

## Running Away

Jonah 1  
Matthew 6:19-24

January 21, 2018  
Faith Community

Friends, I challenge you to read the Old Testament book of Jonah, not just once but rather multiple times, and do so with a receptive spirit, one that asks, 'how does this speak to me?' You'll gain great wisdom if you do.

In order to understand this brief but important book, there's one thing I want you to do, and I cannot over emphasize its importance. It's a three-word command:

Lose the whale!

One of the greatest obstacles to authentic Christianity is the trivialization of the text.

Noah and the ark  
Daniel in the lion's den  
Ezekiel's dry bones  
Jonah and the whale

We let ourselves get so familiar with the image and get caught up in endless debates between literal and symbolic interpretation that we lose the message. Don't let that happen to you.

The book of Jonah is not primarily about a guy getting swallowed by a whale. Instead, it tells us about the love of God, the call of God and the implications of not responding positively to either one.

***The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*** (Jonah 1:1-2, TNIV)

Jonah was a prophet. Remember, please, that a prophet's job was not to predict the future. Much more importantly, a prophet's job was to proclaim God's word and let the chips fall where they may. Prophets weren't popular at all, because they spoke to people who had wandered away from God honoring values. They needed hard and difficult change, and it was never easy because people did not and do not want to be challenged in that way, and so, a prophet's life was and continues to be often in danger.

Jonah's call shows God's love for all people, even nasty ones like those who lived in Nineveh. An entire city would

be turned around by the one time preaching of one guy, and that guy was Jonah.

What are you going to do, Jonah?

***Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.*** (1:2)

Nineveh was a couple hundred miles northeast for Jonah. Tarshish was 2,500 miles west, the farthest known geographical point in that direction. Ships that sailed for Tarshish were gone for three years. That's how seriously Jonah wanted to get away.

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, a great and wicked city, and preach there. It didn't matter that God loved them or that God wanted to save them from themselves, Jonah was convinced they didn't deserve it, and so he would have nothing to do with such an enterprise, thank you very much. So, instead of travelling the couple hundred miles to Nineveh, our reluctant prophet heads in the opposite direction to the most distant place on earth known at the time.

As President Reagan used to say, "You can run but you cannot hide," and the same applies to Jonah. On board his getaway ship, a furious storm comes up and Jonah gets tossed overboard, fully expecting to drown, but along comes the great fish, and Jonah is on the receiving end of the weirdest rescue in maritime history, and now finds himself a bit confined, shall we say, and he prays.

Look at his prayer now. Instead of complaining, he offers a symphony of praise.

***In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.*** (Jonah 2:2) That's how Jonah begins his prayer. The very God he avoided, he now desperately needed, and God followed through.

Jonah knows his Scriptures and puts them to good use. He alludes to no fewer than eight of the Old Testament Psalms in his prayer. That's a great way to pray, by the way. Pray the Psalms, friends, and you'll discover the fullness of worship.

In the midst of his prayer he affirms one of the great truths of the faith:

***Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*** (v. 8)

An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Friends, we live in one of the most idolatrous countries in one of the most idolatrous eras of them all. Jonah's idol was his own opinions, which he allowed to outweigh the call of God. What might it be for you?

Friends, you can do all the right things and still get it wrong. Jonah offered a wonderful, God honoring prayer from inside that great fish, but missed the point. How does that happen in your life?

- When you go to church, affirm great faith, and then act like a creep the rest of the week, something's wrong.
- When your mind will not open and your mouth refuses to close, something is wrong.
- When your heart doesn't break for those who are far from God, when you harbor judgmental attitudes toward entire groups of people, something is missing in your walk with God, no matter what you might say or do on Sunday mornings.

That is the tragedy of Jonah. Don't let it be yours.

Friends, do not fall for a safe, easy, predictable religion. Do not settle for a lifeless routine that doesn't call you to stretch, to reconsider, to risk your comfortable life and to give beyond the leftovers of your world. That's a dead end.

Instead of trivializing the text, develop the respect it deserves.

The chapter ends with Jonah being deposited back on shore. The people of Nineveh aren't the only ones who get a second chance, Jonah. You do too. What're you going to do, Jonah?

Indeed, what are *you* going to do?