



WHY WE RUN

Sunday 31 July 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> *Read Jonah chapter 1.*

This term our teaching team is going to be walking us through the book of Jonah and on every other week I'm going to focus in on a practical application of the book, talking about your calling to purposeful work in life, why calling matters, how you discern what you are called to, and what does it look like to do that thing well.

When people think of Jonah the first thing that comes to mind is, what? A whale. This is not a story about whether you can live in a whale for three days. I had the opportunity to go whale watching off Boston a couple weeks ago. I asked the Naturalist if whales have a giant air pocket in their mouth or gut when they dive.... She looked at me with this look of, "Are you stupid, sir?" Go figure: they breathe through the hole in the top, and there is zero air in their mouth or stomach! Because Jonah is a story, a parable; and, not only that but, one of the only truly satirical pieces of literature in the Bible. Classic examples of satire you might think of include Kath and Kim, the Castle, and during Covid we tuned into Jimmy Rees. You are laughing at them, but they are saying something about you and your culture – you know it – that, without comedy, would be offensive. And we don't expect this in the Bible. It doesn't seem very spiritual. But the author uses satire to express powerful truths about our humanity and our spirituality: how conflicted our inner lives as people who say they follow God can be, and how the people we want to demonise may be no different than ourselves. But mostly the scripture points to who God is: full of mercy for us, regardless of our sin.

Jonah was a Prophet. We know that because he shows up in 2 Kings 14:25 and Jesus calls him that in Mathew chapter 12. But by the end of this book you are going to be thinking, "This guy

needs to find a different job...!" God comes to his messenger, Jonah, and gives him a very clear task: *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."* (Jonah 1:2)

Nineveh (modern-day Mosul in Iraq) was a truly great and wicked city. The capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire. They basically wiped out 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel off the map! It's the greatest city of its time, but it also has a reputation as a society that has abandoned any regard for human life. The injustice rises up and a messenger is sent: God has a job for Jonah to do – that's what Prophets do, after all: Prophets preach. God says, "Jonah, go preach against the city." It's in the job description like laying bricks when you are a brickie, or making coffee if you are a barista. But sure, this is a tough assignment. It's the equivalent of going to North Korea and getting on all the main media to say, "Down with oppressive regimes!"

"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord." (Jonah 1:3)

God commands Jonah, and Jonah does what? He takes a sickie. He runs away from the Lord. Tarshish was the end of the known world for Jonah! 4000km in the wrong direction from Nineveh, in fact. He is thinking, "How far away can I get from the Lord's will for me? How much distance can I put between where God wants my life and where I want my life?" Can you think of a story in the New Testament where a young man asks himself the same question: "How far can I get away from my dad? The furthest country, a distant land?"

So why does Jonah run away? Well, why does anyone run away from God's call? Today I want to address this question in particular and I think there are a couple of common reasons why we run:

1. Insecurity:

"I'm not able, I'm not qualified, I'm not worthy... Who am I?!" We can look at Moses' response to God's call in Exodus 3:10-11: *"So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."* But Moses said to God, *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*. Or Gideon in Judges 6... We all carry insecurities in different areas. Our insecurities are powerful drivers and are turbocharged in a social media-saturated world.

I was talking to a young lady last week at Harvard Law School. I asked, "What's it like to be a student in one of the most prestigious law schools on earth?" She replied, "Everyone has to look like they have it all together and they feel so much pressure to fit the image – but everyone is gripped by perpetual anxiety".

2. Fear:

Related to insecurity is fear. Sometimes fear and insecurity hang around together. If insecurity is anxiety about your personal worth or ability, then fear is anxiety about consequences, real or perceived. Seventy times in the Bible you find the words, *"do not be afraid."* When Joshua took over from Moses and God said it's time to cross over into the promised land, he and all the people were gripped with fear at the thought of what will face them. God says, *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."* (Joshua 1:9)

Fear comes in many forms: fear of failure, fear of the cost, fear of lost reputation, fear of embarrassment... I've been away for several weeks because I just started some post-grad study, a little side project that I'll be working on for several years. I love to learn but, for a very long time, I've maintained that I'd never go back to formal education, which was driven by both insecurity and fear. I'm not an academic person. Truth is, I'm pretty terrified by it - I think I have library anxiety. It's a real thing! I find libraries intimidating, I highly doubt my research skills, and I have a strong case of imposter syndrome... Have you ever felt like you're surrounded by really qualified people and you aren't sure how you got in the same room, or you think you have nothing at all to offer? I have to tell you on day one the Dean of the Doctoral Studies Program gave a lecture on the process of developing, researching and writing your thesis - and I went back to my room at the end of the day terrified. "Why am I here God? What was I thinking? I can't do it! Who am I?" Have you ever felt that way about something? Can you relate at all? But that leads me to the only reason why I'm there: and its trust. I trust God opened all the doors to make a way, and so I trust He will help me through.

3. Lack of Trust:

"I'm not confident that God will meet me there..." I think this is ultimately what it comes down to: "Will I trust God, or not?" I'll come back to this...

I totally think any of these 3 reasons, or a combination, could have been Jonah's motivation to run. But we know from Jonah 4:1-3 that it's not fear, insecurity or lack of trust: *"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, 'Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'"*

I think it was mostly just:

4. Disobedience:

We want something else, not God's will, to be done. Jonah is Angry! He doesn't want the

Assyrians to get one scrap of grace or compassion! What's behind that anger? Trauma, pain, deep racism... Dig down far enough you get to idolatry: "I am the master of my own destiny. I call the shots and I say who gets justice and who gets judgement..." We put ourselves in the role of God. This is Jonah saying, "Those Ninevites can go to hell for all I care! I'd rather be dead than see them redeemed!" Insecurity, fear, lack of trust are powerful reasons to run away. But sometimes we run from God because of wilful disobedience. We say, "Not Your will, but my will be done on earth"...

What was the last thing you said no to God about? I suspect that if there was a recording, I say "no" a lot more than "yes." Mostly the no's are subtle, inner conversations: "I won't give that, say that, go there. I won't stick it out. I won't forgive that. I won't pray that. I won't surrender that. I won't commit to that... Send somebody else, Lord." Notice, it's not just personal but God is calling Jonah to a justice matter: the wickedness of Nineveh means that people are suffering and Jonah is turning away from doing something on behalf of God about injustice. I wonder if we've ever neglected to champion justice...?

Disobedience or passive resistance is right throughout my life. Jonah holds up a mirror to our own lives and reminds us that we are all 'Jonah's'. That we are all running to Tarshish in our own ways. We all need just as much grace and mercy. And that Jesus is the only One who has ever lived in perfect obedience to the will and call of God. He is the One who says, "My food is to do the will of the Father..."

The big story here is that God is looking to see if Nineveh can be redeemed, if they can repent because God's real desire is for cities and communities to flourish. His real will is not to destroy but to renew the city. That's the big story of God: a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah knows it and is invited to step into something truly wonderful: the saving of a city. But that's a big story that he didn't sign up for. He is not interested because his hatred for these people is dominating.

Now whether it's insecurity or fear or lack of trust or just wilful disobedience, I think God wants to reveal why we run because there is a giant lie in it. When running for your life from God, you are kind of running from your life and into something less than life. Isn't that what happens to the prodigal son? He runs for his life toward a lie that he will find the life he always wants, away from his Father... But what he gets is something less than his father's servants get. This is powerfully illustrated in the descent of Jonah down into spiritual apathy and a coma:

"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid

and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. 6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." (Jonah 1:3-5)

Tim Mackie really brings this point out, highlighting the repetition: Jonah goes down to Joppa, he gets stuck in a storm, but Jonah had gone down into the belly of the ship, where he lay down, and fell into a deep sleep and ultimately he will be thrown down into the sea and swallow down into the belly of the whale three days and nights. Do you see that he running, but really he is falling down into the deep into a kind of death...

Now, this is a picture of a person whose life has been overpowered by something more influential than God's call on their lives. Asleep to the storm, apathetic about the witness of being a Hebrew, a Prophet, a man with a message. Resisting God, grumpy and bitter. All that running has taken him away from a good and abundant life with God - to a life of dulled senses, cynicism, bitterness and apathy. You've seen this, haven't you? Maybe a family member or friend seems to have little joy or hope, everything is offensive or a problem, or there's always something to complain about or be a victim of. Have you ever descended into cynicism? No one plans it but pain and trauma and disappointment in life can take you there.

And sometimes God says, "OK, have it your way. Keep sailing for Tarshish. Run as far as you can and see how that goes..." But one thing we discover here is that wherever you go, God is there waiting to meet you.

Two unsuspecting moves of God are seen in this chapter (Jonah chapter 1):

The storm: *"Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up." (Jonah 1:4)*

It seems sometimes God is extra persistent when it relates to your formation and calling in life. Storms come in all kinds of forms and I think you have free will to make as many dumb choices as you like. But I also think God is sovereign and sometimes He is persistent. Storms can sometimes turn us around. But I don't think it was enough to turn Jonah around. So God tries again...

The questions: *"Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?" (Jonah 1:7-8)*

The storm is providential but so is the sailors casting lots. The lot falls to Jonah (and he is probably thinking, "Why am I not surprised...?") and they ask the exact questions of calling

and identity that Jonah is trying to forget: *"What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"*

I love these questions of vocation and identity: who are you and what have you been called to? These are like smelling salts for the sleepy soul. And Jonah replies with the real reason as to why they are in the storm: *"He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' This terrified them and they asked, 'What have you done?' (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)"* (Jonah 1:9-10)

The great reversal of this book is that the Prophet is the bad guy and the pagan people are the heroes. And here we see God speaking prophetically through the sailors to Jonah – God saying to Jonah, "Who are you? What are you called to do?" So, whether it is circumstances or people, God's grace is chasing after his wayward prodigal Prophet just as He chases us. In your fears, insecurities, lack of trust and wilful disobedience is the invitation (maybe through storms, sailors, or sermons like this) to wake up, to remember who you are, to get back on mission, to come back to life with Me... Stop buying into the lie that you'll find your life running from God – as if you can. Grace chases you today. It comes down to, "Will I trust Jesus, that He invites me into the Way, the Truth and the real Life?"