**Not the Leader You Expected**

**Jonah: Not What I Signed On For**

**Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-5**

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Can you think of a time you were asked to do a job you didn’t want to do but you couldn’t really turn it down? Like when your parents asked you to mow the lawn or do the dishes and you really didn’t want to do it but you knew you’d get in trouble if you refused? Or maybe when a teacher gave an assignment you thought was stupid and you thought maybe you just wouldn’t do it. Or maybe instead of your teacher it was your boss. Or the chair of the Nominating Committee who asked you to serve on a board or a committee and once you went to a meeting you were sorry you said yes….

I had that feeling all last week. You see, I was asked to serve on the worship committee at my home church, Calvary Baptist Church in Norristown. Of course, I am not there very often these days but they asked me anyway knowing that I would be returning to them in the future. Anyway, first I got a bulletin and was asked to proof read it. Hmm…I do that here; I thought that was the job of the administrator and the pastor. Then I was asked to decide something about the service for today, which I obviously wouldn’t be at, a decision I didn’t know the history of. And then the four people on the committee got into what seemed to be an endless email chain trying to figure out when everyone could meet, in spite of my early suggestion to do a simple doodle date finder poll. By the end of the week I was thinking that I really didn’t want to be on this committee at all; that it was all a mistake and that I must have heard God incorrectly when I thought I was being invited to use my gifts in this way.

Well, that was exactly what our friend Jonah thought when he received a call from God to go to Nineveh. Now plenty of folks in the biblical text *go* when God says, “go!” Abraham and Sarah picked up and headed to the unknown Promised Land with no hesitation. Aaron helped Moses as he was asked. Elijah stood defiant in the face of the prophets of Baal. And in the New Testament we see fishermen dropping nets all over the place to follow Jesus, tax collectors leaving their responsibilities, and Paul heading to the Mediterranean: all because God told them to.

And then there’s Jonah. It wasn’t that Jonah didn’t *want* to answer God’s call; he was plenty willing *to go*, just not to Nineveh! The problem was that Nineveh was in Assyria. You see the Israelites and the Assyrians weren’t on the best of terms. During the 8th and 7th centuries, the Assyrians plundered and burned Israelite cities and drove their people into exile. In the years 772-771BC the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist because of the Assyrians. Jonah would have been happy to go *anyplace* else; but he was **not** going to Assyria!

Now in some respects, who can blame him? It would be like asking an African-American to hang out with the Klu Klux Klan; or a Jew to befriend a Nazi; or Central American to embrace the oppressive governmental regime. Or what??? *What would it be for you?*

Jonah was a man of intense nationalism; a Zionist, if you will. He has also been called a man of “gentle prejudice”. He didn’t want to *do harm* to the Assyrians, he just didn’t want to set foot into their territory. And he certainly didn’t want to preach to them about God!

There is a lot of speculation about this wild and funny story! Scholars think it’s meant to represent something, someone else: like perhaps Jonah represents Israel, which had gotten off track at being “a light to the nations”. Maybe the story about Jonah is a story about them, about how they needed to be pushed and punished, exiled even in order for God to get their attention. In order for them to see where they had gone wrong, in order to repent and receive God’s wide mercy.

And maybe it’s a story about us. Maybe even about your next pastor. Maybe it’s a story about how we don’t always do what God asks of us, like welcoming our Muslim co-worker, or inviting our Spanish-speaking neighbor or saying, “yes” to that job in the church or community. Maybe it’s a story about how *we’d* rather tell God how it should be! “Not me, not Nineveh! Anyplace else, God!” Because when God’s call becomes a challenge to us, like this worship committee at my church that I am now on, it’s tempting to reverse course, to change direction! It’s easier to back out and say, “Sorry, God, you’ve got the wrong person” than it is to hang in there, to trust God and the process that will lead to God’s mercy.

But here’s the good news: God tries again! Jonah doesn’t have the last word; God does! In chapter three, verse one it says, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time….” A second time!* Another chance to do what God asks; to serve as God envisions! Jonah had survived the storm and the great fish but God was not giving up on him. God had a vision for what Jonah could do and so God invites him *again* to hear God’s word and answer. And verse three of that chapter tells us, “Jonah set out and went to Nineveh.”

We are thinking about how it is that God calls what seems to us to be the most unlikely leaders! What a kidder, that God! This guy Jonah is clearly not on the same page as God and yet God is patient and forgiving and stubborn even, calling Jonah again and again. Perhaps God has been doing that in your life, calling you to something even though you are making your very best effort to refuse and resist! If the persistence doesn’t go away you might want to take it seriously; the belly of a whale can’t be a good alternative!

Maybe the person God is calling to pastor this church has had a “Jonah” experience they can share with you; or maybe they are having one right now, and YOU are the Ninevehvites they are running from! (Imagine that!) The point is that *each* of us is likely to be Jonah at some point in our lives; each of us runs from God. But God is persistent. While what God is calling us to do may not be what we think we signed on for, we would do well to pay attention to God’s intention for our lives. Even Jonah knows that God’s way is the most kind and merciful in the end.

“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 says to God in chapter four. (Jonah 4:2b) Jonah knew this, and yet he ran the other way. But God was not so easily deterred. God stuck with Jonah; God kept him safe in spite of himself so that in the end Jonah would love and serve God.

And so maybe this *is* a story of Israel, of God’s inviting God’s people, over and over again, to regain their mission and purpose, to repent and return, to accept God’s unending mercy. And then maybe it’s our story too. For this congregation would do well to call a leader like Jonah, honest with God and with self, willing to struggle with God and with their own humanity, accepting God’s repentance with humility, with humor, and even if not with grace!

And we would do well to do the same. Is there something God is asking you to do, someone God has put in your path to befriend, someplace that God is inviting you to go but you are thinking about saying “no”, about closing the door, about buying a bus ticket for the other direction? Think about Jonah and think again. Although this story has some funny elements, in the end it’s serious; it’s about the need for repentance in order to know God’s mercy.

A trip to Nineveh was definitely *not* what Jonah signed on for but who are we to refuse God? Be open to God’s voice, listen closely and examine your own resistance, and then go boldly where God has called you to go, knowing that God is “merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”, love and mercy that is in store for you!