

WGUMC August 5, 2012 Jonah 1:1-16

Our camping trip last week to the Trinity Alps and the Sky Lakes Wilderness areas in California and Oregon confirmed what I've always known: I wasn't made for life in the city. I felt right at home alone in a campground thirty miles from the nearest town. Made me remember what it was like when I graduated from high school in Billings, Montana and went off to college in Boston, Massachusetts. By mid-February, I'd be standing ankle-deep in dirty slush, waiting for the T. I'd look up at the gray sky. I'd see a plane taking off from Logan International Airport, and I'd say to myself, "I don't care where it's going. Put me on it."

Almost thirty years later, I live in a much bigger city, and now you know why I drive so far to get a run around here. Three times a week, I have to get out of town.

So, I can relate to Jonah when God wanted him to go to Nineveh, "that great city," to preach there. He did what I'd be

tempted to do: he tried to escape. He went down to Joppa and bought a one-way ticket to Tarshish.

Now it's interesting that archaeologists and biblical scholars don't really know where Tarshish was. It must have been a port somewhere west of Joppa. Maybe in North Africa. Maybe in Spain. It doesn't really matter, because Tarshish isn't so much a place as it is an idea.

Everyone of us has a Tarshish in our mind, a place real or imagined, where we'd rather be, where we want to flee. Tarshish is the place we go to when we want out of this job, out of this relationship, out of this situation. Tarshish is the place where we believe our life would surely be better, where the work wouldn't be so hard, where the demands on our body and our soul, wouldn't be so onerous.

San Jose is a big city. Life here exacts a high price. Even if your boss offers you a yoga class to reduce your job stress, you don't dare turn off that cell phone. And woe to the yoga

instructor who glares at you for using it! [She was fired.] I figure everyone working in Silicon Valley has had their Jonah moment. They get the call or the email or the text and they wish they could run away.

But Jonah wasn't trying to escape the call of just any boss. He was trying to escape the Big Boss. Jonah was fleeing from the presence of God. God told him to go to Nineveh and he didn't want to go. Nineveh was a major city in Assyria. Assyria was a long-time enemy of Israel. He didn't want to have anything to do with that wicked place. He didn't want to warn them of the wrath to come. Better that it come without warning. Nevertheless, God was wanting to save the people of Nineveh and needed a prophet to do it. The thought of going there must have turned Jonah's stomach.

If everyone has a Tarshish, it stands to reason that everyone has a Nineveh, too. There's someplace you want to escape to because there's something that you want to escape

from. God has called you to go where you *DON'T* wanna go and do what you *DON'T* wanna, wanna do (because God is not a member of the Mamma's and the Pappa's).

Last year at Annual Conference, the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in America spoke to us. Adam Hamilton was talking about God's call when he said: it's likely that thing that makes you queasy every time you think about it. Whatever that is, that's what God is calling you to do.

I get a little queasy when I think of violent crime. But I get even sicker to my stomach when I think of the over 700 people on death row in the state of California. When I was a pastor in Marin, San Quentin was just down the road a piece. When an execution was scheduled, there would be a midnight vigil outside the gates of the prison. I didn't want to go, but I knew I had to. How could I talk about the mercy of God Sunday after Sunday and not bear witness to it where it was most needed? How could I believe in a God who would save the wicked

Ninevites but wouldn't save Clarence Ray Allen or Stanley Tookie Williams? I went alone, but I wasn't alone. Hundreds of Christians joined me, young people with their Bibles, old people with their crosses.

San Quentin can make you queasy, but you don't have to go that far to get to Nineveh. The place God is calling you with may well be the place you live or the family you try to live with. The sister you haven't spoken to in years lives in that city. Or the father who abandoned you, the coworker who humiliated you, the spouse who cheated on you, the friend who lied to you, the system that is crushing you. For every one of us, God gives us reconciling work to do. There is a Nineveh to go to. And just thinking about it can make us lose our lunch.

If Jonah got queasy about going to Nineveh, why then did he get on a boat to Tarshish? Because he was using his first line of defense: run away. In fact, he ran in the exact opposite direction. God told him to go east. He went west. It's like what

we do: God tells us to love our enemies; we kill them. God tells us to turn the other cheek; we slap them. After all, oppositionality is our personality!

I used to play a word game with Kristen when she was a toddler: Mommy says "up," Baby says "down." Mommy says "in," Baby says "out." Mommy says "yes," Baby says "no." And now as a parent of a preteen, I think maybe that wasn't such a good idea.

But how does that work for us in the long run: always doing the opposite of what God wants us to do? As soon as Jonah got in the boat, a great wind came up and it threatened to break the boat up. When we run from the call of God, our life gets pretty stormy and pretty scary. The sailors in the ship were scared. They cried out to their god. They threw the ship's cargo overboard. Meanwhile, Jonah is employing strategy number two: he's sleeping.

So, if you can't physically run away from God, try mentally running away. Try sleeping through the storm. Zone out. Disengage. Pretend nothing bad is happening. We know this one, too. How many of us sleep through bad marriages for years? Deny our addictions or eat our way through depression? If real life is like a bad dream for us, we can simply go to sleep to escape it.

But that doesn't work for Jonah, either, for the captain of the ship shakes him awake. "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god!" We all need a captain like that in our lives, someone to rub our noses in reality every once in a while. We need someone to ask us pointed questions. The sailors asked Jonah: "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from?" In other words, who are you?

Unable to escape reality, Jonah tries a different strategy. This time he tries honesty. "I am a Hebrew...I worship the Lord,

the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Finally, he tells the truth, and the men were even more afraid, "for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so."

No wonder the storms of life were raging. For Jonah was both worshiping God and running away from God at the same time. How many of us in church are in the same boat? We worship God on Sunday and run from God the rest of the week. At least the story of Jonah gives us permission to be honest about that. Honesty: the first step in coming to terms with reality.

Jonah realizes that his running from God is causing more problems than it's solving. And, what's more, it's putting other lives in peril, too. Just like we do. The storm swirling around us threatens other people as well. So maybe the best thing is to just get thrown overboard and start over. Jonah said to the sailors, "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."

Wow. That's honesty. That's facing reality. Pick me up and throw me into rehab. Schedule an appointment with a marriage counselor. Find me a therapist. Get me a gym membership. "Drug me or jail me. Stamp me or mail me. But get me to the church on time."

When finally Jonah took responsibility for his running away from God, the sea stopped raging. The sailors were safe. They gave thanks to God. Meanwhile, Jonah is underwater. At first, honesty doesn't seem like the best policy. Reality is sometimes just too real. But what he doesn't know yet, and what we won't know until next week, is that he's already on his way to being saved. That has to be our hope for the day.

So if you've stopped running away, if you've already jumped the ship of denial, and you're feeling underwater, remember Jonah and take a deep breath. Help is on the way.