

Sermon 2-17-09 (Ash Wednesday)
Jonah 1:1-3
God is Calling!

Let's play a little game of music trivia. Name the song based on these lyrics, "And now, the end is here, and so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived, a life that's full I traveled each and every highway, and more, much more than this..." As I was thinking about the opening of Jonah, this song came on my ipod while I was driving. I thought to myself, what a perfect song to describe the call of this prophet of the Lord, who, after being commissioned for a task, sought to go his own way rather than the way of the Lord.

"The Word of the Lord came to Jonah...saying, 'Arise at once to Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'" Following the Lord's call, Jonah does "arise" but he goes in the opposite direction. The city of Nineveh was east of Jonah, and in a willful act of disobedience he heads west to Tarshish instead. This is not the typical opening to a prophetic book. Typically there might be a protest of some sort on the part of the prophet but never willful disobedience. Jonah's "escape" is an attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord, breaking the traditional call model. But what would cause Jonah to flee; what would cause him to act out with such willful disobedience? Surely Jonah was familiar with Psalm 139, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

Just like other prophets before him, Jonah is called beyond his borders. Abram was sent from his homeland. Moses led God's people from their homes in Egypt. Elijah had been sent to the Gentiles in the town of Zarephath, and Elisha was sent to Naaman. God's prophets had a history of speaking God's Word beyond the traditional borders and cultural

designations. Precisely because it was God's Word, it was for those whom God intended it. Yet for Jonah, this call to Nineveh was difficult to reconcile. Upon hearing the name Nineveh, I imagine that Jonah's initial reaction was one of shock, followed by anger with a healthy dose of doubt.

Nineveh was a place of deceit and wickedness, renowned for their bloodthirsty acts of warfare. It was a city of the Assyrians and when the Assyrians took over a town in battle, they would take the survivors and impale them on stakes in front of the town. After the battle, they would pile up the skulls of their enemies, making pillars of them. This was not a friendly nation, nor was Nineveh a friendly city. It would win no awards as the "Friendliest City in the World." Yet it's to this group of people that Jonah is called to speak the Word of the Lord. He's not going on an overseas mission trip to Italy or Puerto Rico; Jonah is headed to the equivalent of Kabul, or Tehran, or Bagdad, or Mogadishu. Jonah received a call he would rather not get.

You know that feeling. The phone rings, and before you answer it, you check the caller ID. If you don't have caller ID then you screen the call through the answering machine. You know the feeling when the phone rings, it's your ailing mother whose misplaced her glasses again; or it's the friend who's always looking for a handout; or it's the gas company calling because you're behind on your payments; or it's the random person from college who knows your in the ministry and wants you to do a wedding for them, even though they don't go to church. You screen your calls because you don't want to deal with what lies on the other end of that line; you use caller ID to duck those people you just don't want to deal with. Maybe you've even made the mistake of picking up the phone in the first

place, discovering to your horror that it's someone you have no interest in talking to, and so you hang up quickly. That's essentially what Jonah does with God.

Imagine that Jonah had a cell phone and it started ringing. He looked at the caller ID, saw that it was God and hit ignore, letting it go to voicemail. When he listened to the message, he got up, running in the opposite direction that God had told him to go. The last thing he wants to do is to answer God's call by going to Nineveh. So he hires a boat and heads for a city far away from Nineveh, tossing his phone over the side in the hopes that God will have no other way of reaching him.

How many of us try to do the same thing? How many of us try to ignore God's call, running in the opposite direction in an attempt to frivolously flee from God's presence? Even as those who live their lives abiding in Jesus Christ, we try to flee from his call and claim. We resist his call for holy living. We don't set our hearts upon his Word as often as we should. We don't lift our lives in trust and thanksgiving but focus solely on what we can do to plod through life; we focus on what we can do because of the strengths we have. And in the process we descend further and further with Jonah down the road of disobedience and distrust. And yet we arrive at Lent and we are reminded of the One who is obedient. We are reminded of the one who didn't flee from God's call but embraced the will of his Father in heaven. At Lent we behold the One who shared the same things as us, "so that through death he might destroy death...and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death...he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of his people (Hebrews 2:14-17)." This day, we turn our eyes upon Jesus, the One who penetrated into the depths of our sin and disobedience,

that he might stand in for us, to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves, offering up his life as a perfectly obedient response in our stead. We

We hear the disobedience and flight of Jonah and we remember our own, yet in the midst of this day, as we prepare to receive ashes upon our heads, we remember the One who went before us, to vicariously stand in for us that he might break the power of sin, and shatter the claims of death; we remember the one who is our living, reigning, active, and present Lord, who joins us to his vicarious life that we might live and move and have our being in him.

Listen my friends, God is calling again. In this season of Lent, he is calling us to confess our sins in response to our forgiveness in Christ; he's calling us to lives of repentance and holiness because of the free gift of grace in Christ, he's calling us to lives that resist wandering and, through the power of the Spirit, live into our union with the Savior of the world. Christ is the faithful one of God on our behalf; can we hear his call to us now? Praise, glory and honor be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.