

August 9 Worship Transcript

Welcome and Prayer – Peter Goerzen

Good morning, and welcome to worship at Tabor! This month, we will be remembering the story of that runaway prophet of old, Jonah, whom God called to go and minister among his enemies, the Ninevites. Today's part of the story invites us to ponder that tendency we have to ignore, to avoid, or, like Jonah, even to flee from God's call in our lives. Yet that ancient call, to go, to be a blessing among all the peoples of the earth, will not flee from us, nor will God's presence abandon us. Let us pray together.

From Psalm 139:

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Scripture Reading: Jonah 1:1-17 – Sheri Schmidt

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

3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."

7 Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. 14 Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." 15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

17 Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

The Word of God for the People of God. ***Thanks Be to God!***

Sermon – Pastor Phil Schmidt

"Run Away!"

Several weeks ago, I was out running one morning, something I have been doing a lot these days, and I was about a mile and half down Chisholm Trail to the South. I had my headphones in, listening to my audiobook, enjoying the fresh air, when suddenly I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. And as I looked toward the movement, I saw something with black and white fur with its tail raised in the air. That's right. I saw a skunk, and it was "locked and loaded" if you know what I mean. So what do you think I did? I didn't stop to smell the roses or take in the view, that's for sure. I quickly made a u-turn and ran in the opposite direction with an extra jolt in my steps. Makes sense, right? But why did I respond this way? Because I didn't want to get sprayed! I didn't want to stink like skunk.

With that in mind, let's look at the story of Jonah, which begins by identifying who Jonah is, the son of Amittai, which when we look at 2 Kings 14:25, we find that the person Jonah son of Amittai was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. As Rosie highlighted in her children's story, a prophet was someone who was in relationship with God, who ran toward God, and who proclaimed the word of God.

In the story of Jonah, he received a message from God - "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Sounds simple enough, right? Go to a certain place and proclaim the word of God. That is what a prophet does. But instead, Jonah responded to God's call like I responded when I saw that skunk on the road during my run. He quickly turned around and headed in the opposite direction. But not only that, his intent was to go to Tarshish, which if you look up on a map is some 2000 miles in the opposite direction of Nineveh! And, on top of that, fleeing to Tarshish meant going across the sea, which is not something Jonah would have naturally done because the sea was thought of as a place of chaos where monsters lurked. Jonah is clearly trying to run away from God and God's call in his life. And he apparently thinks that he can succeed.

But why did Jonah run away? Well, we find out a clearer answer to this in chapter 4, which we will get to in a few weeks, but for now, let's focus on Jonah's response to God's call, how he treated God's call like I treated the skunk on the road. Why? Perhaps because Jonah didn't want anything to do with the Ninevites. After all, Nineveh was a major city in the Assyrian empire, the very same empire that was an enemy to Israel and eventually destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, killing many and sending many into exile. In other words, the Ninevites were enemies and you can imagine all of the negative stereotypes associated with them. These were thought of as bad, evil people. Thus, it seems fairly clear that Jonah had absolutely no desire to go to Nineveh and thus stink like his worst enemies.

So Jonah got on a ship headed in the opposite direction, and he even told the sailors that he was fleeing from the Lord. But God would have none of this kind of behavior from his prophet and sent a storm, which caused terror amongst the sailors, who cried out to their own gods and threw cargo overboard, at the same time that Jonah was below deck sleeping! Then the sailors discovered that Jonah was the cause of the storm and that he worshipped “the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). This terrified the sailors even more and Jonah finally provided the solution: they had to throw him overboard into the chaotic sea - only then would the waves calm down. So the sailors who didn’t know the Lord prayed to God, Lord of heaven and earth, asking forgiveness for their actions, then they threw Jonah overboard, the sea grew calm, and they worshipped the Lord by offering a sacrifice! And as Jonah sank in the water, the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah and to keep him safe for three days and three nights. In other words, the fish wasn’t punishment, but rather God’s means of saving Jonah’s life.

It’s quite a story. Jonah, the one who was supposed to worship God, run toward God, proclaim God’s word, was the one who tried to run away from God. At the same time, these sailors who didn’t know God began the story by crying out to their own gods and ended the story by worshipping Jonah’s God! Perhaps not the best strategy for evangelism on Jonah’s part, but there you go :).

So the story is full of contrasts, what Jonah was supposed to do and what he actually did, how Jonah was supposed to behave and how the sailors actually behaved. In the beginning, Jonah wanted to avoid stinking like his enemies, the Ninevites, but he ended up stinking like fish guts. (If you had to choose, would you rather smell like: skunk or rotten fish guts?)

So where do we go from here? The power of scripture is not only that God spoke, but that God continues to speak through scripture today. One way I see God speaking to us through this scripture passage amidst our current cultural climate is the challenge for us to consider how we might be like Jonah in our own lives. As followers of Jesus, we are called by God to worship God, to be in right relationship with God, to run towards God, and yet there are times that we don’t hear God’s call, perhaps we even reject or try to run away from God’s call in our lives.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, to his worst enemies, but Jonah didn’t want to interact with and thus “stink” like his enemies. Throughout scripture, God calls God’s people to be a blessing to others, to take special care of people who have been marginalized by society, including poor, widowed, and foreign people. Through the life of Jesus, we see this same theme in how he reached across social borders to care for and love those who were sick, demon-possessed, poor, and thought of as enemies. This same theme is present in Jonah’s story, but Jonah initially refused God’s call. Thus, as we reflect on this story, it is well worth considering: who is God calling us to reach out to in our lives today? Who are the different, stereotyped people we consider to be enemies?

Perhaps it is a neighbor across the street or across town. Perhaps it is a school sports team from another town. Perhaps it is homeless residents of the New Hope Shelter. Perhaps God is calling us to learn to know immigrants, people negatively impacted by our broken immigration system. Perhaps God is calling us to better understand the systemic racism in our society that constantly harms our black and brown brothers and sisters. This learning can happen through books, but also through relationships.

But the question isn’t only, “Who is God calling us to reach out to and interact with?” It’s not just “Who is my enemy?” The question is also, “What is holding us back from doing the cross-cultural work needed to respond faithfully to such a call?” or “Why are we trying to run away from God and God’s call?” Are we afraid we will begin to “stink” if we interact with people who have been marginalized by society? Are we afraid our own privilege and power and sense of entitlement might be challenged?

The story of Jonah continues and we will continue diving deeper into this story over the next several weeks, but for now, I end with this exhortation. Sisters and Brothers in Christ, when we receive God's call to reach out to other people who different than us, people who are stereotyped and marginalized in society, may we not respond like Jonah, and may we not respond like me when I saw that skunk, but rather, may we let go of our excuses and pursue God's call, even and especially if it means that we will cross cultural borders to do so and thus will learn and be transformed by these interactions. The model of faith in Jonah chapter one is not Jonah the prophet, but rather the sailors, who recognized and worshipped the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Sisters and Brothers, may we be ready and willing to run toward God's challenging call in our lives. Amen.

Congregational Prayer – Pastor Katherine Goerzen

Maker of the wind and waves, the fish of the sea, and the sailors who sang your praises, we offer up the joys and praises in our hearts, such as our gratitude for the opportunity to gather together in this space.

We also name before you the places where we continue to long for your healing presence, especially as coronavirus cases continue to rise. Bring your healing, your strength, and your peace.

So much is unknown and so many things seem upended from what is familiar, to the extent that we can feel like someone tossed about in a ship in a stormy sea. Even in the midst of the storm, help us to see the ways that you are present with us: such as in the faithful prayers of those around us or in safety from an unexpected source.

You are a God of grace and steadfast compassion. Be with us when we are afraid. Catch us when we stumble. Give us voices to praise you even from the belly of the fish. There is nowhere we could run to where you would not find us; nowhere we could flee where you would not already be present. Give us the faith to continue to follow you wherever you send us. We pray this in the name of the One you sent into the world that you so love, Amen.

Go with this assurance based on Psalm 139:

Even when the shadows seem to cover us completely, God's hand will lead us
Even when we settle at the farthest limits of the sea, God's Spirit is already there
Even when we seem to come to the end, God is still with us.
Go now in peace. Amen.