

“Running from God”
Sermon Series on the book of Jonah
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
May 12, 2019
(Jonah 1:1-16)

Introduction.

If you had to summarize your life in just six words, what would they be? Several years ago, an online magazine asked that question, and it was inspired by the possibly legendary challenge posed to Ernest Hemingway many years before to write a six-word story. That resulted in the classic: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” (On this Mother’s Day, think about the heartache behind that six-word story.)¹

The magazine was flooded with so many responses that the site almost crashed, and the responses were eventually turned into a book *Not Quite What I Was Planning*. It is filled with six-word memoirs written by both famous and obscure people, and the stories range from funny to ironic to inspiring to heartbreaking. Here are a few examples.

“One tooth, one cavity; life’s cruel.”

“Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends.” (This one was written by a nine-year-old boy with cancer).

“Painful nerd kid, happy nerd adult.”

“Seventy years, a few tears, hairy ears.”

The challenge of the six-word limitation is its demand to focus on what matters most and to capture briefly something of significance. How would you summarize your life in just six words?

John Ortberg thought about all this, and he came up with a few six-word summaries of some biblical characters. For example, Abraham: “Left Ur. Had baby. Still laughing.” Or Noah: “Hated the rain. Loved the rainbow.” And for Jonah he summarized his life like this: “‘No!’ Storm. Overboard. Fish. Regurgitated. ‘Yes!’”² That about says it all, doesn’t it?

Last week we began a new sermon series on the book of Jonah, and Tim provided a wonderful introduction for our study. He explained how Jonah, in essence, said to God, “You’re not the boss of me,” and he headed in the opposite direction God asked the prophet to go. He also said that all of us have a “them” in our lives – people we don’t want to help, people we’d rather not get involved with, and folks we may even hate. And Tim shared with us that there is a lot we can

learn from this short book in the Old Testament. Today we're going to continue our series and look at the first 16 verses of chapter 1.

I. Refusing God.

In the opening words of the book of Jonah we read that after receiving God's call to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it, "*Jonah ran away from the Lord...*" (1:3). The reason Jonah refused God and ran away isn't given in the text, but we can imagine a few of the reasons he might have said no. For example, fear would be one. The Jews hated the Assyrians, and vice versa. Another reason might have been how unlikely it was Jonah would be successful if he went to Nineveh to preach to the people there. It could be argued that Jonah's chances of winning a hearing and convincing the people of the city to turn to God were slim and none. So why go on a fool's errand?

However, later on in the book the *real* reason the prophet refused to go is stated in 4:2, "*I knew You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*" Jonah's real fear was that God would extend forgiveness to the people he hated if they repented, and he simply didn't want them to experience the mercy of God. So, the prophet refused to go and do what God asked him to do.

The people of Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital, were feared and hated, not just by the Jews but all over the world. It was because they were one of the cruellest and most violent nations in antiquity. Nineveh was the belly of the beast, and the people there were so destructive that Nineveh was nicknamed the City of Blood because of its tyrannical and violent conquests of rival nations. That's why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. It would be like you or me being asked to go to Syria today and try to reach people involved in the terrorist state of ISIS with the gospel of God's love in Christ. You can understand why Jonah didn't want to go. So, he refused God.

Think about all the people in the Bible who refused God at one time or another. Abraham – "I'm too old." Timothy – "I'm too young." Esther – "I'm the wrong gender." Moses – "I don't talk well enough." But Jonah is the patron saint of people who refused God.³ He's the picture of a person who knows what God wants him to do but refuses to do it. And in Jonah's story we see all our evasions of God's calling mirrored right back to us and all the ways we refuse Him too.

What has God been asking you to do lately, but you've been refusing the Lord? What is that difficult thing God wants you to do, but you just want to run in the opposite direction? Maybe it's to forgive someone who hurt you badly. Or perhaps it's to come alongside someone with whom you really disagree regarding politics or race and God wants you to try to understand where they're coming from and why they believe as they do.

Maybe God wants you to tell a friend why Jesus is your Savior, but you're worried it will affect your friendship, or that it will damage your reputation at work or school. Perhaps you're like Tweedledum in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* when he said, "I'm very brave generally, only today I happen to have a headache."⁴ How are you refusing God today? Just remember God's "yes" is always bigger than your "no."

II. Running from God.

When the call of God came to Jonah, the prophet responded by running in the opposite direction. The text tells us that he went down to Joppa, which is a port city, and he boarded a ship that was bound for Tarshish. Scholars aren't exactly sure where Tarshish is, but they all agree it was in the West, and many think it was somewhere on the coast of Spain. There was a Phoenician mining colony in southwest Spain near Gibraltar, and many scholars think this was the ancient city of Tarshish. Nineveh and Tarshish represented the opposite ends of the Levantine commercial sphere in the ancient world, and these two cities extended to the geographic boundaries at the time. One was in the far East; the other was in the far West. They couldn't have been further apart.

The text tells us that "*after paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.*" That's a little detail we might be tempted to overlook, but it's really a big deal. In Jonah's day money was relatively new. The ancient world was a barter economy, and money was very scarce among the people of Israel. Most folks wouldn't be able to do what Jonah did.

Jonah had enough money to buy passage for a long voyage out of his pocket. What this tells us is that Jonah had options. He had mobility, and he had wealth. John Ortberg says this is one of the most dangerous things about money. It makes it easier for us to run away from God. When we've got options, when we've got the means, and we don't always have to do what the Lord calls us to do. We can change direction, we can buy a new experience, and we think we control our own fate. But we're wrong.

It's significant to note that Jonah wanted to go to Tarshish, not just because it was in the opposite direction from Nineveh, but because in many ways it represented a different kind of city. Nineveh was a center of military might, but Tarshish had great wealth. It was a pioneer in trade. Commerce over the sea was sort of like a new technology in the ancient world, and people were getting rich with maritime trade. So, the phrase "a ship of Tarshish" actually became a symbol of wealth in antiquity.

This comes up several times in the OT. For example, Isaiah says, "*The Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; ...against all the ships of Tarshish....The haughtiness of people shall be*

humbled” (Is. 2:12,16-17). A similar image is used in Ezekiel. “The ships of Tarshish serve as carriers for your wares....With your great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth. Now you are shattered by the sea” (Ez. 27:25,33-24).

The ships of Tarshish became a symbol of wealth and self-sufficiency, of power and greed. So, Jonah was running to Wall Street. He was running to the Silicon Valley of the day. He got on a ship of Tarshish, and he was chasing wealth thinking it would make him safe and take him where he wanted to be. People have been headed for that ship for a very long time and in every age. But that ship will never lead to where you think it will take you, and often your life will get shipwrecked going there. Just ask Jonah.

Have you been running from God lately yourself? What is your Tarshish, and how have you hoped that a ship headed there would take you away from everything you fear? How’s it going with your running from God? Are things turning out as well as you hoped, or is your life a mess now? You can never really outrun God, you know.

I read about an accused drug dealer named Alfred Acree who escaped from the police in Charles City, Virginia, a while back, and he took off into a dark wooded area. However, despite his best efforts, police were able to catch Acree rather easily. You see, he was wearing a new pair of LA Gear shoes that were outfitted with small battery-operated lights. With every step he took, the lights on his heels lit up his path. Sheriff’s investigator Anthony Anderson said, “Every time he took a step we knew exactly where he was.”⁵

God knows every step we take too. It’s as if we have battery-operated lights on our souls. You can never really outrun God. He loves you too much to let you go. Sure, he’ll allow you to get on the ship, but eventually the pursuing love of God will overtake you. And often it happens when your world falls apart. That’s what happened in Jonah’s life.

III. The Pursuing Love of God.

Notice how many times the word “great” appears in the book of Jonah. The word in this text that is translated “great” is used several times. It’s the same word used to describe the great city of Nineveh, but now it’s God who is doing great things. And He sends a great storm that threatened to break up the ship. Now, these were professional sailors. They didn’t usually panic, and yet they started throwing the cargo overboard and each prayed to his own personal god. In the ancient world every tribe and ethnic group had its own god. It was a very multicultural world. When the sea is calm, any old god will do, but when a storm hits your life everything changes. And now you’re hoping one of those gods turns out to be real.⁶

Meanwhile, Jonah was in the bottom of the boat sleeping. He was exhausted. It's always an exhausting experience whenever you try to run from God, isn't it? The captain woke Jonah up and said, "What are you doing? Get up and call on your god!" Now, here is a great irony. The pagan ship captain called on the man of God to pray. The unbelieving captain was doing what the prophets usually did – call people to turn to God, and the prophet did what unbelievers usually do – sleep when it's time to pray.

When the sailors cast lots to determine who on board was the cause of their calamity, the lot fell to Jonah. And the sailors asked him, "What's your story?" When he told them he was a Hebrew who worshiped the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, they were terrified. They knew from what he had told them earlier that he was running from God (see 1:10), but they figured it was just the tribal god of the Jews. When Jonah told them it was the Lord, the maker of the land and the sea, they began to see that Jonah's God is the one great God. And they were seized with fear.

It's interesting. Jonah didn't want to be an evangelist. He didn't want to tell the people of Nineveh who God is. But on this ship in the middle of a storm Jonah does just that. The prophet ends up fulfilling his call to be an evangelist, a missionary, in the middle of the storm, and it brought people to faith. Whatever storm you may find yourself in today, God wants to use you as a witness for Christ. Perhaps He has allowed this calamity in your life not only to test your faith and build your character, but also to use you as a light to point people to Jesus.

Tim Keller says that Jonah couldn't see that deep within the terror of the storm God's mercy was at work. It was drawing him back to change his heart. It's not surprising that Jonah missed this initially. He didn't know how God would later come into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to save us. However, we who live on this side of the cross know that God can save through weakness, suffering, and apparent defeat. Those who watched Jesus die saw nothing but tragedy and loss. Yet at the heart of that darkness the divine mercy of God was powerfully at work, bringing about pardon and the forgiveness of sin for us. There's always mercy deep inside every storm.⁷

Conclusion.

I wish we had more time this morning to look at some other aspects of this chapter which I find fascinating, but this is all the time we have today. There is more to unpack, and I encourage you to read the passage later on again this afternoon or during the week.

As we close this morning, there are several things I want to say by way of application for you to consider regarding this text. The *first* is that *God has a plan for saving His world*, and He wants everyone to come to know and love Him. John

3:16 reminds us that God loves the *whole* world, and there is no Nineveh that God doesn't care about. I think that's instructive for us today in 2019, because we need to realize that the ancient city of Nineveh was in what is modern day Iraq. And the ruins of Nineveh are just on the other side of the river from a city that's been in the news a lot in recent years – Mosul, Iraq. Jesus told His followers to go into all the world to make disciples of all the nations, and that includes places we would rather not go and people we'd rather not love.

Second, whenever we try to run from God it usually results in going down. Jonah went down to Joppa, he went down into the boat, he was thrown overboard down into the ocean, and as we shall see, he ended up down in the belly of a great fish. Running from God will never take you higher. You'll always go down.

The *third* thing I want to say as we close is that *whenever we disobey God it hurts other people.* The sailors on this ship were caught in a storm because of the disobedience of Jonah. What we do affects other people, and sin splatters. It compounds the problem, it affects our spouse and children, and it always has a negative rippling effect. Keep that in mind the next time you're tempted to sin.

And finally, God loves us so much that we can never run too far from his mercy, and we can never fall too far to be out of the reach of His love. Whatever you've done and wherever you have gone, God arms are open wide to receive you back and help you with the mess in your life. He loves you so much that He sent His Son Jesus to die for you, and He has your best interest at heart. Trust God and turn to Him. He'll embrace you, and He'll rescue you. Just ask Jonah.

Later this afternoon, why don't you try your hand at writing a six-word summary of your life? Take some time to reflect on your journey of faith. How would you express what God has done with you? I think you'll find it will be an exercise God will bless. Amen.

¹ John Ortberg, *All the Places You will Go: How Will You know?* pp. 2.

² John Ortberg, pp. 2-3.

³ Greg Lavoy, *Callings*, p. 190. Quoted by John Ortberg in *All the Places to Go: How Will You Know?* p. 183.

⁴ Quote by Lavoy in *Callings*.

⁵ *Our Daily Bread*, January 1994, p. 10.

⁶ John Ortberg, p. 191.

⁷ Tim Keller, p. 30.