

Pastor T.C. Arnold
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Jonah 1:1-17
February 2nd, 2014

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Fear is a powerful emotion. The mere thought of something scary can be absolutely terrorizing. Fear causes us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. It might cause us to act in funny ways or do things we might later regret. It might cause us to do nothing when something needs to be done – or even the opposite. Fear can strike at anytime. It might make us go absolutely crazy and scream at the top of our lungs. Or, it might petrify us to the point we can't move a muscle.

With fear in mind, here are three big questions: Was Jonah afraid of God? Is that why he fled from the presence God? Was he afraid of going to Nineveh? Well, not actually afraid in the way you might think. He wasn't afraid of Nineveh. Actually, let me put it this way. I'm not sure if he was afraid of Nineveh or not. We really can't tell from the Scriptures. But I can tell you this. He didn't flee from the presence of the Lord because he was afraid to go to Nineveh. How do I know this? I know this because Jonah tells us the reason in the last chapter of this Old Testament book. Jonah was angry over the "potential" repentance of Nineveh. He said, "*O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*"

Does this sound strange to you? It wasn't fear that caused Jonah to flee from the presence of the Lord. It was a conceited self-centeredness that didn't want other people, wicked people, Gentiles, to also become the Children of God. Jonah didn't want to share God. Jonah wanted to keep God to himself. The only thing that Jonah feared was that Nineveh would repent, find favor with God and then overpower Jonah's people. Jonah figured as long as the Jewish people were God's people they were protected. If they no longer are God's "only" chosen people, they might find favor with God and overpower his own people, the Jews. Jonah didn't want to see his people destroyed. He didn't want anyone else to find favor with God. It was the fact that Nineveh might repent and find favor with God that scared Jonah the most. So, he didn't want to be a part of it and he fled.

You know, what I just explained, for the reason why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, might have been the very first time you have ever heard that before. I know you have heard this story before. Jonah gets swallowed by the big fish. He stays there for three days. Jonah prays to the Lord. Then the fish spits him out and God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh again and this time Jonah listens. It's one of those stories we have heard since childhood. It's a great Bible story. But the question of why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh has usually been answered by saying – he was too scared. In all reality, he was more scared for his people than for himself. He might have been angrier at God for wanting to save those terrible people than he was scared. Anger – that's another powerful human emotion.

So Jonah fled. He got out of the land of Israel. He figured the best way to get away from God is to leave the place where God shows up – the temple. Therefore, he left town. But there is just one other thing: There is no such thing as hiding from God.

Putting this situation into perspective really does put Jonah in a bad light. Before we might have thought he was just scared to go to Nineveh. That's something we can all relate to. Now, we see how Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because he was selfish in the hopes that those evil people would remain outside of God's favor and not repent. Now Jonah doesn't sound so much like a hero. Now he

sounds like a conceited egotistical man who didn't want to share the blessings of God to Gentiles. We might have thought "I could always understand Jonah – being scared to share God's Word. Now it just sounds like he didn't want to go because he didn't want to share God's forgiveness with other and risk his own hide in the process."

Well yes, it all does sound like this when we put it all into this kind of perspective. But I want you to know this... While we can relate to Jonah if indeed he was truly scared to share God's Word to the people of Nineveh, we can also relate to him in terms of his angry selfishness as well. We've all been scared and we have all been angry. We have all have been selfish from time to time.

Have you ever reveled in the failure of others (even quietly to yourselves) because it makes you look good or feel better about yourself? What about withholding an important piece of information from someone so that it would give you the upper hand at work or school? What about making sure your backside is covered so that you don't get into trouble – nobody involves you – when you know that if you took the chance and did put your neck out other people might be able to share in the same good fortune or would be better off for it? This is what we do. We keep it to ourselves and don't put ourselves on the line even though others might benefit if we take the chance. This is exactly what Jonah did.

Now, I'm not saying that we need to take chances and put ourselves in dangerous positions all the time. What I am saying is this. Sometimes our self-centeredness will keep us from helping others share in the same blessings because we want to keep them all for ourselves. That was Jonah. That is sometimes us. Jonah fled from God because he didn't want to be a part of helping Gentiles repent. I tell you – flee from such ideas and actions. Be there for your neighbor. Help and support him. Encourage him. Allow him to share in the same blessings you have – Share what you have. Give what you have to give. Don't keep it to yourselves. Whether that be God's Word, information at work or school, or some other simple way you can support your neighbor. Don't live in a self-absorbed, self-centered world.

Our Savior Jesus is the perfect example of all this. Instead of living a self-centered life in heaven or on earth – Jesus did the unthinkable. He put everything on the line for you. Here is a man who knew all the secrets. Here is a man who knew the meaning and the purpose of life. Here's a man no one could touch if He didn't want them to. And He put it all aside for you. He put it all on the line for you. He shared the secret – faith in Christ is the stuff real life is made of. He allowed Himself to be touched – to be beaten, nailed to a tree and die. He did all of this because you were put first and He made Himself last. He put you first no matter if you are a Gentile or a Jew – whether you think you deserve it or not. God went to the cross for you – and put Himself last – so that you could be first in the Kingdom of heaven. The jewel of the Kingdom comes through the package of the forgiveness of sins won for you by Christ. That's for you. His unselfishness means your righteousness.

Jonah wasn't left with this attitude. After a time in the belly of the fish he returned to the Lord's ways and realized that it would be better to go to Nineveh because God had a plan in mind even for that wicked city. God's will is for all to repent and be saved. Let this be our time right now in the belly of the fish. Realize with these words coming to you that it is better to give than to receive – that it is better to share the life rather than keep it to ourselves – that it is better to help than to keep quiet and hope that it makes us look better in the long run. There's more. Today we see the cross and what Jesus would have us to go – go to Nineveh and proclaim His salvation. It's your salvation too. It's your comfort in times of trouble. It's your healing. And it belongs to the Word. That's our God – never leaving anyone out and never leaving you out. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.