

A Still, Small, Voice: Trusting

Jonah 3 and 4 (various)

January 25, 2008

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Ninevah, according to the word of the Lord.

Now Ninevah was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" And the people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is this not 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 God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord appointed a bush, and made it come over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "it is better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Last week we started a three-week sermon series on discernment by reflecting on the call of Samuel and how important it is for each of us to listen for the voice of God in our lives.

And so this week we continue our series with the familiar story of Jonah – a reluctant prophet in whom we can see much of ourselves – who clearly hears God’s call but initially neglects to follow where it leads.

We pick up our reading after Jonah has run away to Tarshish – to escape God’s beckoning to proclaim judgment in Ninevah; our reading comes after Jonah’s famous voyage on the ship off of which he is thrown into the sea to be spit up by the big fish. In my sermon today, I am more Bible study leader than preacher – so listen extra carefully with me for a word from God. [Read scripture]

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Have you ever wanted to go to Tarshish?

I know we have some world travelers in the church – have you wanted to go to Tarshish?

Scholars debate where Tarshish is, exactly. Some say it is in the vicinity of Turkey. Others think it is closer Cyprus. Many believe Tarshish is simply a way of saying “the opposite direction.”

God called Jonah – to do something difficult; something that Jonah was not interested in doing – and Jonah ran in the opposite direction.

Have you ever wanted to go to Tarshish?

Listening for God’s call on our lives is only the first step. Once we hear it – be it individually or as a community – God asks that we follow. And the place God leads us might not necessarily be what we expect or want.

God may call on you to speak a difficult word to a loved one – to confront them with a hard truth that might risk straining an otherwise happy relationship.

God may call on us to reach out and welcome people whom we would rather not know. People whose lifestyle is different than ours; who think differently than we do; who dress differently than we do.

God may put a call on you to lift up your voice in a board meeting, or at the dinner table, or – Lord forbid it – at a committee meeting in the church; a voice that you know will be unpopular...but one that needs to be heard.

The call of God is not always easy – sometimes it takes us through people and places that we would rather avoid – yet part of discerning God’s call or God’s will is not only listening well, but trusting that where it leads is where God needs us to go.

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Jonah fled to Tarshish; but we all know that didn’t work out. And so the word of God came to Jonah a *second* time.

What God asked Jonah was no small thing. Ninevah wasn’t just some out of the way place that had a petty disagreement with the people of Israel. Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrian’s had a policy of conquering and plundering; it was a savage state, the epitome of violence and cruelty. Israel and Judah seethed with hatred toward Ninevah – this capital city of an empire that had terrorized their nation¹. There was nothing that suggested that the people of Ninevah were repentant for their way of life; nor was there reason to believe that they would ever be. And yet God called on Jonah to pronounce a message of judgment.

Jonah heard God’s call – but you can’t blame him for being lukewarm about following it. Even after he ran to and returned from Tarshish, we can see his reluctance to throw himself into the call God placed upon his life.

We hear, clearly, that Ninevah is a large city – a three days’ walk across. Did you catch how far Jonah ventured into the city? One day. In essence, Jonah poked his head in the city gates, spoke the requisite

¹ Much of my exegetical information – and indeed the interpretive nugget that guides this sermon – is from a summer 2008 Church Unbound Conference Bible study by Dr. Christine Yoder.

words “Forty days more, and Ninevah will be overthrown” and then retreated to the outskirts of town to watch what would happen.

Jonah heard God’s call, but he didn’t give himself over to it which suggests that he had a trust issue.

A professor of mine in seminary led a Bible study on Jonah last summer where she uncovered for me a fresh look at Jonah’s reluctance.

Consider what happened in the story after Jonah answered God’s call: the people of Ninevah listened; they repented; God changed God’s mind and spared the city its devastation;
and Jonah became angry.

Why? Because Jonah knew “that God was gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Jonah *knew* that God would relent from punishing those who went against God’s will. And this was displeasing to Jonah, because his preference for how God would act did not match up with God’s preference for how God would act.

Jonah’s lack of trust had less to do with him being afraid to carry out his call to go to Ninevah. Jonah’s lack of trust was evidenced by the fact that he disagreed with God’s action. Jonah *knew* that God would show mercy to these wicked people in Ninevah – and if it were Jonah instead of God – they would not be spared what they deserved.

Jonah lacked the trust to let God be God. Jonah’s theology – his understanding of God – was small; pinched by his inability to see beyond his own understanding of what was right and just and within the reach of God’s grace. In the words of my professor, Jonah insisted on a theology that was at odds with God’s behavior...and it made him angry, angry enough to die.²

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Bless his heart, Jonah is easy to identify with, isn’t he?

² From Dr. Christine Yoder

We all have a theology that is too small. Every one of us. There are limits to our comprehension of God; limits to our understanding of the reach of God's forgiveness; limits to our willingness to love in the kind of way that God loves.

Each of us have blind spots to the vast and great mystery that is God. Oh, we call them different things: liberal, conservative, traditional, progressive, Republican, Democrat, working-class, business-class, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic...these are things that inform our perspective of the world and of God, some in ways that we can control, others in ways that we can't.

When our expectations of who God *should* be, or what God *should* do, or how God *should* love, or whom God *should* love bump up against the limits to our perspective...um, um, um – it can make us angry. I can testify from personal experience.

I can tell you from personal experience that it is easy for me to allow my expectations of God, or the church, or the world determine how and where and to whom I am willing to go in the service of God – as well as how and where and to whom I will not go. In truth, there are some judgments that I have already made.

But I know that God is bigger than that; and I know that God beckons me and us beyond the places and people to whom we would rather not go; and I know that God's mercy extends to us past the places where we draw the line for somebody else.

God calls us to trust – to trust that we don't know all there is to know and we don't see all there is to see. That there is more to God than we can understand or even appreciate.

And even as God calls us to trust – God bestows trust in us by enlisting our help in the work of the kingdom.

May we have the courage move beyond ourselves enough to follow.

Amen.