psalms of Israel the psalmist asks, **“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in Sheol (the realm of the dead), thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.”** We can attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord who lays claim on our lives, but we cannot escape. God has a way of *hounding* us into response.

I use that word “hounding” deliberately. One of our great convictions as Presbyterians is that God does not give up on those whom God has called and claimed to be his own. God continues to seek and to find us, in every hiding place of our rebellion.

It is interesting how often those who have discovered in their own lives the relentless power of God's love have described their experience by saying that they simply quit running and let God catch up with them.

Consider the case of Francis Thompson. Thompson was brought up in a deeply religious home in England. At one time studied for the priesthood, and then later studied to be a physician. But each time he failed through his own lack of self-discipline. Eventually he ended up homeless on the streets of London doing odd jobs to scrape up enough money for his next "fix." The only thing left in his life of any value was his love of poetry.

One day on an impulse he sent a couple of poems he had written to Wilfred Meynell, an editor and publisher in London. Meynell recognized in the poems a spark of genius. He and his wife began to work with Thompson--slowly, persistently, until he was able to stand on his own feet again.

Through them in time Francis Thompson came to know the relentless love of God, from whom he had fled for so long. Thompson's most famous poem is entitled, “The Hound of Heaven.” In it he tells of his flight from God.

"I fled him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled him, down the arches of the years;
 I felt him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
 I hid from him, and under running laughter.
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, precipitated
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
 But with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbed pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat--and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet--
 "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."...

Yet ever and anon a voice sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity.....

That Voice is round me like a bursting sea;...
“Rise, clasp My hand, and come.
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!”¹

The “Hound of Heaven”—the relentless call of God to make of our lives something good and fine and useful in the work God wants done through us. It is a call we can ignore for a while, perhaps a long while. It is a call from which we can seek to flee for a while, perhaps a long while. But it is not a call from which we can finally escape. God has a purpose for your life and mine, and even now, in ways we may not yet perceive, God is leading us toward the work God is calling us to do, to his glory and for “making and keeping human life human.” In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹ Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” in John Leith’s *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) pp 103-105.