

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans

October 20, 2019

“Called...”

Jonah 1: 1-6

Pastor Jonathan

We start a new series on the prophet Jonah. He is number five in the smaller books we call the Minor Prophets, “minor” not because they are less important, but because they are shorter literary works. The Major Prophets are longer, and the Minor Prophets are shorter. And since this is normally the question asking time, let me ask you, how many of you enjoy Middle Eastern history as a subject? Anyone? How many enjoy Middle Eastern Geography? Yes, I know, it sounds like a Jeopardy category. These two areas are critical for understanding this book. The fact is that it is set in the eighth century BC, during the height of the Assyrian Empire. Now if you don’t know about that empire or get confused between Assyria and Babylon, that’s okay. We’re going to take a few minutes to explain a few key things to both understand Jonah and ourselves, and they happen to fall into the zone of history and geography.

Jonah 1: 1-2

*Use the Power point maps.* If you have a map in the back of your Bible that attempts to show Nineveh, Babylon, Joppa and Tarshish, that will help you understand the geography of the region, and show you that God is calling Jonah to a city named Nineveh, a major city in Assyria, the largest empire of the eighth century BC, to call that city to repent.

The call of God is clear: You go and do this, Jonah. The mission of God is clear: Preach against the city of Nineveh, declare the judgment of God. The prophet of God is chosen and called but then decides to go the other way, a 180 degree turn. We can speculate as to why he is such a reluctant or rebellious prophet. But before we do so, let me simply ask you, do you know that you are called of God to be His? Have you given your life to Jesus Christ as Master and Saviour, and turned from your sins? Then you know you are called of God to be a follower and missionary of His right where you are now. Perhaps God is asking you to go somewhere far away or to stay right in the neighborhood you are in right now, or something in between. Are you willing? Are you willing to hear God’s call, to respond to God’s call, and act on that calling? He is asking you to share with your family, your friends, your neighbors about the Good News of Jesus. Are you

willing? Willingness is the first and most important part of God's call on your life.

Without the willingness, what do you have? But pastor, I'm not a professional Christian leader like you, I'm just a run of the mill Christian. And yes, we are all just ordinary followers of Jesus, all of us. But the call of God is on your life. Isn't it? Then if that call is real, how are you responding to it? Some of us are planning trips to Spain, which is a lovely place to visit. Some of us are planning the trips where God wants us to go, and go there as a mission, God's mission. Some of us are simply staying and realizing that we need to stay here and share.

No matter what we do, we need to listen to God, and be faithful where we are. The call of God to be faithful to His Word, is clear and constant. We are to obey. The book of Jonah, whose name means "dove," records a prophet who ran away from God. (Jonah 1:3) We too can run away but be careful if you are running from God. God has His way of calling you back, sometimes supernaturally with a big fish on an ocean cruise, sometimes simply in your thoughts, sometimes through other Christians, sometimes through varying crises. God speaks to us through the Scriptures and through others and through our own prayers and trusting of God. Make sure you are trusting God in this season. The denomination this church is a part of may make wrong decisions regarding sexuality and marriage, but each of us needs to know from God where we stand, and how we can trust the Scriptures and trust Jesus anew here. The elders are seeking to lead from that position of trusting Jesus.

Jonah was supposed to get up from Galilee as Gath Hephner is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:24, during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC) and go east to Nineveh, near present day Mosul in Iraq. He went the other way. He went west to the coast of Israel, to Joppa, to get a ship to Tarshish, likely Spain, but possibly a name for several Phoenician smelting ports in the W. Mediterranean.

Each of us in our lives seeks to follow the Lord. That's why we come here. But there are moments we find it hard to follow the Lord. And in that moment, we may make choices against the Lord. Are there any of those choices against the Lord in your life right now? Purpose in your heart to no longer go against the Lord in those areas of your life. Perhaps you have run

away from the Lord before and know the consequences of such. Remember those consequences and choose to agree with God and go God's way.

Why was Jonah running away? Did he not like Nineveh or the weather there? I remember my brothers telling me, why would I ever move to Canada when everyone knows California is the best place in the world to live...sort of in the Beverly Hillbillies type of reasoning. And it is a beautiful place, with wonderful weather. But it is the call of God that matters. So why does Jonah resist God in going to Nineveh, a major city in the major empire of the world? Preaching destruction apparently was not Jonah's fear. You must read chapter 4 to get Jonah's reasons for why he fled to Tarshish, rather than going to Nineveh as God instructed. He wanted to see the people judged and condemned. He didn't want to see them turn to God and be saved. They weren't Jews. They weren't like us. They deserved punishment and condemnation. Jonah was depressed in seeing God's grace.

That was Jonah's story. What is ours? What holds us back from sharing our faith with others? Are we too concerned of what they might think? Are we too afraid to share, because we think we are not great with words or communication? Are we simply wanting the status quo: for things to stay as they are... or perhaps we say to ourselves: "people who don't know just won't know Him and won't change, people who do, already do?" How do we explain our reticence to ourselves and to the Lord? Jonah gets angry with God. And the book ends with him still being angry with God. Will we choose the same in our lives?

God has given us this book to reflect on our reticence, reluctance and rebellion in our faith journey. I can't tell you what is holding you back from trusting Jesus more, for trusting here through the storms and challenges, we have already faced here and the ones coming. I can tell you God is faithful and creative to find ways to keep you coming back to Him.

The beauty of the story of Jonah is that God cares so much for Jonah and his part in the story that God pursues Jonah with many means: prayer, storms, sailors, swimming, fishing (it was the fish who was fishing for humans in this story), more prayer, time to decide to go God's way, faithfulness, anger, gardening, all kinds of ways God speaks in his life, and in our lives today.

So, Jonah boards the ship to the lovely sun-drenched port of Tarshish in the S. Mediterranean, he buys his economy ticket (v. 3), he gets on board below

deck, probably in steerage class, and goes to sleep. It's been a hard decision to go against God's call, and he is feeling sleepy. Maybe some of you are too. Apparently, he doesn't get sea sick, or like many of us takes the Grivol, and goes to sleep on the ferry in the rough Atlantic, or even rougher Mediterranean Sea. And the Lord sends even rougher weather, the Scripture says. A violent storm.

Now in those days, you realize almost all sailors were religious men. They called out to their gods when they knew the storm was supernaturally bad, a "record breaker," as they say today. What storms has God allowed in your life? Or even made worse? It's time to pray. The Renewal Fellowship of the Presbyterian Church in Canada recommends we set our alarms for 7:14 am and pm, to pray for our church and our people, reading 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people who are called by My Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." This is one way to remember to pray...set your alarms...

The storms are upon us. We can also pray this over the federal election. God knows what we need. Seek God in the storm. Sometimes we ask for the storm to go away, but really it is first seeking God in the midst of the storm.

It was so bad on board that ship, that they threw away the cargo and the food, to lighten the load and hope that the sailing ship would not go under from the weight of those goods. The captain made sure everyone was praying that day, including Jonah, the cheap passenger. Imagine being awakened on your cruise ship by your captain, urging you to pray, because it looked like all was lost. No hope. Are you feeling that way? Turn to God right now. Just as the captain urged Jonah to call out to God to save them from certain destruction, and the captain who had navigated those waters a lot knew how bad it was, so you too, call out to your God. For God is not like that unrighteous judge in Luke 18 who would not help the widow until she bugged him enough. God does want to hear and act and be generous. Call out. "Jesus, master, have pity on us!" like the ten lepers did last Sunday.

God meets us as we call out, and beyond our seeking Him. We will see this time and time again in Jonah. Let us look for the same in our own lives.

Let us pray.