

“Really?!?!”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

I love Jonah. If there ever was a character from the Bible who reflected human frustration with God, Jonah is it. Right from the beginning, he has no idea why God would want him to go to a place like Ninevah, to “cry out against it” for the wickedness it has committed against God. So, he reacts the way most of us would in a situation we don’t understand: he ignores God’s Word and runs the other way.

Listen to how William Carl describes Jonah: *Jonah is my kind of missionary. Reluctant, withdrawn, stubborn. Never quite ready to go to Nineveh. All over the Bible, people are getting up and going. Abraham and Sarah move out on a promise and a prayer. Moses heads for Egypt with nothing but a shepherd’s crook and Aaron to write his sermons. Elijah stands defiant, facing four hundred and fifty Baal prophets. But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with tickets for Tarshish.*

All over the New Testament people are getting up and following Jesus. Fishermen are dropping their nets, tax collectors are forgetting about credit and debit, and others are leaving their parents behind. A little man called Paul travels the Mediterranean spreading the Word. But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with tickets for Tarshish (Dr. William Carl, “Tickets for Tarshish,” November 9, 2008, http://day1.org/1118-tickets_for_tarshish).

Of course, we all know that Jonah departed from that dock on a boat, and once at sea the Lord sent a great storm to disrupt the boat. When Jonah was sent overboard by the sailors, God sent a big fish to save him, and in the belly of the whale Jonah spent three days and nights. And then, in such typical human fashion, Jonah prays to God in hopes of getting a second-chance: “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice . . . I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay!” (2:1,9) It’s almost as if you can hear Jonah’s thoughts: “Now can I get out of this fish? Please?!”

Well, his prayer does the trick, and God has the fish spit him out on the shore. What’s fascinating is that God hasn’t forgotten the original reason he needed Jonah: to preach God’s Word to the superpower called Ninevah.

Consider what Jonah has already experienced: fear, flight, judgment, salvation, forgiveness, redemption. He’s tried to run, but couldn’t flee the Almighty. He’s been given-up for dead, only to be saved by the One he originally couldn’t flee. He’s been shown forgiveness and redemption after God could have given up on him. That’s pretty powerful stuff, and you’d think that would impact how he goes about the next steps in his calling from God.

In fact, Jonah doesn't run away this time. He sets out for the city, and once he reaches the gates of the city, he starts telling the residents what God wants them to hear: "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" Jonah does what he is supposed to do, and then exits the city to wait and see the city get its just recompense.

As Carl writes: *Jonah is one who sees Israel as the chosen people and the Gentiles can go to hell for all he cares. How unlike Peter, a Jew's Jew, who, after conversion, is on his way to Cornelius' house. Jonah would never do that. But let's not be too hard on Jonah, for here we can see the complexity of human nature. We all have our enemies. What is it for you? For Jonah, it's Ninevites. Even Jesus had enemies. Certainly he said love your enemies, but I think William Sloane Coffin is right when he says, "Love them as enemies. Let's not be sentimental about this thing" (ibid).* Jonah follows through on God's command, but he definitely knows what should happen to the Ninevites, and forgiveness is not included.

"And the people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. (The King said,) Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (3:5,9). God showed mercy and compassion on Ninevah, based on how they responded to Jonah's proclamation: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (3:10).

Now, this is why I love Jonah. It's not in the text, but I can hear him saying, "Really?!?! Are you kidding me, God?" He doesn't buy it. He doesn't see how this can be possible. *Jonah is the quintessential human being, the classic model of the human species, for there is an ineradicable flaw in his character, one that he cannot erase on his own. It is his desire to control his own destiny and to determine who should and should not be punished. So off goes Jonah, half-heartedly, half-hoping that no one in Nineveh will listen and God will level the city with his mighty wrath. But, instead, the whole town comes forward singing, "Just as I am, without one plea," and Jonah doesn't know what to do with them all. Jonah wants God to blow the whole place sky high. "Punish them, Lord. I am the righteous one; they are the sinners." Jonah never could understand about God's great forgiveness. He never quite understood that there is a wideness to God's mercy (ibid).*

I love the story of Jonah, not only for the emotions he expresses, but also for the lesson God teaches through him. Too many times, we view our relationship with God as an adversarial one, especially when things don't go our way. We believe God is distant when he doesn't do what we expect, and we keep trying to take more and more control of our lives.

And yet, just like Jonah, those are the times we fail to recall the grace God has shown us, when we have been given a second-chance. We have forgotten that it is not God who has become distant, but us who has distanced ourselves from our Creator. It is at those times that our anger has

clouded our perspective, and instead of working through our anger, we allow our anger to control us. Ultimately, the story of Jonah reminds us of the correct order of life: God, then us; not us, then God.

It is amazing how a scripture I chose to preach on two months ago can speak directly to me today. On Tuesday, I was humbled by how many of you came to hear me share about the possibility of taking a time of sabbatical next year through a grant from the Lilly Endowment. I was rather blunt in revealing how I feel exhausted, both emotionally and spiritually, and how an extended time of intentional renewal and rest would benefit both me and the church. I know this revelation surprised many of you, and I can tell you, the depth at which I shared it surprised me, as well. You may have left Tuesday night wondering whether after four months of sabbatical, I would still want to be your pastor.

I want to say something as clearly as I can say it: I love you. I loved you when I came nine years ago as your installed pastor. I have loved you throughout all the amazing things God has done through us since then. And I love you today, with all your energy and faith, your strengths and weaknesses. My prayer is that you continue to love me despite all of my imperfections and flaws, for I have grown in immeasurable ways through the care, compassion, laughter, and passion you have shared with me and my family these several years.

Something which can happen when we love someone is we can slip into a pattern of wanting to please the other, much like a child can do with a parent. We seek their approval or affirmation, and do more and more to illicit those words of affirmation. And when we become involved in more and more activities, our focus can narrow to getting the tasks done, rather than seeing the wider vision balancing responsibility throughout the group. My love of all God has done and is doing through you led me into this trap, and I believe we both forgot to see the bigger picture. I know, like Jonah, I had been running away from this reality. I stopped running Tuesday, and realized I needed to honestly share what I was feeling, and ask us to seriously consider this God-given opportunity.

We have done so much in such a short amount of time: new staff, increased programming, two capital campaigns, tearing down and then rebuilding our sanctuary, tremendous expansion in our outreach and mission, especially in Hispanic ministries. We need Sabbath – as a congregation, as individuals, as a pastor. We need to relearn what Sabbath means, and how it is an essential part of Christian discipleship. We need to find what gives us Sabbath rest and renewal in the short-term, and how that stillness allows us to hear more clearly God's call. An intentional time of Sabbath, like this proposed time of renewal, would allow us to breath, help us listen to what makes our hearts sing, and return our focus to God, not us. I know that is what I am yearning and thirsting for. Are you?

If you will have me, I wish to serve alongside you in ministry for many years to come. For that to happen in a healthy way, I believe we both need a

time of space and reflection, so we can renew our shared calling in this place. I will be revising what I had originally proposed to do to reflect this centering on Sabbath – to be more at rest, to learn from other ministers who have faced this same kind of challenge, and to renew my love of this calling I have felt since I was a young man in high school. My prayer is that this will be a chance for you to consider not just what you receive from being at John Knox, but also what you can give to strengthen this church. My hope is that we would all reevaluate our lives through the lens of Sabbath, so we might not run away from the challenges of faith, but embrace them through lives squarely centered on God.

Here's why I really love the story of Jonah, and why it speaks to directly to me today. Despite his constant running away, his refusal to initially follow God's Word, his preemptive judgment of the Ninevites, his anger at God for showing forgiveness – despite all of those things, God is persistent and always there. God is there, and never abandons Jonah. Despite all the stress and strain, the anxiety and uncertainty, the peaks and valleys I and you and we experience – despite all those things, God is persistent and always there. God is there, and never abandons us.

Really?! Absolutely. I have heard that in ways this week I had not heard in a long, long time – through prayer, through deep conversations, through memories of the past and visions of the future. Friends, may our doubt be met with hope, may our questions be met with faith, and may our hesitation be met with passion and expectant joy, as we worship, trust, and follow the God of Jonah.

Thanks be to God. Amen.