

Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Mark 1:14-20

“Send Me Where?”

R.P.C.  
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The book of Jonah presents a strange, even quite funny story. Some Biblical commentators have called the book of Jonah a kind of outlandish, extended joke....

Out of the blue, Jonah is contacted and commanded by God to become a missionary to the worst and most hated people in the world – at least the worst people as far as Israel is concerned: the Ninevites. Jonah, upon hearing God’s command, runs in the opposite direction. He would rather die than go talk to the Ninevites about God. So God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah up, and then spit him out on the shore of the Ninevites. Evidently, God was serious when God commanded Jonah, “Go! Preach to the Nivetites.”

Jonah is an insider. By that I mean he was a member of the house of Israel. He has heard and knows that ‘God is merciful;’ that God is the one and only God; therefore the God of Israel is the God of ALL people.

Yet when God speaks directly to Jonah – when God gives him a clear command, Jonah refuses to obey and flees in the other direction. The chief reason for Jonah’s refusal to obey is that God is commanding him to go speak to the despised Ninevites.

So it would seem that although Jonah is a monotheist – someone who believes there is one God – he is acting like a polytheist: the Ninevites have their gods and we have our God and our God would never have anything to do with the likes of them.

This Sunday’s reading from Jonah, takes up where the Lord came and ordered Jonah a SECOND time, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you” (Jonah 3:1). This God is persistent. This God won’t take “no” for answer when it comes to God’s mission into all the world. Yet this God has compassion not only for the Ninevites; this God has compassion for Jonah. For God continues to call him, continues to believe that Jonah – reluctant and disobedient though he may be – will be faithful to God’s call.

So Jonah reluctantly gives up, and gives in to God. He goes to Nineveh, but does so with a lousy attitude. He preaches the shortest and worst sermon in history – a one-sentence threat saying that in 40 days Nineveh will be history: “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown.” So much for a three point sermon with

supporting illustrations. “There!” we might have expected Jonah to say to God, “I’ve preached to these disgusting Ninevites!” And then leave in a huff before the Ninevites could retaliate against him.

And yet, wonder of wonders, in response to the worst and shortest sermon in history, given by the world’s most reluctant preacher, the Ninevites repent! The whole city repents: the king repents! All the people repent; even the cattle repent! And as a result God kind of “repents,” concerning the threatened judgment.

Israel had been called to be the “light to the nations.” But after years of humiliating defeat at the hands of the Assyrians (the capital of Assyria was Nineveh, you see), what Jew in the world would want to be part of God’s reaching out to the Ninevites? That would be tantamount to God tapping one of us on the shoulder one night and saying, “I want you to go to Yemen to tell the leaders of Al Qaeda that they have 40 days to repent.” Or, “I want you to go to Nairobi and tell Boko Haram that I want them to release those girls, or I will destroy them in a month.” NOW do we understand Jonah’s reluctance, saying “You’re sending me where God?” Some Christians have already attempted to visit and talk with such groups and were not well-received – In fact they met untimely, unnecessary, and unusually gruesome deaths.

Jesus commanded us to forgive our enemies. That is a command that is very much at odds with the ways of the world. It is contrary to our own perfectly natural human inclination to want to avoid, or even harm our enemies. Sometimes the hardest step down the path of forgiveness is to simply talk to our enemies. “They haven’t spoken to each other for years,” is what one often hears about the conversation between enemies. And yet - that was exactly what God ordered Jonah to do – “Go speak.”

Nineveh was located in what is now modern day Iraq. When our country felt threatened and aggrieved by Iraq, we did not talk to the Iraqis. “The time for diplomacy is over,” said our then-President when the war was preemptively launched against Iraq. But then, he was simply following the usual way of the world.

A group of clergy was meeting together for their monthly discussion on the life and times of their various congregations. The discussion turned into a sharing of reasons why it seems that parishioners don’t really listen to sermons. Some of the points discussed were that modern people are preoccupied with many issues but are rarely interested in Jesus any more. Another offered that modern people live in a media-saturated, techno-glitz culture and poor old vocal sermons just can’t

compete for their attention. Still another clergywoman said that modern folks are scientific, skeptical, critical creatures by nature and are therefore suspicious that this ancient Biblical literature could have anything to say to them.

On and on the widespread discussion went with the conclusion being that today's modern people – especially younger adults – were a hopeless cause when it comes to hearing something like a sermon.

Then one of the clergy said, "In other words, we are exactly like Jonah when he was asked to preach to the Ninevites!" "We tried to reach the young adults in our community; we tried again and again but without results," he continued. "We put ads in the newspaper saying that we wanted young adults to come and join our Bible studies. We asked members to invite their young adults and friends to attend – all for nothing!"

"So we hired a church consultant. One of the questions she asked us was, 'Where do the young adults in your community gather?' 'Where would I stand the best chance of meeting most of your young adults?'" "Someone sheepishly mentioned that a popular bar that was a favorite gathering place for young adults, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights. 'Then go there,' the consultant advised. 'They won't come to you before you go to them.'" "Well, we can't do that because we don't want to be seen there," came the reply. 'Besides we are interested in nice wholesome young adults who look and act like us.'"

"Oh, I'm sorry,' replied the consultant. 'I thought you were talking about obeying Jesus.' 'Did Jesus say, "Go into your own neighborhood, and limit church to folk who look like you and with whom you are most comfortable?" 'I think what he said was, "Go into ALL the world to make disciples.'"

Let me tell you that as a pastor I have no less reluctance about going where God says to go than anyone else. That became quite clear to me when, while taking a course from Ben Johnson at Columbia Seminary, our class assignment was to go into downtown Atlanta on our own and talk with homeless people. Maybe it wasn't so much a 'call of God' as it was a compelling to meet the requirements of the course, but a written report and a verbatim of a conversation was due the next day.

I found myself getting on MARTA and heading to the station near Underground Atlanta. There were a number of apparently homeless individuals in the area on the plaza up above the station and I picked out what I considered to be the safest one to approach. He was a man in his late 50's or early 60's.

I sat down next to him and introduced myself, told him I was a minister and asked him if he would be willing to 'tell me his story.' He kindly said he would and

slowly began to open up. It was a pretty typical story of alcohol abuse, job loss, divorce, rejection by the family, loss of a place to live, and finally landing on the streets. He didn't ask me for any money, nor for any pity, but simply related his life, seeming rather pleased that someone had taken the time to ask and listen.

After about 20 minutes, I thanked him and offered to pray for him; he readily accepted, and then he did something I did not expect, but I will always remember – he prayed for me. In spite of his circumstances, he was still a man of faith, who willingly, openly and unashamedly prayed for another.

As someone like you, who has sometimes been sent by God to places I don't want to go – I'll just say this: While Jesus may appear to be rather demanding, what with all of this sending and calling and compelling and pushing and commanding, it should be said that there is reward in being sent there.

Of course there is always the fact what when we give of ourselves, we receive so much more in return – like a prayer. But there is also something satisfying about knowing that what you are doing, you are doing not just because it pleases you, but because you sense it pleases God. You are going where you know God wants you to go. Your little life is being swept up somehow in the grand purpose of God.

To be commanded by God to go where God wants us to go means that we are not working for ourselves, but are doing what we are doing and saying what we are saying in the name of God. We are speaking up in the name of someone who is far greater than ourselves. And we have a wonderful Savior who is backing us up – a kind of 'wing man.'

For me this means that even when we cannot immediately see positive results for what we are doing, even when we cannot see the good in what we are doing - we still have faith, not in the positive good or the results, but in the One who sent us. And whether that issues for good that we can immediately see or whether it doesn't, we have faith that somehow God weaves all of this into God's good purposes.

This story of Jonah has been long associated with Jesus and his ministry. Perhaps now we can see why. Jesus shocked his own followers by pushing the boundaries of God's reign out toward the despised Gentiles. Jesus kept company with outsiders. Some were outsiders within Israel because of their behavior. Some were outside of Israel because of their birth. Yet Jesus sends his followers into all the world – not just our little corner of the world. And Jesus sends his followers to all people – not to just the people with whom we are most comfortable.

There is not a corner of this earth that is not to be penetrated by the disciples of Jesus Christ who have been called to obey the same command that God gave to Jonah: “Go!” And usually when that command comes, the voice of God commands them to go places where few of us naturally want to go. That raises a question as to where God is calling each of us to go. With whom is God commanding us to strike up a conversation?

I have to admit that sometimes when I grow weary of doing ministry, I wish God’s reign was not quite so expansive. Sometimes I confess I secretly wish that Jesus Christ had died for my friends and my family and for those with whom I am already most comfortable – those who share my values, my faith, and maybe even my political views. Sometimes I wish that our sacrament of baptism said, “In as much as you look a great deal like those who are already here in the church, we therefore will initiate you into our religious club that we call the body of Christ.” That would make ministry so much easier - but that isn’t the Gospel. No, what God said – and God had to repeat this twice for Jonah to get it, was, “Get up and go to Nineveh ... and proclaim the message I tell you.”

So where is the “Nineveh” that we individually, or we as a church are neglecting? In what ways have we circumscribed the breadth of God’s reign? Who have we left from our table when we eat and drink in Jesus’ name? Those are among the questions that are raised among us by this ancient story of Jonah, the reluctant missionary – a story, as it turns out, that is also a story about us.

“You are sending us where, God?” Is this passage a joke or a tragedy? Should we laugh or cry? ... I guess it all depends on whether or not we go .... Dare we go ... to Ninevah? Amen.