“Running from God”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Jonah 4:1-11
June 29, 2014
This summer, we’re preaching on the Minor Prophets; perhaps the least known portion of Scripture. Thus far, we have examined the prophets Hosea, Joel, Amos and Obadiah—not exactly household names.

The only exception to these obscure Minor Prophets is Jonah. Everybody knows something about the man who was swallowed by the whale. Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of a whale.

Some of you will recognize the tune that just played as part of the Veggie Tales movie on Jonah, which is sung by the Newsboys. Work in Progress will sing the entire song at the close of worship this morning.

How it is possible for a man to spend three days and nights in the belly of a whale and live to tell about it? Some are convinced it must be some sort of allegory, along the lines of a fish story fishermen like to tell to exaggerate their catch.

Yet, Jesus makes pointed reference to this story. “Just as Jonah is three days and nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and nights the Son of Man will be in the belly of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Jesus calls this creature a “sea monster.” Perhaps God orders up such a creature to swallow Jonah whole.

You know something about the whale, but not so much about the portion of the Jonah story David read earlier. Let me offer an overview.

The book opens with God calling Jonah to preach judgment to people living in Nineveh. This city is situated north of Joppa, where Jonah resides. Nineveh serves as the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians are Israel’s nemesis. These Ninevites have a well-earned reputation for being brutal and warlike. They capture Northern Israel in the 7th century BC and force the rest of the country to pay tribute.

Jonah isn’t the slightest bit interested in this preaching mission to his enemies, so he books passage on a ship bound for Tarshish. As you can see by the map, Tarshish is situated at the other end of the civilized world. It’s one of those places where God has not yet revealed himself. Jonah is
thinking that he will go where God is not. What is Jonah thinking? How is it possible to run from God?

Jonah’s voyage to Shangri-La is interrupted by a violent storm that God orders up for just the occasion. The pagan sailors become suspicious that God is angry with someone on board, so they cast lots which falls to Jonah, who is sleeping below deck. Jonah comes clean by confessing that he is on the run from God. He proposes they throw him overboard. These pagan sailors prove more humane than Jonah and attempt to ride out the storm, but the waves are too fierce. So, the sailors offer a prayer to Jonah’s God and throw him into the churning sea.

Chapter 2 opens with Jonah being swallowed by this great fish. Jonah prays for deliverance—no surprise here. His prayers are answered when he is regurgitated onto dry land. God’s call comes a second time to Jonah to preach judgment to the Ninevites. This time he is all about it.

The king of Nineveh and his subjects don sackcloth and ashes. A good old-fashioned revival breaks out in the city. When God sees their change of heart, he relents by showing mercy.

What a happily-ever-after ending. Jonah does as he is told and Nineveh repents. Not so fast! We read in chapter 4 that Jonah is angry. He’s none too pleased that God doesn’t take his enemies out. They can go to h-e-l-l for all he cares. Jonah prays, “I know you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishment. And now, O Lord, please take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live” (4:2-3).

God asks Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (4:4). Jonah doesn’t answer God’s question directly. Instead, our pouting prophet stomps off in a huff and waits to see what God will do next.

God arranges an object lesson to prove his point. He appoints a bush to give shade over Jonah to provide relief from the hot desert sun. But Jonah’s respite is short-lived. God sends a worm to destroy the plant, which puts Jonah in a foul mood again.
God asks Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush” (4:9). This is called “gotcha!” Jonah shows himself to be more concerned over the death of a single plant than the death of an entire city. God asks, “Should I not be concerned that Nineveh of which there are more than 120,000 who do not know their left hand from their right?” (4:11).

When I can become testy about our culture’s increasing infatuation with secularization, the story of Jonah calls me on it. If God shows compassion on those who, ethically speaking, don’t know their right from their left, shouldn’t I do the same?

The concern God shows in verse 11 literally translates as “tears in the eyes.” When God looks upon Nineveh, he sheds tears of compassion. It reminds me of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Jonah doesn’t want Nineveh to get a second chance, even though he had a second chance. Jonah, don’t you get it? God’s forte is giving people second chances.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? I ask this same question virtually every Sunday.

My son Andrew and I were talking about Jonah this week. He has just graduated from seminary and is interviewing in New England churches to do essentially what I do. He commented that Jonah is one of his favorite books. He identifies with Jonah. So, I blurted out, why don’t you join me in the sermon and tease out the so-what question with me. He jumped at the chance.

(Andrew comes forward to continue the sermon.)

Well, this is fun. Indeed, it is an honor to preach today with my father. He really has come a long way since I have been mentoring him over all these years! For real, what a privilege it is to be able to do this together: grateful for you, Dad.

As my father mentioned, I just completed seminary. It feels good to be done. We are grateful to VPC for your wonderful prayers and encouragement over these last three years! Actually, I still have one course to finish: Revelation. I think that I will just write on the test, “God wins-its all going to be okay!” Seminary is harder than you think. You probably think that we are a bunch of monks praying and chanting on a holy hill for fifteen hours a day; in reality, it is only six hours a day! My friends that have gone to law school and seminary state that the reading and writing
in the two are about equivalent. Exegesis, Systematic Theology and Church History are tough, but it is still “all Greek to me!”

When I first applied to seminary I thought it would be a good excuse to get back to the South. See, I love hot weather, enjoy Southern culture and I went to the University of Alabama (Roll Tide)! So I applied to seminary in Atlanta and a few others in that general region. I knew about Gordon-Conwell Seminary because my dad had gone there, Billy Graham was the founder, it is a great school—yada, yada, yada. None of that really mattered because God and I had an agreement that I would never live in a cold weather climate; at least that’s what I thought! Sure enough, after much pushback, I ended up at Gordon-Conwell Seminary on the North Shore of Boston!

I had two significant “welcome to Boston moments” that summarize my cultural adjustment well. 1) I went to a sports bar on a big college football Saturday in the Fall and we had to haggle for one little screen out of 12 big screens that were showing a Boston Bruins regular season game that was 5-1 in the third period; that is truly when I realized that Boston is a pro sports town! 2) Some of you may know I work for a ministry to the workplace called CBMC. My first Fall in Boston I laid out a business plan for reaching the city with the Gospel and building up CBMC. After I was finished with my pitch and felt pretty good about it, one of the key leaders in the room stated, “I don’t really like it much; it probably won’t work here. But I will pray for you.” It was my first taste of some good ol’ New England bluntness! He did stick with me but just wanted to make it clear what he thought!

Occasionally, my seminary peers would feel called to Boston long-term so I would put my hand on their shoulders and say—let me pray for you….(knowing that I was only staying three years in this region)—or so I thought. More on this at the end!

Let’s look at the text for a bit in connection with my story and yours. After being spit out from the fish, Jonah eventually obeys the Lord (3:3) and goes to Ninevah. Yet, when he goes and preaches God’s judgment (like God told him to), God has compassion on the people of Ninevah and this angers Jonah; “Wait a second, God, you told me that you would bring justice!” This is a first teaching point when it comes to us. We often feel called to step out in faith and if God’s response doesn’t meet our expectations we are mad. We will make statements to ourselves such as: “God, I went to church and it didn’t work out.” “God, I tried to reach out to that person with Jesus and they didn’t respond.” “Lord, I tried to reach out to that family member.” “I tried religion and it didn’t work out.” Hence, we end up missing out on God’s best for our lives because we get “stuck” in these places of frustration and unmet expectations with God. Yet, we must also note here that if one was writing their fake religious book it seems like perhaps one would want to “white out” this anger from Jonah and others in the Scriptures. These types of exchanges with God and His people demonstrate the rawness, and the authenticity of Scripture. God’s prophets are not just automatons!

Then (4:5), Jonah goes to watch what will happen to the city. He wants a “front row seat” to its deserved destruction. Hence, God graciously provides him a vine
with some shade. In the Hebrew (showing off my seminary education) the word is “yakta” for ‘exceedingly happy.’ Jonah is exceedingly happy for the vine. God provides us vines, too, that make us happy. These are not intrinsically bad things. They can be a cool breeze on a warm summer day, a house, a car, a good job, good friends, etc. Yet, God can also take these things away (hence the worm, 4:6). This is where I see a lot of people fall off the wagon. They are looking for a “vending machine God.” One who gives us what we want, when we want it, and if He doesn’t give us these things we stop coming to Him. Maybe God allows the vine to be eaten for His purpose of awakening Jonah to the bigger purposes He has for them. To accomplish this purpose of “weaning” Jonah from the vine, there may be temporary pain. Perhaps the withering of a vine is to get Jonah to seek the Lord in a deeper way. Our own pain, Jonah’s own pain, comes in the midst of the bigger picture of God’s glory being made manifest through the city of Ninevah, which had “120,000 who can’t tell their right hand from their left” (4:11). Maybe our personal pain is to drive us to God and to drive us to reach out to others going through similar struggles! When your ‘vine’ has been eaten away, does it drive you to God and to evangelism and discipleship?

As for us, yes I still don’t like winter, but God may want us to stay in New England long-term! Yes, I am adjusting to culture and many things. But a quiet revival in New England seems to be brewing and maybe, just maybe, I need to begin to look up and rise above these petty things to His redemptive purposes! Please pray for the two churches I have applied to: Christ Redeemer Church in Hanover, NH and First Church of Boxford, Boxford, MA.

Thank you, I will be praying for VPC and what a delight it was to share with you today! Thanks, Dad!

How is God calling you? There are two calls in Scripture. The first call is to someone, namely God. First and foremost, the call is to someone rather than to do something. “Come and follow me,” Jesus said. Have you ever opened your life to this Jesus? Could he be knocking on the door of your heart? The prayer in your bulletin (and at the end of this page), is intended to help you open your heart to Jesus.

The second call in Scripture is to do something to accompany this call to follow Jesus. Once we open ourselves to Jesus Christ, the question is in play as to what Jesus wants to do through me. Andrew senses God’s call to preach the gospel in New England. How is God calling you? It may not
be to anything particularly momentous or cosmic at the moment. God may be calling you to reconcile with someone from whom you are estranged. God may be calling you to address a destructive pattern in your life or reorder your priorities. If you want assistance with answering God’s call, there are people in this church who want to help you. I think of our Stephen Ministers and the Renewing Prayer ministry.

Let’s not be too hard on ole’ Jonah. We are all Jonah. Every one of us runs away from God. I don’t want to go to Nineveh and seek reconciliation with someone or address a bad habit. I want to go to Tarshish.

What is your Tarshish? What is the place you run to for comfort and security? I don’t want to go to Nineveh. I’d rather go to Tarshish. I’d rather go to things that bring me comfort than deal with the unpleasant stuff in my life that needs attention.

Do you sense that God, through this sermon, is calling you to Himself today? If so, I want you to do something in our closing prayer. I want you to stand to represent to God and self that you want to follow Jesus with your life. Let your standing represent your intention to follow Jesus. This standing is not for everybody; it’s for those who want to announce to God and self that it is your intention to follow Jesus. As I pray the prayer in your bulletin, you can pray silently with me.

In the second portion of the prayer, I’ll invite others of you to stand if you would like to answer God’s call to do something with your life. I gave a few examples of what this call might entail—reconciling with people or getting rid of a bad habit. Surely there are other ways of answering the call that are coming into view.

There is no pressure to stand. But if you want to register that on June 29, 2014 you are answering God’s call, then, by all means, stand. I will conclude the prayer by inviting all of us to stand in solidarity with those who are answering God’s call.

Prayer of Commitment
Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.