

“Running From God”

The Old Testament records many different wonderful stories of the call of God in the lives of His people.

Our text today tells us of the story of God’s call in the life of Jonah to go and preach the gospel to the people of Nineveh.

The city of Nineveh is located in present day northern Iraq (imagine that) and in the day of Jonah it was the capital city of the old Assyrian empire. The Assyrian Empire eventually grew to be the greatest of all empires in the ancient near east, and she would soon overrun Jonah’s own people, the Israelites, the chosen people of God.

Assyria was known throughout the world to be a ruthless empire, and when she took over a people she would deport the population away from their homeland (exile them) and replace them with foreigners, so as to dilute their ethnic and religious cohesion. This is what Assyria eventually did to Israel.

It was to this great and wicked city that God called Jonah to go and preach too. If anybody has ever thought that it was only the New Testament that teaches us to love our enemies this little book of Jonah blows a hole in that idea. Jonah is the epitome of God’s call to love our enemies.

Jonah Runs from God

But what makes Jonah unique from all the other prophets is the way that he responds to the call of God in his life. His response is unlike that of anyone else I know of in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament gives us plenty of pictures of God’s people struggling with the call in their lives, but no else besides Jonah chose to run from the call of God.

When God called the prophet Jeremiah to preach His word, the Lord said,

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah lamented and said “Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.

When God called the prophet Isaiah to preach Isaiah declared, “Woe is me! For I am a man of clean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

When God called Moses to lead Israel out of the land of Egypt, Moses came up with all kinds of excuses as to why he was not right for the job. “The Pharaoh will not believe me.” “Lord, if my

people ask me what your name is, what shall I tell them?” “God, I cannot speak; I’m just a bumbling stutterer.”

But none of these men actually ran from God. They struggled with the call, they wrestled with it, and they tried to wiggle out of it, but none of them ran. Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah each succumbed to the call of God in their lives and obeyed, but not Jonah. Jonah ran from God’s call as far as the east is from the west.

At least we can respect Jonah for his honesty. He did not try to fake his response to God’s call, by going to Nineveh and pretending to do what God had called him to do. No, Jonah ran as far as he could from Nineveh, getting on a boat and going in the totally opposite direction from that great and wicked city.

Jonah Runs from God Because He Does Not Agree with God’s Mercy for all Sinners

The reason Jonah was running from God is because he did not agree with God about who should be in His Kingdom. Jonah apparently felt that God’s good news was only for the Jews; therefore he was not going to take God’s gospel to the Gentiles, especially a wicked people such as the Assyrians.

Somewhere along the line Jonah had forgotten that God’s promise of salvation made to the people of Abraham was for the sake of the whole world.

God called Abraham and told him that He would make a great nation from him for the purpose of blessing all the nations of the earth. This promise to bless was to include the Assyrians, provided they would repent. “I will bless those who bless you (*those who repent*) and I will curse those who curse you (*those who refuse to repent*).”

So what we see in the Bible, from its beginning to its end, is an inclusive God, in the best sense of the word. I’m hesitant to use that word “inclusive” because of the way it has been hijacked, misconstrued, and perverted in our culture, but when it is properly understood it is not a dirty word.

None-the-less, the God of the Bible is a God who is desirous of redeeming peoples from all the nations of the earth. It has always been that way. Going out into the world and preaching the gospel (The Great Commission) is not a new thing, it’s in the Old Testament as well. The world is the purpose for which God called Abraham. The world is the purpose for which God called Israel. The world *is* the purpose for which God called Jonah.

As for the reason why Jonah felt the way he did about the Assyrians we cannot know for sure, but we do get a clue in the last chapter of the book.

As we will soon find out in a couple of weeks, God gives Jonah a second chance and he eventually goes to Nineveh to preach the gospel. To Jonah's surprise the people repent. This makes him angry, so he prays to God, "O Lord is this not what I said while I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

In that prayer Jonah shows his hand. He knew all along that Yahweh, the God not only of Israel but also of all nations, was a gracious and compassionate God, and Jonah did not like that.

Jonah knew that if he ever went to Nineveh there was the possibility that the Assyrians might repent and he did not want that to happen. Why? Because Jonah wanted them to burn in hell. In his mind there were some people who were not worthy of God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness, even if they did repent of their sin. Jonah believed that some people did not deserve God's forgiveness; therefore Jonah made up his mind that he would not go to the undeserving. He wanted God to stick it to those wicked people, but God had other things in mind.

One of the great beauties of this story, and there are many, is this great compassion that God has for the Assyrians, a wicked and sinful people, God also has for Jonah the prophet.

Jonah did not want Nineveh to be saved. Jonah's purposes were not in tune with God's, yet God had mercy on him anyway.

In our text today the mercy of God that is extended to Jonah, a man whose heart is not right, is most explicitly received in a whale. While on a boat headed for Tarshish, fleeing from God's call in his life, a great storm emerges, and Jonah is found to be the culprit and is thrown overboard into the sea. Jonah deserved to drown for having such a hard heart, but God showed him mercy. He is saved by a whale. More on that next week.

Application of the Text for the Christian Life

There are some wonderful truths contained in this text that are applicable to our Christian lives.

First, we cannot escape God's presence in our lives.

Try as we may, there is no place we can run to to hide from God. The Assyrians were running from God because they were a wicked city. Sin is always running from God. We shall see in a couple of weeks that Assyria can run from God, but they cannot hide. God's gospel will eventually get to them. Jonah too is running from God, but neither can he duck from the responsibilities that God has called him to. He got on a ship to flee from God's presence, and he then asked to be thrown overboard in order to be drowned from God's calling in his life, yet Jonah is swallowed up by the whale. The psalmist was right.

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.

Are you running from God's call in your life? If so, God will find you out. The hounds of heaven are after you. When will you relent to the call?

Second, are we as merciful and open as God is to saving lost sinners?

Sometimes there are people that we do not like, and we want to see God stick it to them. This is not right. The book of Jonah is a wonderful foreshadowing and reminder of the truth that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and everyone is a sinner; therefore the church is for all who would repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. But sometimes we as a church act like Jonah. We do it in our personal lives and we do it corporately as a body.

Getting involved with sinners is a messy and complicated business, but that's what God does and that's what God calls us to do. Besides yourself what undeserving person is God calling you to be merciful and welcoming too?

Third, share the gospel.

For many reasons we mainline Presbyterians stink at evangelism, and what we shall soon find out is that unless we learn how to go to the world and the neighborhood with the gospel our churches will be closing their doors. This ought not to be our motivation for evangelism, our love for the gospel and our desire to see people's conversion to Jesus Christ ought to be our motivation, but none-the-less this is the reality we now find ourselves in our culture.

In the old days of doing church, having a nice building, good Sunday schools, good programs, good advertising, and good preaching was enough to reach people. That's called the "attractional model." Have all the right programs and the people will come. That no longer works in our increasingly secular culture. We will have to learn to go to the people.

We Presbyterians are a lot like Jonah. We don't want to go to Nineveh, we'd rather sit in our pews and wait for Nineveh to come to us, but that's not happening anymore. We are going to have to learn to go to the world, just like God called Jonah to do, just like Jesus did, just like his disciples did, and just like the early apostles did, to the people that God brings along our path and share the gospel with them. If we want to grow we will have to go, and we will have to learn to open our mouths.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders, make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Col. 4:5-6)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.