

May 7, 2017  
Lesson 10: Jonah 1:7-17  
God's Sustaining Love

**Context:**

Our scripture lesson this morning jumps back to one of the shortest books of the Old Testament. The story of Jonah is usually noted as the “reluctant prophet.” The book of Jonah comes as part of the collection of the twelve Minor Prophets.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike the other prophetic writings, this one contains fewer words of the prophet and is more of a narrative.

In the verses before the ones for the scripture lesson today, we read that Jonah has been called to God to go to the land of Nineveh and preach to the people there. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the main enemy of Israel and Judah for several centuries.<sup>2</sup> However, Jonah does not respond to God's call. Instead, Jonah boards a ship for the opposite direction that he is supposed to go.

In an almost comical twist, the ship begins to experience a storm once they leave the harbor. As they are tossed about, they decide to use one of their ancient traditions of casting lots to discover who could be responsible for such a calamity. And all the lots fall on Jonah. Jonah is forced to tell his identity and that he is a Hebrew, someone who belongs to the Lord, or Yahweh. The sailors are fearful as the name Yahweh means one God who is over all things. They have a fugitive on board, one who could get them in a lot of trouble and is the cause of their current predicament.

They ask him what to do and he says to throw him overboard into the sea so that it will become calm around them. They try to reach shore instead. But in their desperation they listen to him and he is thrown overboard even as they pray and ask God to forgive them if this is not what they are supposed to do. And the minute Jonah goes overboard, all is calm and the sea stops sloshing them about.

However, God still has the last laugh. A great fish finds Jonah and swallows him up! Jonah dwells in the belly of the giant fish for three days and three nights. In later chapters of Jonah we read how the fish spits Jonah out and he finds himself headed to the dreaded city of Nineveh to preach and call the people to repentance. God got God's way in the end.

**Application:**

One might wonder what we can take away from the story of Jonah. My hope is that everyone has heard God's call on their lives in some form or fashion. When I think of call, I don't just think of clergy who are called to serve the church in ministry. It is certainly one of the words that we use to describe how we responded to God nudging us to take those steps and hear that we were being instructed to lead God's people. But if we look throughout the scriptures and in this story particularly, we see that God calls everyone to do something even if it pushes us out of our comfort zone. Even when we may go kicking and screaming wherever that may be.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2011), 517.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 517.

Jonah is a prime example of that in the Bible. Of all the prophets, we do not know as much about background of Jonah. Unlike the other prophets, we never hear about his lineage or if he belonged to the priestly clan of the Levites. We don't know where he was from exactly or what his occupation might have been. Unlike other prophets, we don't know what happened to him after he returned from preaching in Nineveh.

What we do know is that Jonah ran from God's call and tried to do his own thing. But in the end, God was able to get Jonah where he needed Jonah to be. And shockingly the people of Nineveh were receptive and were repentant. How often do we see God surprise us and we find ourselves as part of the story? And all because we heard God's call and used our gifts and talents in a way that glorified God. At first we may be nervous, we may worry about the unknown future, and we may we event try to run from whatever God is calling us to do. But God usually has a way of drawing us back into the fold.

I think one of the things I love the most in ministry is seeing people respond to those calls and realizing that God has indeed called them to do what they think are small things when it might actually might be the seed to something greater that God has placed on their heart. Last Sunday my sister Hillary, who serves as the Children's Minister of FUMC Tallassee, put together a Children's Sabbath that went along with confirmation. She of course had the challenge of organizing schedules and lining up the order of worship. But for her and the congregation the rewarding part was seeing the children step up to do different things. One child wanted to do the "Adult moment." Another one wanted to serve as an usher because they liked watching their father and grandfather do it. Others wanted to sing, or pray, and even speak. Some were nervous and would respond with the fact that they didn't want to mess up in public. But my sister and others assured them that God would use them and that God called them to share their gifts and talents with the church and with others. Perfection didn't matter. Experience didn't matter. Age didn't matter. The children were responding to God to lead in worship and to share how God is at work in their lives and in the world.

As I saw the pictures posted, I remembered my own experiences and how calling can be both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. For my own call to ministry to story, I confess that while it was exciting, there were and are parts that make you go: "Are you sure about this God?" I remember the nerve-wracking sweat that creeped up before delivering a first sermon for youth Sunday. I remember the anxiety several years ago of finding the right school to "prepare" me for ministry. Following the feeling of graduation saying to myself, "Am I really ready to serve? Maybe another degree and then I'll be ready." But too late for that now; it's time to step up to the pulpit and lead a new church! And then there's the rolling in of appointment season when you look at your phone and have this unsettling feeling that the Caller ID with your DS's name will mean a change in your future. You may even want to run and you may want to hide!

But after a long run in the evening or a scripture from your morning devotion, you remember that God has called you and given you all the gifts you need to serve God. The call was enough and even though it may be hard, God will keep tugging and pursuing you until you surrender and say: "Alright Lord. You've won. Know do with me what you will." And God will and God does. We learn that God never gives up on us and God is constantly calling us to be to the stewards and servants he has created us to be. What is God calling you to do and what path might God be leading you down so that you might

be a part of God's beautiful Kingdom?

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