

**Lent 2010: Jonah      Week 1 - God is Calling**  
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*(standing at the pulpit... cell phone rings...)* Aw, man... Please excuse me...

*(answering cell phone)* Hello... This is he... I'm kinda busy right now... Who is this?

*(looking at caller ID)* Could you hold on a minute?

*(holding phone to chest as if to muffle sound, then speaking to congregation)* You're not gonna believe this, but it's God!

*(returning to phone)* I'll call you back.

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Wouldn't it be something if God actually *did* call? It's not that far fetched, you know. Way before the invention of the telephone, God was calling people and giving them important messages. One of the most well-known calls God ever made was to a man named Jonah. We will be focusing on Jonah's life story during this season of Lent. I know... it sounds strange. Shouldn't we be focusing on *Jesus* during Lent? Yes, we should. And we will.

I ran across a passage in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke where people ask Jesus to prove that he is the Messiah. Jesus responds, "*The only sign I will give you is the sign of Jonah. What happened to him was a sign to the people of Nineveh that God had sent him. What happens to the Son of Man will be a sign to you that I am sent by God.*"

In other words, Jesus compares his life to the life of Jonah. Jesus seems to be saying that if we understand the story of Jonah, we will better understand who Jesus is and his purpose for coming into the world. And so, for our Wednesday night Lenten services, we will dig deeper into the story of Jonah to see what truths we can uncover.

Although Jonah has his very own book in the Bible, the story of Jonah actually begins in 2 Kings, the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. There we read about the evil king Jeroboam, who "always did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." To show him the error of his ways, God called the prophet Jonah to go to King Jeroboam and to speak God's word of truth and mercy. And it worked. Jeroboam and the people repented of their evil ways and chose to live righteously.

Then, in the opening chapters of the book of Jonah, we hear God once again make a call to Jonah. God says, "Stop what you are doing and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against them because I have seen their wicked ways." Because of the success Jonah had with the evil King Jeroboam, God sends Jonah to what some considered the most evil and despised place on earth – Nineveh. It would be Jonah's toughest case. It would be like asking a Jew in 1942 to go to Hitler and tell him that God loved him and that everything he did would be forgiven if he would only repent.

It doesn't surprise me one bit how Jonah responds. You might say that Jonah hung up on God. The Bible says, "Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the ship dock and boarded a ship headed for Tarsish in hopes that he could escape the Lord."

Notice, Jonah did the *exact opposite* of what the Lord commanded him to do. That's the biblical definition of sin. God clearly spells out to Jonah – and God clearly spells out to us – what direction our lives should take. And yet, time and time again, we disregard God's instructions. We do the exact opposite. We choose to live life by our own rules. We're gonna go to Tarshish – that perceived paradise – and no one is going to stop us.

What we so often forget is that there are eternal consequences to disobeying God's directives. When we disobey God we jeopardize the relationship we have with the One who is the very author of life and the giver of salvation. To run from God means that we cut ourselves off from the very source of all that is good.

Ash Wednesday – the beginning of the Lenten journey – is all about coming clean, of confessing that we have not always followed God's instructions. We have disobeyed God's commands. We are sinful, mortal beings. Our lives are a mess, often looking like the blackened smudge on our foreheads this night.

We deceive ourselves into thinking that God's rules apply to everyone else, but not to us. When we see "GOD" in the caller ID, we deny that the phone is even ringing. Not now, God. I'm too busy living life. Maybe after I return from my trip to Tarshish I'll answer the phone. But right now it's just not a convenient time.

The Bible says, "Jonah went down to the ship dock and boarded a ship headed for Tarshish in hopes that he could *escape the Lord*." Let's cut to the chase: you can't escape from the Lord. Psalm 139 declares: "O Lord, you know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up... You see me travel and when I rest at home. You go before me and you follow me... I can never get away from your presence!" God is all-knowing; therefore we can never escape the Lord. Everything about us – our thoughts, our motives, our lack of commitment – it's all an open book to God.

Names in the Bible always tell us something about the person. The name "Jonah" means "dove." When we think of a dove we might think of peace, or perhaps the Holy Spirit might come to mind. But that's not what the ancient Hebrews thought when they heard the word "dove." In the Old Testament culture, a dove was a flighty, brainless creature – something that was unreliable, flying quickly from one place to another, with no apparent goal or plan. It's the perfect description of Jonah – a lost creature in search of peace and purpose, but finding none; a person without direction, without peace, without a future.

As we gather next week and continue with Jonah's story, we will soon learn that by Jonah boarding the ship of his own desires, he plunges himself into the sea of certain death. Without God, death is inevitable. Death is the verdict declared upon all sinners – upon all who choose to run from God and disregard God's ways.

But all hope is not lost. Even though Jonah disregarded God's instructions, even though Jonah will be cast overboard into the deep waters of death, God will intervene (in the most unexpected of ways!) God will save Jonah. Because of the great love God has for Jonah (and for us), God will choose to intervene on our behalf. Jonah's rebellion – our rebellion – will not have the last word.

God's intervention plan has a name: Jesus. Although *we* choose to disregard God's instructions, *Jesus* obeys God's Word each and every time. Jesus will heed God's call to be the perfect sacrificial Lamb for all of us imperfect sinners. When God calls us to go to Ninevah, we say "No way!" But when God calls Jesus to go to the cross and accept the sin of the whole world, Jesus faithfully responds "Your will be done."

Yes, we are people who choose our own way. But in the midst of our rebellion, God makes a promise to us – the promise of the cross. On the cross, Christ will put to death the powers of sin and death, thereby restoring our relationship with God. That is our hope, our faith – that our God is a God of forgiveness and unconditional love. Through the sacrificial death of Jesus, God will transform our sin into forgiveness, our rebellion into faithfulness, our death into eternal life.

And so listen, and you will hear God calling. God is calling us to confess our sin and to return to God with all our heart. But more importantly, God is calling us to confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the One who will free us from everything that keeps us from enjoying the full joy of our Father's love.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, for I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Thanks be to God! Amen.