

Re-Turning to God
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January 24, 2021

Book of Jonah

Introduction

My thanks to Gene Raymond, who read our rhyming version of the Book of Jonah so delightfully!

In our story, Jonah sees trouble from the start. Jonah doesn't say why he ran, but it doesn't take a lot of imagination to see that (a) Nineveh was a tough assignment, and (b) he could be very badly received and lose his life.

God has asked him to do something that he clearly does *not* want to do, and he runs away, to Tarshish, to the place most clearly like Las Vegas. It's like getting a call to go to your enemies, and saying, "I'd rather go to Disneyland." Added on this is the fact that scholars believe this story was written generations after the prophet Jonah lived and after the destruction of the city of Nineveh in 612 BCE, a destruction foretold in one of the books of the minor prophets – Nahum.

Instead of going to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire and the biggest threat to Judean self-government, Jonah does what we don't see any other of the prophets do – he makes a break for it, fleeing from God's work. You gotta wonder, why *did* this story ever make it into our Bible?

What we have is a story with a message. This story has more to do with how we are faithful to God's work in the world, how we as God's followers might learn what God has in store for the world – the redemption of even our enemies. It's a story of learning how to miss and follow our marching orders, even when they threaten to turn our world upside down.

While this sounds unusual for one of God's prophets, I suspect it happens to a lot of us regular, everyday kind of folk. It has happened to me. I spent about 10 years ignoring a call from God to enter ministry. I kept running away

from it because I knew it would turn things upside down for my life, and that my family wouldn't understand, and a deep-down fear that I wouldn't be able to handle it. I even said something to friends that was really silly – that I didn't think I could be a pastor helping people through life crises because I hadn't had one to live through myself. This is where I would recommend to all of you that you should never say this kind of stuff to God, because God will call you on it, sooner or later.

I think the reason the Jonah story got in the Bible is that running away from God's call isn't all that unusual. I think we are constantly faced with Tarshish-like distractions that we hope will keep us safely away from the difficult business of following God, from having to come face to face with the enemies of life, or from sharing God's love for them all. Maybe we'll just get lost in grief over life's challenges, or stuck in places that appear to offer life, but really don't.

Friends, if the story of Jonah is any indication – don't count on it! God is extremely patient and persistent, just like a loving parent is. If one looks at the Biblical record of how many times God's people got it wrong, God was always there ready to give the instructions again.

Thank God. Thank God if we miss the call of God the first time, we don't need to worry that we'll never get another chance. Thank God our God is also a God of second chances, and third and fourth chances too. Thank God the Holy One won't give up on us. So if you think you've passed by on a dream that God sent you, I'm here to tell you that it's going to come back in some version sooner or later.

God's call is usually much bigger than we think.

Embedded in this story is also the nature of God's call to share the mercy we have received.

By the time we hear of Nineveh's repentance, we learn Jonah's real problem with the people of Nineveh. He isn't at all happy about their change (repentance). He's just plain angry. He hadn't wanted to go there in the first place because he was afraid they might listen to the spirit *and he didn't want*

them to change because he wanted the city to be destroyed. “See, God? *See?* That’s why I got on the boat to Tarshish in the first place,” he says to God, “because I know you’re merciful and you might actually save them from destruction. I did not want to be a part of that.”

Wait. What? Yes. Lousy prophet. The parable ends with God’s reprimand of Jonah.

Jonah’s problem is that he hates these people – never a good sign for someone claiming to follow God. He thinks: my people don’t like Ninevites or any Assyrians. We have long been enemies. They have a different religion. They are of a different race. They are not Hebrews. Since they are not *my* people, they cannot possibly be *God’s* people.

That is where we all go wrong. We’re all the *same* people. There is one human family, period. The people of Israel, the sailors on that ship with their various religions, the mean people of Nineveh, even the lousy prophet.

Just as Jonah was a lousy prophet, we today have become lousy theologians. Our civic public theology has gotten all messed up. Our leaders need to be inclusive of all our people; saying that a certain group is dirty, or not to be valued only divides us. We can’t buy into lies that people are so different from ourselves, because the truth is that we pretty much want the same things.

We, who come from other lands, whether distantly or in the last generation, need to remember this. We cannot forget my history and your history of the US where nearly all of our ancestors came from other places, and where most of the situations they came from were horrific because of oppression or lack of opportunity. Many, maybe most, of our immigrant ancestors were feared because they were deemed lazy, disease-ridden, dangerous. And yet, this country is better because of them and because of us.

It is still true that our country is better *because of* immigrants, including new ones who arrive from difficult places. Immigrants are almost always extremely patriotic Americans, because for them it was a choice to come here. As the Hamilton musical reminds us, “Immigrants – they get the job

done.”

God’s Call Changes for Us

The other thing about being a disciple is that it changes. It takes on different forms at different points in our lives. Today we are ordaining and installing our new officers – we are installing two elders, and installing and ordaining two other ones. I am thankful for their acceptance to new duties in the middle of a high-transition time. It might have been easier to say no in this upside-down time of pandemic and pastoral transition. But they have answered the call to lead during this time.

Maybe God is calling you to something gentler, something where you share your wisdom. All I know, is that if one call from God ends, another one is around the corner.

So, I do believe that God will be giving out many more second, third and fourth chances to folks we don’t think deserve them, no matter what advice we might give. The good news is that we will get them too, because we need them as well, if we are honest with ourselves.

God’s call comes in so many ways, and those of us who have recognized that we’ve missed a call are always grateful for its return, and our ability to return to God. Thanks, God!

In closing, I’d like to read this prayer by Thomas Carlyle, a Presbyterian pastor and poet:

...Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.
And God is still waiting
for a host of Jonahs
to come around
to his way of loving. Amen.