

2.13.22 Where Are You Going? Jonah 1.1-16, Psalm 139.1-12

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Theme verse, Jonah 1.3, But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

The Book of Jonah is one of my favorite books in the Bible. Its message of God's grace, second chances, and the wideness of God's mercy never gets old to me. We learn in 2 Kings 14:25 that Jonah Ben Amittai came from a place called Gath-hepher which is in Galilee according to the allotment of tribes in Joshua 19:13. In the line of prophets Jonah comes after Elijah and Elisha. He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. We're to think of the events of Jonah's experience happening at a time when Nineveh was the greatest city in the world. The ancient city of Nineveh is located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River on the outskirts of what is Mosul, Iraq.

Listen to Jonah 1:1-16

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 2 ***“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”*** 3 But Jonah set out **to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD**. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, **away from the presence of the LORD**. 4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone **down** into the hold of the ship and had **lain down**, and was fast asleep. 6 The captain came and said to him, *“What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”*

7 The sailors said to one another, *“Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.”* So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, *“Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people*

are you?" 9 *"I am a Hebrew,"* he replied. *"I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* 10 Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, *"What is this that you have done!"* For the men knew that he was **fleeing from the presence of the LORD**, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, *"What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?"* For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, *"Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you."* 13 **Nevertheless** the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. 14 Then they cried out to the LORD, *"Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you."* 15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows."

The story begins when the wickedness of the people of Nineveh comes up before God. God often confronts evil and injustice through individuals so the Lord calls Jonah to go preach to Nineveh about their need to turn their lives around and to turn to God. Jonah, however, is upset with God's command to go to preach to a people he dislikes because of their violence and their mistreatment of his nation. In Jonah's mind, the Ninevites deserve to be punished and should get what's coming to them, rather than receiving a second chance to turn their lives around.

Jonah's name means *"dove."* Doves are sometimes sent as messengers, particularly messengers of peace. Jonah is the son of Amittai, which means faithfulness or truth. So, in the eyes of his people and his God, Jonah is *"a dove of faithfulness."* He proves to be anything but; in fact, he flies the coop in the opposite direction. Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. When the answer he got from God was not the answer he wanted to hear, he decided there was nothing more to be gained from further debate and he took off and ran away. **At one point or another, you may have done something similar in your life.** You may have sensed God calling you to do something you found difficult or disagreeable and said, *"No,"* and fled. This is, of course, a clear violation of a believer's or a prophet's obligation. The obligation of a prophet is

unquestioning obedience and service. Jeremiah 1:4-10 is the classic example. It says basically, *"You go wherever I tell you, and say whatever I command you."* That's all a prophet has to do, but he or she has to do it. Usually when a prophet is told, *"Arise and go to X,"* the story continues, *"And so the prophet arose and went to X."* But not Jonah. Told to go northeast to Nineveh, he heads west to Tarshish, located probably in Spain, the end of the earth as far as they knew. Jonah pays the fare and gets on board because sin that can pay its way can travel freely. What will happen to a prophet who so blatantly disobeys God? What will happen to wicked Nineveh?

Noah sailed through a storm brought about by the disobedience of others, Jonah sails into a storm brought about by his own disobedience. Some of the toughest storms we encounter in life can be generated by disobeying what God wants us to do or by failing to live as God teaches. They are storms brought about by our own disobedience. The Lord is not about to let Jonah off the hook. You know what happened next. *"The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed. If not for the courage of the fearless crew..."* The sailors were not Israelites and would be considered outsiders, pagans, by those who first heard this story. Each man cried to his god. In a crisis, some people get spiritual and religious in a hurry. All of the sailors are trying whatever prayers, magic, superstition, and rituals they know. When prayer doesn't work, they act, throwing the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Where is our hero Jonah in the midst of all this tumult? Helping the crew? Praying for their deliverance? Reassuring the Captain?

Jonah is down in his small, dark confining berth, below the waterline, with the big beams arching around the side of the room like a big set of ribs, sound asleep! Jonah has gone down to Joppa, down into the hold, and lain down and was fast asleep. The Captain, not leaving anything to chance, rouses him, *"What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."* Calling on his God is the last thing Jonah wants to do. The Captain doesn't realize God is giving them significant thought and attention, which is why this storm, spawned by Jonah's disobedience is raging all around them. As far as the crew can tell, all the circuits to the gods are busy or no one's home because the storm is only getting worse, so they change tactics and instead of trying to get the gods to bail them out they

start looking for someone to blame. Whose fault is it? Who is responsible for causing this storm?

Human behavior has changed very little through the centuries. If we can't find an answer or someone responsible or if we need to deflect blame away from our own behavior, we'll find a scapegoat. To determine who was at fault the sailors used the most logical, scientific, and reliable method they knew – they cast lots which is similar to rolling dice. They rolled the dice and Jonah came up snake eyes. So, they questioned Jonah, *“Who are you? Where are you from? What did you do?”* Jonah replies, *“I am a Hebrew and I worship the God who made the sea and the dry land.”* Whatever the sailors may think, Jonah knows he's busted. Jonah knows God has caught up with him. **Psalm 139:7-10** tells us that we can't escape God, it doesn't matter how far we try to flee. *“If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”*

Jonah undoubtedly knew that he couldn't really escape from God. Jonah knew that, but maybe he hoped that if he could just slip away for a while, God might give the assignment to someone else, or by the time God ultimately found Jonah, perhaps God's instructions would be altered or revised so they wouldn't be as offensive to him. With the casting of lots Jonah knows God sees him and from then on, he becomes a bit more cooperative.

The sailors are scared because Jonah is trying to sail away from God. The sea is getting worse and worse. The ship may break up at any moment. What can they do? Jonah says, *“Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”* These are brave words. Jonah realizes his disobedience has put innocent lives at risk. **Jonah finally accepts responsibility.** Is there anyone in your life you need to speak to in a similar way? Perhaps there are people in your life you need to go to and confess, *“I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”* You can accept responsibility and ask for forgiveness.

Imagine you're on the deck of that small ship, you're seasick, scared to pieces, waves are breaking over the bow; you figure you're a goner. Then a passenger chimes

in, *“You know I’m sailing away from God and it’s my fault you’re all going to die, but if you just toss me overboard, the storm will cease, and you’ll all be saved.”* How would you respond? I’d say, *“Thank you for sailing Royal Mediterranean Cruises, please don’t come again!”* SPLASH! Give these sailors credit. Don’t miss their courage, selflessness, and concern for Jonah. They had every right and even Jonah’s permission to toss him overboard and save themselves; but they don’t. *“Nevertheless the men rowed hard to being the ship back to land, but they could not”* (verse 13). They did everything they could even risking their own lives to save Jonah. **The courage, compassion, and openness to God of the sailors remind us why it’s so important to regard with humility and respect those who don’t share our faith or our views.** The sailors demonstrate more faith and humanity than Jonah. As the storm’s fury increased, they realized there was nothing else they could do. They pray to God not to hold them responsible because this was the Lord’s doing and not theirs, and they pick up Jonah, throw him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. The irony is that Jonah’s disobedience and his refusal to go to Nineveh, leads to the transformation of the sailors: *“Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows”* (v. 16). The awed sailors promise to serve the God of Israel. This is the opening act of the wonderful book of Jonah that teaches us several things about sailing life’s turbulent seas.

First, there is no escape from God. Jonah thinks a ship made with human hands will carry him to a place where God is not present. Sailing away from God is impossible. There is nowhere you can flee from the presence of the Lord. It doesn’t matter if you are living a life that is not pleasing to God as were the Ninevites, or if one is a self-righteous, puffed-up prophet of Yahweh like Jonah –God sees you and knows you. While it may be a bit unnerving to contemplate, there’s also comfort in knowing no matter how bleak life appears, God is still with us. A farmer and his wife had been married for 30 years and one day they were driving off the farm to go to town and his wife, who spoke more than her husband, said, *“What happened to the spark in our relationship? When we were first married, we used to sit right next to each other and we were so close. It seems like we never do that anymore.”* Her husband turned and looked at her from behind the steering wheel and said, *“I haven’t moved.”*

When you feel like God seems distant, check to see who has moved. When a relationship between spouses, a parent and child, two friends, or an individual and God lacks closeness or intimacy, the solution lies in moving back toward each other, not in looking elsewhere for satisfaction. Your feelings follow your thoughts and actions. When you lack the assurance of God's presence the **first thing to do is to check if you have neglected your relationship with God and so are out of touch. The second thing to check is – have I tried to escape and sail away from my responsibilities as a believer.** The Ninevites were guilty of neglecting their relationship with God. Jonah was guilty of trying to duck his responsibility as a servant of God. Jonah headed for the end of the earth to try and escape from God, and it didn't work. It won't work for you either. There is no escape from God.

The second lesson to be learned is that God's will is to be obeyed. A hard part of obeying God is that it often means disobeying ourselves – our feelings, our desires, what we want. Jonah shows us what happens when you bump up against the will of God and you try to go your own way. Jonah doesn't like what God is going to do. Jonah doesn't want the Lord to extend grace and the opportunity of a second chance and forgiveness to foreigners he doesn't like. The Ninevites were citizens of Assyria the nation that conquered Israel. Can you imagine going as God's messenger to people you consider your enemies with the message that God loves them and wishes to be in relationship with them? Do you have people you consider your enemy? People of a certain race or political party or nation, or religion? Could you bring them the message Jonah was asked to bring that they need to repent, believe, and change to have a chance at new life? Yet as God's messenger, Jonah must obey God's will if he hopes to convince others to do so. Jonah ends up being guilty of the same thing as the people of Nineveh – resisting God's will. Jonah doesn't want to be a part of God's plan, so he argues with God and then runs away like a spoiled child who is angry over not getting his way. How often do people respond to God in a similar manner, insisting on getting our own way? God didn't consult with us for our opinion or input in creating the universe and as much as God enjoys conversing with God's people, when God tells us to do something, the Lord expects to be obeyed.

Perhaps the best part of the first chapter of Jonah is the fact that God uses even human disobedience to accomplish God's purposes. Of all the characters in Jonah chapter one, the one who demonstrates the least amount of faith is Jonah, the one who is supposed to deliver a message from the Lord. In giving human beings free will, God gave us the ability to choose to follow God's will or to reject it. Yet God can use even our disobedience and human sin to move things where God wants them to go. Although Jonah refused God's call to go to Nineveh, his sailing away results in the conversion of sailors who did not know or worship *"the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land"* (v. 9). Jonah becomes a missionary for God in spite of himself. Even in our lives, if God can work through our disobedience and sin, how much more can God work through obedience and faithfulness.

There is no escaping from God.

God's will is to be obeyed.

God uses even disobedience and opposition to further God's purpose.

Let's pray: God of heaven and earth, help me to regard with humility and appreciation those who are different than I am and who don't share my beliefs. Like the sailors on Jonah's vessel, they may be courageous, compassionate, and open to Your Spirit. Teach me to seek your presence and not to flee from you. Whether in times of disobedience or depression, of sin or storm, may I always listen to and look for you. Though there are times when you are mysterious and unpredictable, I thank you that you never leave me, but you continue to pursue me. Regardless of my fear or hesitation, help me to listen for your Word and to respond in obedience, even if what you ask me to do seems difficult. Holy God, like Jonah, may I learn to accept responsibility when I have done wrong. May I always be ready to confess my faults to others and to admit, *"I know it is because of me that this storm has come upon you."* Help me Lord if there is anyone I need to say that to today.

When the storms of life are raging and threaten to overwhelm me or break me, when I've rowed all I can and the storm only grows fiercer, teach me to turn to you in prayer, trusting your wisdom and love. Remind me of who I am and whose I am and who I worship that my life may be of service to others in your name.

Finally, God I pray for Jonah sinking as a result of his disobedience, may Jonah find his way to repentance, to turning back to you, the God of second chances, we entrust all Jonah's to your mysterious care.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why did Jonah try to run away from God?
2. Have you ever tried to run away from God? How did that go for you?
3. How did Jonah's disobedience endanger innocent people? How did the sailors who didn't know God, act in a godlier way than Jonah?
4. Have you ever acted less godly than people who are not followers of Christ? What was going on?
5. Have you seen people who claim to be Christians acting less godly than folks who claim no faith at all? How does this damage God's reputation and the Christian faith?
6. How did God show grace to Jonah regardless of his disobedience? How has God shown grace to you?
7. What can you do to have more confidence that you're moving toward the presence of the Lord and the Lord's will for your life, rather than away from the Lord and God's will for you?