

¹ Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. ⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your God! Perhaps your God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” ⁷ The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. ¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. ¹⁷ But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 1:1-17

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“Way Down In the Middle of the Ocean”

Rev. Amy Terhune

If you went to Sunday School as a kid, chances are, you learned about Jonah and the whale in our lesson this morning. If you didn’t learn about it in Sunday School, you may have heard it in a college English class while studying Moby Dick. Because Herman Melville splashes biblical imagery all over the place in his novels. If you didn’t learn it there, maybe you’ve watched Veggie Tales with your grandkids. If you’ve never heard it any of those places, that’s okay. I learned it is as a kid. And in 25 years of ministry, I’ve never preached on it, so maybe we have something in common this morning.

Part of my issue is that it’s a negative example. In other words, it’s a story of what NOT to do. I’m not a big fan of those kind of stories, although I admit that they can be useful from time to time. But I really prefer stories that show us how we should live. You know, the good Samaritan who picks up the guy by the side of the road; the leper in the pit who throws himself at Jesus’ feet with gratitude when he discovers he’s healed; Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego, who keep faith in God even inside

the fiery furnace. Those are the good ones. But Jonah? Uugh. To be honest, the characters that usually come to mind when I read from Jonah are "...Jake and Elwood, the Blues Brothers – two genial bozos out on an ill-fated fund-raising mission for their old parochial school. As they blunder through a series of larcenous schemes and make general mayhem, Jake and Elwood establish their credibility by quietly proclaiming to all their detractors, "We're on a mission from God." [from "I'm On A Mission From God" by David Leininger, <https://sermons.com>.] Give me a break!

Now, Jonah really is on a mission from God. Why God picks Jonah, I can't say. Not that I'm in any position to question God, but seriously, God? Jonah? In all the world, you didn't have anyone better for the job than Jonah? I know some of you probably have a soft spot for Jonah left from your Sunday School days, but the truth is: Jonah is kind of jerk.

But before we dive into that, let me briefly offer some background. Jonah is considered one of the 12 minor prophets, or as one of my seminary professors preferred to call them, one of the 12 succinct prophets, as opposed to the three rambling ones. But that's neither here nor there. We don't know much about Jonah. There is nothing in the book of Jonah itself that places it in any historical context. II Kings 14:25 mentions Jonah the prophet, the son of Amittai, during the reign of Jeroboam II, King of Israel during the mid-700s BCE. According to that one verse, Jonah the prophet spoke out against the sin of Jeroboam II, but that's all we know. The challenge we face is that most scholars today date the book of Jonah to the exile in the 600s due to a variety of theological and vocabulary clues in the writing itself, which suggests that Jonah didn't write this, and that details may have gotten lost in the haze of history.

It begins: Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness stinks to high heaven." That's a solid translation, by the way. Ninevah is the capital city of Assyria, who ransacked Jerusalem in 710, before falling to the Babylonians for a time. It is interesting that God calls it a great city when other Hebrew writers such as Zephaniah and Nahum lambast it as a horrible place of violence, evil, and injustice. Clearly, God is aware of its problems, but still recognizes it's power, prestige, and more importantly, it's potential.

Jonah, like many Jews of his day, has nothing nice to say about the Assyrians. He doesn't want to preach to them. He wants no part in saving them. As far as Jonah is concerned, the Assyrians are bad people who deserve to be annihilated from the face of the earth. He doesn't share God's hope or aspirations for their redemption. So instead of going to Ninevah, Jonah flees. He goes down to Joppa and catches a boat bound for Tarshish. Now, Jonah is not the first person to resist the call of God on his life. As Phyllis Trible points out in her commentary, "Moses shrank from speaking to pharaoh, Elijah fled from denouncing the regime of Ahab, Jeremiah recoiled from prophesying to the nations. Yet Jonah exceeds them all in his defiance. The phrase "flee from the presence of God" signals not just resistance but outright disobedience. Jonah does not flee because he believes Yahweh is confined to the land of Israel. This phrase indicates that Jonah recognizes Yahweh's presence and power in Nineveh. To flee from the divine presence is not to escape God but to reject the divine call." [from "Jonah: Introduction" by Phyllis Trible, in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII*, L.E. Keck et al (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) pg. 480.]

Anybody ever try to hide from God? Have you ever tried to avoid God? Have you ever truly wrestled in your soul with a calling you just can't stomach? It's a real thing. It happens. I've heard countless testimonies about genuine people of faith who feel the nudging of God and simply can't follow – the call asks too much. One of the most famous is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German preacher who denounced the Nazis in the 1930s. When it became clear that his work against Naziism was become more dangerous, Bonhoeffer fled to the US in June of 1939. His friends in New York set him up

as a professor alongside Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. But he only stayed a matter of weeks. It wasn't long before he concluded that he had made a mistake coming to America – that he needed to return to his people and weather whatever was coming in Germany. Despite many he tried to talk him out of it, he went home before the summer was out. Ultimately, he paid for that choice with his life, hung at Flossenburg Concentration Camp April 9, 1945. But he also left the world incredible riches in his writings – riches we might not have but for his faithfulness to God's calling on his life.

The lesson Jonah teaches us is that we're not always going to like the call on our lives. It's not always easy or comfortable or pleasant. It takes us out of comfort zone. It demands we extend compassion to those we can't stand. Like little Ruby Bridges, who coped with those spitting at her and hurling curses at her for trying to desegregate a white-only school by praying for them, we sometimes get faced with a calling that's beyond our own fathoming. Like Bonhoeffer, we take risks, we demonstrate courage, we find love deep inside us and let it move us.

Jonah can't seem to find that. So he runs, and God hurls a storm at the sea. While the sailors are hurling cargo from the ship, Jonah sleeps in the hold, trying to escape his reality. The captain wakes him and demands he arise and call on God – which is ironic, given that God had already asked Jonah to arise and call to Ninevah – he again refuses. There will be no arising and no calling, thank you very much. When the sailors draw lots and point the finger at Jonah, he admits, "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." If God made the sea, why does Jonah think he can flee from God there? In a final desperate attempt at escape, Jonah embraces drowning over preaching to Ninevites. Hurl me into the sea, he tells them. And though they resist that at first, eventually, that's what happens. But even then, Jonah can't escape God's call. He's swallowed by a big fish.

Friends, no matter how low you go, God can reach you. Jonah could not get any lower. He's in the belly of a fish. I can't explain how he survives this ordeal, but I'm going to go with it on faith. He knows he's hit rock bottom. He knows he's messed up. He was too stubborn and too angry to pray amid the storm, but he prays now. He repents. He acknowledges God's authority. And he puts his trust in God's deliverance. Way down in the middle of the ocean!

I don't know what brings you down. You may wrestle with sin. Or it may be illness or grief or disillusionment. All of us have those moments when we feel like nothing is going according to plan. When we're trapped in a dark and putrid hole we can't get out of.

"Rev. Shannon J. Kershner, a Presbyterian pastor, tells of a parishioner named Jane who was battling severe clinical depression. Some of you know what that is like. Jane felt like she was sitting at the bottom of a deep hole. It was dark and big and she felt so small.

"Jane sat there in that pit, feeling betrayed and angry with herself and with God. Kershner was fairly fresh out of seminary and had become well acquainted with the Lament Psalms—those psalms in the Bible that let it all hang out in regard to anger and frustration with God. She pulled a few of them out and began to read them with Jane. She said, "See? What you feel is right here in Scripture. It is faithful to feel this way. These psalms help remind us that God is in the pit with us. Even when you feel God's absence, God's presence still covers you."

"Kershner said she was trying to speak faithfully and truthfully to this woman. But Jane looked up at her and said through her tears, "Shannon, I don't want a God who will sit with me in the pit. I want a God who will pull me out of it." [3 ¶s from www.woodhavenpres.org/Sermons/03-13-05.pdf; as adapted from "No More Tears" by King Duncan, <https://sermons.com>.] I can certainly understand that, can't you? Well, God does pull us out. He pulls lepers from the pit outside the city, and they're healed. He pulls Peter from sinking in the water, and Peter finds faith. He pulls Lazarus from the grave, and he lives. And he pulls Jonah from the sea. Deep in that whale's belly, Jonah turned to God

whose everlasting arms had already been extended towards him. The fish spits him out. And there's poor old Jonah, stinking to high heaven, smelling like rotting fish and half-digested seaweed, heading out to go and preach to Ninevah. And they respond. They pray. They repent. They acknowledge God's authority and put their trust in God's deliverance.

And dumb old Jonah gets all riled up again.

Remember, Moses thinks he's inadequate to be called. Elijah is terrified. Jeremiah and Isaiah weep for the horrendous prophecies they must announce – things so dreadful, they can hardly maintain sanity. But not so with Jonah. In the 4th chapter, after Jonah has preached to Ninevah and they repent and are saved, Jonah throws himself down in the shade a tree to pout, saying: "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. I'd rather die, Lord, than be part of this."

Phyllis Tribble concludes it like this: "Jonah is not concerned about his qualifications; He does not fear for his life; He does not resist because Yahweh commands him to preach doom. Instead, his objection is the certain knowledge that doom for Ninevah can be averted because God repents of evil. Whereas some prophets shrank from preaching because they saw no hope, Jonah refuses because he knows there is hope. Whereas some prophets complain about the wrath of Yahweh, Jonah protests the love of God. [from "Jonah: Introduction" by Phyllis Tribble, in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII*, L.E. Keck et al (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) pg. 481.]. Which is why I still say he's a jerk. He never could get past his prejudices. And yet, ultimately, his great success remembered for all time is the message of redemption delivered to a people he never wanted to save in the first place. Which just goes to show: God is going to do what God is going to do.

Centuries after Jonah, when the scribes ask Jesus for a sign in 12th chapter of Matthew, he promises them the only sign they'll ever see is the sign of Jonah. He tells them flat out: For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than Jonah is here, and you won't see it! Like Jonah they could never get past their prejudices and their expectations.

Friends, God's call is hard. It's not easy or comfortable or pleasant. Because love is hard. Love means we want what's best even for those who are hellbent on seeing us get the worst. Love sees the best in those who constantly believe the worst about us. Love takes the high road even when we're at our lowest. Love hurts for those who, in anger and fear, want to hurt us. Love is not fair. Love sacrifices. Love takes the hit another deserves. Because at the end of the day, love believes in something better, something greater than here and now. True and lasting love has faith that God is doing something. Check your prejudices. Check your expectations. Side with grace. Choose love. God is going to do what God is going to do. Don't miss it out of spite. Don't limit God. Don't get stuck way down in the middle of the ocean. Amen.