

WHAT ARE YOU RUNNING FROM?

The Old Testament reading is a glimpse into the book of Jonah. In Sunday School many young have heard of Jonah and the whale, how he ran from god when asked to go to Nineveh, got on a boat, there was storm and Jonah was tossed into the sea and ended up in belly of the whale, only to be spit out three days later and was again asked by god to go to Nineveh and preach. Not known as well is the story that unfolds in chapter 4 of Jonah. Jonah complains angrily to god because god saved Nineveh!!! There appears to be a real attitude problem on Jonah's part. The book of Jonah in the end is really about the nature of God, and not Jonah. The book shows us the nature of God and the heart he has for wayward sons and daughters who run in the other direction from him.

There are lessons we can take from Jonah's actions, attitude, and responses to God. We likely all have a touch of Jonah in us. The Bible is like that, holding up a mirror, through its words and stories, to each and every one of us that we might reflect and learn. The stories of the Bible are really stories about people like us. Though we tend to elevate the people of the Bible and make them "larger than life", remember they, with the exception of one, were human like you and I. Being human means we are flawed, not perfect, though some of us may believe that our grandchild is. People of the Bible were called by God, flaws and all, to serve, not unlike God does with us today. We have lessons to learn from the people of the Bible with Jonah being one such person.

There are in this book of Jonah characteristics we as humans share with Jonah. These traits may play out differently in our lives, running away from God or others, getting us in difficult situations of our own making, and then turning to God to again discover his grace and forgiveness. We may nod our head in agreement – "yes, been there done that". We may even find ourselves as Jonah being jealous, even angry at God when he shows that grace and forgiveness to others **that we** may believe do not deserve it!!! Maybe quietly under our breath or loudly shaking a fist at God saying "I have a good reason to be angry"

Let's look at Jonah's and God's actions in today's reading--mindful of the fact that we can relate to Jonah and find ourselves in this story.

Right from the start Jonah receives a word which he recognizes from the Lord to "arise and go preach to Nineveh", a large city near Spain on the other side of the world from Nineveh! The thought comes up "*there is no way he can run away from God, so why doesn't he just go to Nineveh?*"

So what is our reaction when an event "invades" our life that requires us to change our normal schedules or way of doing things? In this day of rapid communications one phone call with good or bad news can change our lives completely!! It could relate to work, home or family and friends. How open are we to such events? The saying goes "the only sure things are death and taxes", but I would add one more – change. Anyone that has been around for any period of time knows that change **will** come! It may not come today, tomorrow or even next year, but it will come. Just think as we sit here this morning all the changes many of us have seen, some were thought to be science fiction not too many years ago.

The question for us is how are we going to react to change? Will we like Jonah run away from it? At Centennial when a call comes to you that may require change in your life what is going to be your reaction? Are we going to take a boat like Jonah, using our “boat” as a way out from that which we have been called?

A side note here, the Jewish people absolutely hated the Assyrians who were the people that lived in Nineveh. Conquers, they would do things to their captors not unlike the terror group Isil today. So for God to go tell Jonah to go preach to them for their salvation, I cannot imagine the thoughts going through his head, and I do not believe they were very positive thoughts.

Where is Nineveh today? We can draw some analogies close to home for us. Nineveh can be whatever pulls us from our comfort zone. Nineveh is a place God is calling us to go and we just don't want to go! Haven't we all said that at one time or another? (example of hospital, funerals)

When Jonah fled from God it was quite literally downhill from the moment his journey began. Jonah went **down** to Joppa, a city located south of his location. On the ship he went **down** in the hold to sleep. He went **down** into sea after being thrown overboard. Then finally he went **down** into the belly of the whale. ***The lesson we can learn is whenever we choose to flee, which really is disobeying God's call, it is always downhill.***

An important thing for us to consider is our *attitude and motives*. Jonah just didn't want to go there. He didn't care about them. He didn't think God should care. He was indifferent about their repentance. He really did not want God to love people like that! We have to remember as servants – disciples, it is not what we want or think, it is trusting God and serving him. **If this story illustrates anything, it is the fact, the promise that even when we leave God, he really never leaves us.** What a blessing!!!! However one word of caution, we may flee quickly, but when we realize just as the prodigal son did at his lowest point, the journey back to God can be slow.

It is almost easy to go down. Like hiking it is always easier going back down than hiking up the hill. It is easy to get off the right path, and how easy and may even attractive is sin? Look at Jonah he said “no”, got on a ship and decided to take a nap, then it hit and things really changed! For those who have been there, going out and partying with friends, the next morning can be absolutely painful and the return to normalcy does take awhile. It sure sounded like a good idea at the time!

Doing the wrong thing, and let's call it what it really is – *sin* – can look really good, for a while, but just ask those whose lives have been ruined and the others they affected by their actions. The consequences can be a bitter pill to take. One thing for sure though is God will be there for us when we return.

A part of this story that really brings it home for us and we can relate to is Jonah's time in belly of the whale in Chapter Two. In one translation Jonah's prayer begins with *“in trouble, deep trouble I prayed to God – help”*. He realizes that he may never again worship in the temple, that because of his sin he has separated himself from God. Though from his prayer he must know God is there, close enough to hear him! And in verse nine declares *“salvation is from the Lord”*.

We can relate to Jonah because when we realize we are missing something important once it is gone we at times begin to bargain with God. Our desire is to have that back which we have taken for granted. What would be those

precious and meaningful things that would be in your prayer, which you would long to return to? *Do we even give a thought to how blessed we with our life – especially the people in it?* After all in our prayers and songs of worship each week do we not frequently admit this to God, our father?

Shortly, we take the offering and we will sing “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”. Jonah in the depths of darkness inside the whale brought about his own disobedience to God, sin, realized this and prayed to God, for his salvation.

Now the story comes to today’s reading where God gave Jonah a second chance calling him to go to Nineveh. Jonah proclaimed the message from God. Then a miraculous event - the people of Nineveh repented!!! However, something happened to Jonah that we recognize that from time to time that we do – he became jealous, even angry at God’s grace shown to the people of Nineveh. Don’t we sometimes look upon people and silently, maybe even verbally say they don’t deserve it? It is quite clear Jonah has no leg to stand on being angry. God demonstrates to Jonah that by Jonah’s concern over the loss of a plant was not God justified to show love and concern for the people of Nineveh?

We too can lose priorities and miss what should be most important in our life. Every single day we make choices. We choose between the right thing and the convenient thing, sticking to a conviction or caving in for the sake of comfort, greed or approval. We choose either to take a carefully thought-out risk or to crawl into a shrinking shell of safety, security and inactivity. We choose to either believe in God and trust Him even when we do not always understand his ways, or to second-guess Him and hang out in the shadows of doubt and fear.

In us all there is a touch of Jonah, his failure or delay to answer God’s call on his life, the urge to run from the difficult, not to fully appreciate the blessings in our lives, to grudgingly do things and then complain or even get angry over them. However, even if we do all these things with an attitude, God will be there to demonstrate the love and compassion he has for us and all people.

The love and compassion we as disciples of Jesus should show.

May we run to God, not from God.

Amen.