

June 25th: On the Run, part two

Today we continue our new journey together into the story of Jonah. I mentioned last week that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

Last week we introduced Jonah chapter 1, and so today we return to that passage with fresh eyes. As always, let's pray together and seek God's wisdom together.

Eternal God,

You laid the foundations of the world, you fashioned every corner of creation, so we know that there is no place we could travel where you would not find us. We might try to escape your presence, but because you created us, you will always follow us. This day and every day, remind us of your enduring love, even when we are foolish or misguided or afraid or unwilling. Today and all days in the future, draw us close to you so that we can rest in your peace, even when we feel

scattered or lost or hopeless or uncertain. For in you, we find wholeness and restoration. Amen.

As I said, today is our second look at the first ten verses of Jonah chapter 1. Let's do a little recap of what we talked about last week.

You might remember that Jonah was born in the 9th century BCE in the northern kingdom of Israel and in adulthood, he became a prophet, serving during the reign of an evil king named Jeroboam II. At this point, it was the 8th century BCE, and the political landscape of the Middle East was rapidly changed by the growing presence and power of a new dynasty called the Assyrians. In just a generation, the Assyrian army will be on the doorstep of the kingdom of Israel, and their cities and towns will be ravaged by these invading forces. So Jonah is preaching and working in a time of uncertainty and conflict, themes which are woven into the story we read today.

But Jonah isn't a typical prophet like others that we might hear about or read about in our Old Testament. In fact, Jonah was quite the unusual and unpredictable prophet.

I mentioned last week that there were certain expectations for Old Testament prophets, and there was a formula for these leaders to follow as they served God and God's people. It went something like this: God called, humans answered. God commanded, and humans obeyed.

God called, humans answered. God commanded, and humans obeyed. It sounds like a simple formula, right? Sounds so easy, right? Apparently not so much for our main character Jonah.

In verse 1, God calls on Jonah, saying, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

However, the story continues, "Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port.

After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.”

Right away, we see that Jonah disrupts this ancient, agreed upon formula, he makes a decision to run away from God’s voice and God’s instructions. He makes a deliberate choice to disobey the voice of God—he makes a series of decisions that take him farther and farther away from the direction that God intended for him to go. And apparently Jonah is so intent on not listening to God’s plan that he begins a journey to the other side of the world. Nineveh was to the east of Jonah’s hometown, but he sails west instead—towards a far off place called Tarshish, on the shores of southern Spain where the Atlantic ocean meets the Mediterranean Sea. This is a pretty dramatic moment in our story, but the drama isn’t over yet.

A giant storm overtakes Jonah’s boat, and all of his traveling companions are absolutely terrified. Verses 4 and 5 say, “Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.”

Unfortunately, things don’t get better, and in verse 10, the sailors confronted Jonah, saying, “‘What have you done?’ (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)”

At the conclusion of our time together last week, I posed a few questions that were repeating over and over in my head.

Here’s what I couldn’t figure out:

Why is Jonah so determined to disobey God’s call?

Why does Jonah have such a hard time with what God has asked him to do?

Why does this prophet seem so unwilling to listen to God’s voice?

Why does Jonah run away?

I said last week that I think from our distance of almost three thousand years, it could be easy to condemn Jonah for his lack of faith and his inability to follow God's instructions. It could be easy for us to criticize him or feel superior to him because we can clearly see where he falls short. We can laugh at his mistakes, we can point fingers and assign blame, but I don't think that's what our Bible is for.

Truth be told, I think a lot of us can understand why Jonah is so reluctant to follow God's instructions. I think a lot of us have faced similar moments in our own stories, perhaps not with a raging storm and a giant fish, but in our own ways we've found ourselves at a crossroads with tough decisions of our own to make. Sometimes we've listened to God's voice, and sometimes we haven't. Sometimes we've answered a specific calling, and sometimes we've turned away. Sometimes we've felt a nudge in one direction but have felt too scared, or too uncertain, or too anxious to follow through.

I don't think this is unusual or always bad, I think it's a pretty natural human response in some cases. But I think God has bigger plans for us, just like God had bigger plans for Jonah. So this series isn't just about Jonah's journey, it's about our journey too.

So how do we learn from Jonah's mistakes? What steps can we take to be more obedient disciples of God? Who can we point to as an example of a better way?

One person immediately came to mind for me. My college pastor was a person who was incredibly tuned into the voice of the Spirit—she was listening for God's voice so carefully and so frequently that she received all kinds of callings. In her sermons and her personal conversations, she would share some of these stories of callings—stories about being in an airport and feeling a nudge to talk to a particular person who turned out to be going through something difficult, stories about being on the train in Chicago and feeling a push to get off at a certain stop in order to walk into a specific store where a single mom needed someone to buy her groceries, stories about reaching out to someone she hadn't hear from in a while because God had placed them on her heart that day, only to find out that this person was dealing with an heavy burden—it was always incredible to hear how she was willing to say or do

crazy and unexpected things in the name of following Jesus. She never seemed to question it. She was willing to risk looking weird, or feeling uncomfortable, or doing something unfamiliar for the sake of God's instructions. She took the Old Testament prophet formula very seriously.

When her college students would ask her how she did this—and how it was possible that God spoke to her so directly and so often, she offered the following advice:

Listen. Really listen. Listen and sit still. Sit still for longer than you think is necessary. Even if you get restless. Especially if you get restless. Pay attention to little details that might otherwise pass you by. Listen, and listen again.

When asked about how these callings affected her own life or inevitably disrupted her plans, she would always respond with this wisdom: if we see our lives as our own, we will always interpret God's voice as an interruption, but if we see our lives as fundamentally connected to something bigger, God's voice is always an invitation into something better. **God's voice is an invitation, not an interruption.**

So because I firmly believe that our purpose on this earth is fundamentally connected to the divine, we're going to practice listening for God's voice. Today we're going to try a spiritual practice called a "Self Inventory." In a lot of ways, it's pretty similar to journaling or the Ignatian examen—a process of examining your thoughts at the end of the day. A "Self Inventory" is a check in that we do with ourselves and with God to see how we're feeling emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually, and listen for God's voice to speak into those moments of reflection. It's an invitation to slow down and sit in the silence.

If it's not something that you're used to doing—it can feel a little strange or unusual, but this is an opportunity to put all those other internal, cultural, familial voices that might be in your head on hold for a few minutes. If you're anything like me, and your brain moves at a mile a minute, it can be tough to

turn off that mental to do list, or the grocery list you started ten minutes ago, but I hope that taking a few minutes of introspection today is a way that you can prioritize your personal connection with God, whatever that looks like for you.

In just a few moments, we're going to transition into a time of quiet meditation—there will be some calming music playing, so feel free to get comfortable and take a few deep breaths to get situated. During this time, you can use the worksheets that were available as you walked in, or you can just reflect internally. This time will be about four and a half minutes, so it won't be long, but it can be powerful if you are willing to be attuned to the voice of the Spirit.

If you're using the worksheets—you'll see that there are a few guiding questions:

How do I hear God's voice?

How do I respond to God?

What is God saying to me this morning?

But if you'd like to just reflect on your own, here are some questions from earlier that can be reframed for this time:

When have there been moments in my own life where I've been so determined to disobey God's call?

Why do I have such a hard time with what God has asked me to do?

What happens when I run away from God—how does that affect my spiritual life?

At the conclusion of our mediation, I'll call us back together for a closing word.

Let's begin.

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Welcome back, friends. How did that feel? Thumbs up? Thumbs down? So-so?

If you didn't hear from God just now, I don't want you to panic. This was our first attempt, and oftentimes we find that God doesn't immediately work according to our human timing. That's okay. We'll keep listening together over the course of the next eight weeks. But perhaps you did hear something, and you did have a moment of clarity—I want to invite you to continue listening to that small voice of the divine and see where it leads you.

Even though this story of Jonah is an ancient and strange tale, I think we can all acknowledge that it can still be applied to our modern lives. I think if we're really honest with ourselves, we can admit that there's a little "Jonah" inside all of us.

But the good news is, God won't stop trying to reach us. Even if we run away, God won't stop trying to pursue us. No matter how long it takes, God won't stop trying to love us. Like Jonah, you are called by name and given a purpose for your life—today is just the beginning.

Amen.