

¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ 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 1:1-3

Everyone who reads the Bible usually has a couple of parts that “get” to them like no other part will. For some, Psalms of encouragement and comfort are what help them out of bed. For others, the proclamation of victory and hope in Revelation and throughout the Gospels propel them into passionate living. For me, the portion of Scripture that always gets to me is the whole book of Jonah. Although the Psalms and Revelation are important to me, Jonah consistently gets to me because it is a narrative that checks my understanding of God’s redemptive mission and my place in it. Though on the one hand Jonah is a bedtime story with Pinocchio overtones, if we let it, Jonah is one of the most subversive stories in the entire Bible. The reason why it is so subversive is because the way Jonah responds to the call to mission is very often how we respond as well.

As you probably did, I grew up with the firm belief that Jonah was a happy little big fish-big city story about how to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. This didn’t change much until Jonah became the first book I read all the way through in Hebrew and then got a sense of its literary merits: the repetitions of key words like “great” and the motifs of Jonah’s progressive “going down”. During that summer, I stopped seeing Jonah as a mere children’s story, and when I did, it started to inform how I was responding to the way God calls you and I to a life of mission.

There is a large part of me that is resistant to the idea of becoming a missionary. Though “missionary” was a word of knowledge that has been prophesied over me, immediately after the prophet removed his hands from my forehead and asked me “*does this word mean anything to you,*” I said “*no.*” I’ve never seen myself as one who might be called to sit in a cow dung hut doling out bush medicine and Bibles. I don’t even like camping all that much—what business could God possibly have calling a city mouse like me into the country?

I think Jonah had much the same mindset when God first called him. Though the NIV translates the call of Jonah to prophetic ministry adequately, it loses its punch when it renders the Hebrew as “*go to the great city of Nineveh.*” A better way of translating “*Qum! Lakh!*” is “*Get up! Go!*”—an abrupt command that startles Jonah like a flock of pigeons. Very often, when God calls us in a new direction, his voice can come from out of nowhere and sweep us into movement with very little time to think about the pros and cons. God disturbs Jonah’s self-chosen life path with the kind of disruptive call that goes against common sense and good planning.

Jonah’s response is just as abrupt: he takes off for Tarshish. By contrast, the call narratives of other biblical prophets are often quite a bit longer. The stories of Moses, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah typify prophetic calling in that they all involve lengthy visions and negotiations. Not Jonah. He gets up, as the text tells us, but he does not get up and go to Nineveh. Instead, he heads down to the port city of Joppa to buy passage for Tarshish. There’s no argument or protest, no reflection or bargaining—just Jonah heading west for Tarshish instead of going east to Nineveh. We’re not given reasons for Jonah’s running from the face of God right away, but the suddenness with which it happens clues us into Jonah’s frank refusal to pay attention to his God-given vocation, his calling.

However, lest we think Jonah ran in the other direction in a state of panic, we need to pay attention to how the text slows around the way Jonah goes down to Joppa with every intent on making it to Tarshish. The fact that he *does* get up means he's not afraid of going places, but heading west instead of east means he adamantly refuses to go to the places God asks of him.

You can't really blame Jonah, though. Tarshish was the edge of the Mediterranean world, located by archeologists as near the straits of Gibraltar. Tarshish, as Eugene Peterson puts it, was "*adventure, an idealized port from which came gold, silver, ivory, monkeys, peacocks...The semiticist C.H. Gordon calls it a 'distant paradise'.*" For Jonah, Tarshish represents the gateway to all the goods of the earth. It's razzle and dazzle along with the monkeys and peacocks. It's the good life in that it's not necessarily stable, but that it holds out excitement and glamour for the taking. Tarshish was also the place where the Apostle Paul tried to go before he died—yet was shipwrecked and held up in Rome before he could make it there again. Tarshish was the bold frontier of the known world, the jumping-off point where excitement and growth could *really* happen.

Nineveh, on the other hand, was the center of Assyria, which was a culture that advertised their violent ways to keep vassal city-states under a fearful rein. One Assyrian King boasted of putting down a rebellion by skinning the rebels and stretching their skins over public works, but also on record are incidents of the Assyrians carrying off royal prisoners and maiming them so as to humiliate the conquered nations. If you were unlucky enough to be taken prisoner, you probably could count on the Assyrians to make an example of you by piercing your ear and nose, possibly cutting off your hands or feet, and maybe tearing out your tongue and skinning you alive. True, the Assyrians were probably no more or less violent than any other nation-state, but they were one of the only nation-states that glorified, advertised, and

professionalized it. Nineveh was not a place any good Jewish boy would go because it was a place of unholy terror, a pit of fear. Yet fear is never a matter of reality. Fear is a matter of *perceived* reality—and by reputation alone, it's no wonder Jonah avoided Nineveh at all costs.

However, it wasn't fear that drove Jonah away from Nineveh, it was hatred. We don't find out about this until later in the story when Jonah becomes angry with God for having mercy on Nineveh and he says "*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.*"¹ Jonah's prejudiced estimation of Nineveh was that they were a people not worth saving, a nation not worthy of God's loving embrace. He doesn't want Nineveh to know God's love, he only wants Nineveh to experience God's wrath. Yet God frustrates Jonah's expectations and acts mercifully towards the repentant people of Nineveh, an act that makes you wonder if we'll see the likes of a repentant Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot in the fully-realized Kingdom of God as well.

So, Jonah runs—but not in a panicked way. He schemes his way down to Joppa and buys his passage to Tarshish. If Jonah had been an irrational mess of fear, he would have tried swimming to Tarshish. But no, he calculates his way out of following God—and by the way he keeps going "down" in the paragraphs that follow, Jonah apparently prefers death to obedience.

Of course, death *is* the only alternative to obeying God. We may not feel it every day, but obedience to the call of God *is* a matter of life and death. The hundreds of little decisions we make that either train us in Christlikeness and everlasting life or drain it from us as we estrange ourselves from God are the decisions that welcome new life or else repel it. Jonah doesn't just

¹ Jonah 4:2

choose once not to respond to God—he makes a habit of it. He withdraws from God as he goes down to Joppa, hardens his heart as he goes down into the cargo hold of the ship, and calcifies his soul as he tells the sailors to throw him down into the sea.

You and I can be like that too. We can become unresponsive to the voice of God because we're blinded by our ambition to make it to Tarshish and we get hardened in the habits of disobedience. Maybe we have really good reasons for buying passage to the distant paradise in our heads, but we need to be careful about how the times we decide not to listen to the Spirit of God can kill our discipleship.

Evangelical Christians tend to describe their Christian faith as a relationship with God—which it is! But the nature of this relationship is often fuzzy and out of focus. Some think having a relationship with God is like having a genie in a lamp who grants us our hearts' desire. Others who get beyond this elementary view might see God as some divine psychotherapist in the sky who listens to our complaints and asks us about our mothers. Yet the call of God has always been a call to discipleship, a call to follow, a lifestyle that starts with obedience.

Obedience is a dirty word to most people in our day and age; a word suited for dog schools and not for human beings endowed with free will. Why would we choose to obey anyone if, as the world has it, what we decide for ourselves is what is best? This may be true for those who have not yet committed their lives to the lordship of Jesus, but for those of us who have, we become the hypocrites the world hates when we say "*Jesus is Lord—except over this and this and that. These, these are mine. God can't have them.*"

In recent years, Jonah has been more personally relevant to me than many other texts because it is about responding with one's whole life to the voice of God calling us up from the deep and into new life. I'm sure most of us are happy with the idea of receiving new life, but one

trouble we often fall into is thinking that this new life is ours to spend as we like. Or else we become paralyzed by fear of what might happen when we feel called out of predictable comfort into lives where we don't quite know just *what* is going to happen.

There are two things worth mentioning here. First, when God has a mission in mind, *he* is the one who guarantees its completion. Jonah does his level best to run in the other direction, but a miracle fish that no one expects comes to bring Jonah to the place he was called to be. It is a miracle that God chooses *us* to work with him in the redemption of all things. We may not ever be thrown into a stormy sea like Jonah, but praying “your will be done” is asking for a giant fish to put us in the right place at the right time to participate with God in salvation history. Never forget that we are all held in the grip of God's grace, and that it is by this grace alone that the Kingdom of God comes to fruition.

Second, when we pick up and follow Jesus, we simply aren't given any idea of where he'll lead us, but the reassurance he gives us is that we meet Jesus *on the way*. When you read the call narratives of the people Jesus invites, it most often happens when Jesus is going from one place to another. He calls Simon and Andrew as he's walking on the seashore. Going home, he nets James and John in their father's fishing boat.² Later, while leaving Nazareth, Jesus stops by the tollbooth and tells Matthew to get up and follow.³ Jesus is recorded in every Gospel as being on the move—and now that he is risen and glorified, he isn't content to sit on his throne and let us do the dirty work. No, the risen Jesus is ahead of us, preparing the way for the fullness of the Kingdom that begins in the hearts of those he loves and calls together.

Though questions of whether Jesus will *actually* meet us along the way will continue to plague us, if we choose to ignore his call to be a part of his mission, we will never find out if it's

² Matt 4:18-22

³ Matt 9:9, Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27

true. Discipleship to Jesus is not just about going to classes or gatherings or reading books and memorizing Scripture, it is about motion, it is about movement, it is about taking risks and being willing to follow our Lord anywhere and everywhere.

This is easy enough to say in the security and familiarity of a Sunday morning with lunch and playoff football ahead, but the real test comes when out of the blue, God may speak to *you*. The question then becomes, are you living lightly enough so that you can obey? Have you trained yourself to be responsive to the Spirit so that God's mission becomes your mission and obedience becomes second nature? Or will you go and stand in line for tickets to Tarshish? If this is what you choose, who knows? You may just make your dreams come true—yet what does having the Spirit of God indwell us mean if it does not mean that we dream the dreams God gives us?⁴ For when we dare to dream of participating in God's mission, we come alive in the vision of the Kingdom of God. And there, sisters and brothers, is where new life *truly* begins.

- 1.) What does it mean to live a missional life?
- 2.) What part of God's mission are you being called to?

⁴ Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17