

Second Sunday after Pentecost
May 29, 2016

Pastor Lew Upchurch
Jonah 1:1-6

"Running Away"

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (1:1-2).

The stage was set. The Lord called Jonah to be His prophet, just as he called Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah, and Malachi, among others. Jonah now had a mission and he had a message. But Jonah's career as a prophet was different from all of the rest. For starters, he was the first prophet God called to go to a distant pagan capital. But this was not just any capital; it was the capital of Assyria, which happened to be Israel's worst enemy. He was also the first prophet to flat out run away after the Lord called him. He didn't want to go to Nineveh. In fact, throughout the four short chapters that make up the book of Jonah, there are a lot of things he didn't want for himself, for other people, and for God.

The story as a whole is actually kind of strange. It's full of chaos, fear, angry prayers, and blame. At times, the whole thing seems weird and hard to process--so much so that at the end of the book, one might draw the conclusion that Jonah was the worst prophet ever.

But was he really that bad or was he actually more like you and me than we might realize? These are the questions we are going to try and answer over the next few weeks as we make our way through the book, so here we go.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and call them out for their evil but Jonah refused. He heard what the Lord told him to do and then he decided to simply ignore it. Now, this was unusual behavior for a prophet. What was the problem? Did the Lord mumble his words or misspeak? Did Jonah not understand the mission? No, he heard the Lord loud and clear and understood what he wanted him to do. The problem was with the place Jonah was called to go. Jonah was probably like *"no way Lord am I going to that good-for nothing Nineveh. They are the most awful people on the planet! I hate them and they hate us. Besides, if by some miracle they actually listen what you are telling me to say to them and repent, you will spare them Lord...and that is so unfair! We are your chosen people. Why are you doing this to me? I can't take it--I'm out of here."*

So whether out of self-righteousness, fear, misguided faith, or just plain defiance, Jonah found a ship going to the farthest known city of the ancient world at that time called Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction of Nineveh, and bought a one-way ticket. Jonah was running away from God.

Now this might seem surprising but how many times do we know exactly what God wants us to do, and then head in the opposite direction? I'm not talking about God speaking to us directly like he did to Jonah, but God speaking to us in his Word. What he wants from us is pretty clear. If you don't believe me, open a bible and read from Exodus chapter 20, where you'll find 10 commandments- not 10 suggestions. "You shall have no other gods; Remember the Sabbath day; Honor you father and mother; Don't murder; Don't steal; Don't lie; Don't covet," to name a few. And then skip over to Mark Chapter 12 and read these words of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself" (vs.30-31). These and the many more commandments are God's will for our lives. We know this but we still run away from what he is telling us to do, don't we?

We run away by breaking his rules in favor of we want or what society deems as right and acceptable. We rebel and go our own way based purely on our emotion and our feelings with no regard to God's objective Word. We run away by convincing ourselves that God doesn't really get mad at us anymore, or care what we do as long as we are happy. We run away by giving up on worship, giving up on prayer, giving up on giving our money, or helping those in need. Jonah ran away from God, that's for sure, and so do we. But as much as we run from him or as much as we try to hide from what he demands of us, God is always present.

He makes this very clear in his Word. "Can anyone hide in secret places that I cannot see him. Do I not fill heaven and earth," he says to another one of his prophets, Jeremiah (23:24). You see, here's the thing- God is always present. He knows and sees everything! He see our hurts and disappointments. He sees our successes and our victories. And yes, he's see our sinful acts- all of them. He certainly saw Jonah's as he was running away.

But instead of allowing him to succeed in his attempt at spiritual suicide, God intervened. He sent a great wind upon the sea-- so great that the ship threatened to break up. It was a chaotic scene on the upper deck with the mariners in a panic, calling out to their pagan gods and hurling the cargo into the sea to lighten the load. And where was Jonah during all of this? He was down below sleeping, doing his best not to be noticed.

That's what we do when we know that we have sinned. We try and escape to a place where we can hide from God and sleep it off. But God doesn't allow that. He sees what's going on and he intervenes. He pursues us and wakes us up. That's what he did with Jonah. It was the storm and the state of the ship that woke Jonah up to an awareness of his sin. But this was not the God of anger at work. This was the God of mercy using that storm to liberate Jonah from his confusion and defiance. Jonah, at this point, knew what he had done. And this should serve as a great reminder for all of us, because the truth is we all need "a storm," at times, to realize how far from God we have run.

This is so important in our Christian lives because even though we run away from God, he continues to pursue us and sometimes this pursuit includes waking us up by convicting us of our guilt. And as tough as this might sound, sometimes guilt is just what we need in order to get back on track because guilt is the awareness that we've done something wrong. But God doesn't stop here. Through his Spirit, he stirs us to repentance and then turns us towards the cross.

As Paul writes, "now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). We have been brought near by Christ's blood that was shed for all of our sins, including all of those times we have run away from God in sheer defiance. We must take this to heart. God could easily shut us out when we run away but he doesn't. He calls us back. Sometimes it's pretty and sometimes it not, like in the case of Jonah, but he doesn't leave us even though we deserve it.

So praise be to God for including this weird, wacky, but oh so real account of Jonah the prophet in his Scriptures, because through his life, we are able to see so much of our own lives. Stayed tuned for next week because the plot thickens.

Until then, I encourage you to talk to God about those places in your life where you know you are running away from Him. Maybe like Jonah, you are asleep in the boat and need to be awakened. Talk to him about this and don't hold anything back. Ask him to rescue you. Ask him to get you back on track and be assured that he will hear you and restore to you to the joy of your salvation. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

