

You Can Run but You Can't Hide!

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Our first reading was from the Book of Jonah – a very small book in the Old Testament, only 4 chapters long. Honestly, you can read the whole thing in 5 minutes, but my sermon will be longer than that! So, who was he? Jonah was a prophet and unlike many other prophets, Jonah was popular and respected and that might be because he was not a doom and gloom prophet but rather, he predicted prosperity and growth for Israel and things were good!! Jonah was proud of his country and proud that God was speaking to him, and God was blessing Israel. Ah, the good life.

Last week we heard Pastor Hyuk preach about Simon, Andrew, James, and John who heard God's voice and immediately responded to Jesus' call. Different for a couple of reasons: Jonah's response that Susan read was the second time God spoke to Jonah. Same request but the second time around! What we did not read was the first time God told Jonah: 2 "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a pagan country with a powerful and ruthless military. Assyria was a strong and wealthy nation – competition for Israel. Why would God send such a message to Jonah? He hated them and the last thing he wanted to do was try and warn them and save them. It was a scary and repulsive thought. No, Jonah was not going to do that! Instead, he was going to find a boat in Joppa and sail off in the opposite direction – he was headed to Tarshish. Quick question – how do you run away from God?

Anyway, long story short, he finds the boat, huge storm comes up, and almost capsizes the ship. These pagan sailors all had their own gods (little "g") that they called on to save them, but nothing was working. They ask Jonah to call on his god, the Lord, to save them but Jonah knows, and the men know, that Jonah is running away from his God. They ask him where he is from and who his people are. Jonah tells them he is Hebrew, and his God is the Lord of heaven, sea and dry land. Yikes – that is a powerful God! Only one thing to do: Jonah tells them they must throw him overboard and they do, but they pray to the Lord not to judge them for throwing an innocent man overboard. Calm ensues and the sailors fear the Lord even more and even offer a sacrifice to him. As for Jonah, God sends a big fish (frequently referred to as a whale) that swallows Jonah.

While Jonah is in the fish for 3 days, Jonah prays – NOW he prays! Then God speaks to the fish it vomits him out onto dry land. Nice! And this is why we heard that Jonah responded the SECOND time to God's request. That is the part of the story we heard today. Jonah goes off to Nineveh, a huge city, 8 miles in circumference with a population of 175,000 to deliver the God's message, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Oh, did I mention this was a pagan city? But what happened? Scripture tells us, "5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." They repented. The result was that God changed his mind and did not destroy Nineveh. Was Jonah happy about it? No, he sulked because he did not want God to show them mercy. THE END. NO, not really.

Do you hear God's voice? I desperately wanted to hear God's voice telling me how to serve. I prayed and I prayed. I thought I would hear, "Ann, I want you to serve me by doing" One day when we were worshiping in the Activity Center, Pastor Brian stood up and said he needed

someone to volunteer to be a bookkeeper because the church needed to pay an administrator and the church could not afford to pay both. I can only tell you I got this feeling that I had to volunteer but did not want to. I had worked in payroll and benefits for 35 years and the last thing I wanted to do was more accounting work, Excel spreadsheets, reports - especially since I was still working full time in Burlington! I tried my hardest to ignore that "call" from God – No, not me, try someone else. I would rather have decorated the altar, handled the coffee hour, cleaned the church, anything but not the kind of stuff that was just like my job. But God is an insistent God and no one else volunteered so two weeks later I was the new bookkeeper, then Treasurer. Not what I wanted but God can be very insistent. Maybe it's a good thing I listened, or I may have wound up in one of those whales that go through the Canal!

What about you? Are you waiting to see the clouds part and a booming voice call your name? No? But are you feeling a tug, the inner voice that is God calling you to do something? Maybe you are not sure what you are to do? Maybe you have felt it, but you don't think it is important, so you ignore it. Everything God calls you to do is important. Two weeks ago on a cold Sunday, and Ted did what he always does when we are here (and not in Middleboro), he set up the coffee pot. He doesn't turn it on because he doesn't want the coffee to be sitting there for 2 hours before coffee hour. When Deb and Bill Fortier or Deb Linehan come in, they turn the pot on. Well Debbie and Bill weren't here and Deb Linehan was tied up – coffee hour came and NO coffee! Several weeks ago, we had the funeral for David Gardner. Ted and I came in early to set up but there was a lot to do, and I was having mobility issues – Guess who walked in without being asked and helped us through that day. Two quiet angels – God called, and Debbie and Bill answered. Important, Yes, I think so and a blessing.

Are you called to facilitate or teach a Bible study or a book study like Susan Scott and Geri Ryder. Start a men's Bible or book study if God is calling you. Don't be afraid to fail, you can do it. Ask for help if you need it.

All throughout Covid, we could not have counters, but Tom and Sue Reynolds called and said, we can do it. They came into this very chilly church every week taking all the checks that were mailed in and they counted, filled out the reports, went to the bank and deposited the money. Important? Yes, I think so and a blessing.

God calls not only for the church that we are called, maybe it is checking on a neighbor, or feeling like an old friend needs you, maybe you should call them. Check on them! Call them! Is there a committee in your town or at school that needs help? Are there openings to read to people who are homebound or to read to kids in school? Do it! We see people on our prayer list – Pray for them, really pray, and send them a card. If you don't know their address, check with the office, and get a directory.

Don't be afraid to fail – God may call you to work quietly behind the scenes or he may ask you to do something big, just try to follow. Jonah failed at first but then followed what God wanted him to do. God not only showed mercy to the people in Nineveh, but God also showed mercy to Jonah.

This book of Jonah took place in 700 or so B.C., but do you see similarities and foretelling of Jesus here? In Matthew 8:23-27, Jesus like Jonah was asleep when a terrible storm came up with waves threatening to capsize the boat, but the disciples lost faith and forgot to pray, so they woke

Jesus and He rebuked the waves and the wind. When Jonah lost faith and forgot to pray, God calmed the wind and waves.

In Matthew 12, that Susan read, Jesus said, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.” And greater He was, is and always will be.

What my friends is the takeaway today? Four points:

1. Listen for God’s call, that inner tug, that pull.
2. When God calls, follow his directive even if you are against it – Jonah hated the people of Nineveh, but God loves even the people we hate.
3. Jesus was called by God to bring salvation to us – to bring light into the world, and though His path was a difficult one, Jesus answered the call.
4. Remember to pray first – in all times good and bad.

And the people of God say, AMEN!