

## “Going Deep: Runaway Prophet”

Jonah 1:1-17

August 9, 2020

If I were asked to give a “what I did this summer” presentation, I would include information about the Mariana Trench. I did *not* visit the Mariana Trench this summer—that would be quite a trip even under normal summer travel circumstances. But, thanks to our son Samuel’s emerging (get it?) interest in the deep seas, I **have** learned *a lot* about it. I’ve read books and articles, watched YouTube videos, and listened to interviews with the few daring souls who *have* been to this spot in the western Pacific Ocean, just south of the island of Guam. My report would include the fact that the Mariana Trench is the deepest oceanic trench on Earth, at its maximum known depth the seafloor is more than 36,000 feet below the surface, deeper by seven thousand feet than the summit of Mt. Everest. Those who have reached those extraordinary depths describe a world utterly unlike anything we can imagine. Dozens of new species have been discovered in the absolute darkness, as well as the sadly familiar sight of a plastic bag.

I am not a deep-sea diver and I will almost certainly never explore the peculiar world of the Mariana Trench. But I would suggest that my vocation has something in common with that of those who have made remarkable discoveries in a previously unknown world. The joy of preaching, which gave birth to my call to ministry and sustains me in that call, is the weekly opportunity to plumb the depths of God’s word, to seek new insight and inspiration from the living Spirit of God, and to invite others to join in the deep dive of Christian faith. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth wrote that scripture describes a “strange new world, the world of God.” My teacher, Stanley Hauerwas, expanded on Barth, writing that scripture “creates more than a world; it shapes a community which is the bearer of

that world. Without that community, claims about the moral authority of scripture—or rather the very idea of scripture itself—makes no sense.” Scripture describes a new world. Scripture shapes a community capable of bearing that world. Whenever I worry, and I do worry, that Christian faith has been hijacked by partisan agenda or provincial perspective, I return to these core convictions. The Bible does not exist to fuel our divisions or strengthen the argument for our predetermined conclusions. In fact, sacred scripture calls both into question, inviting us deeper into the heart of God’s providence and grace.

For the next four weeks, we’ll be going deep (bad pun fully intended) alongside a reluctant, resistant, stubborn witness to the expansive truth of grace. Two weeks ago, Rev. Madison VanVeelen preached a powerful sermon on the theme of mercy, drawing from the whole book of Jonah. Throughout the rest of August, we’ll be zooming in on the four chapters of this short, fascinating book that is often subject to cartoonish caricature or oversimplification. My prayer is that we will find within its words a deep well of meaning and a clear call to faithful living that demonstrates God’s will for the world.

At the outset, we are introduced to the characters who will occupy center stage for the entire story. *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...* Before we dive in (you are going to get very tired of these puns) to the mighty storm and the big fish and the hated Ninevites, we would do well, I think, to dwell on this opening verse. God’s word came to Jonah. God and Jonah, our main characters, will be in dialogue throughout the book. But there is a third player, an active participant, in this drama. The word of God.

Here’s the thing about the word of God: when

it comes to you, it is *never* distant or detached. The word of God is not information or even insight. God's word, delivered to you, is a calling word. God's word *asks* something of you, often something that makes you uncomfortable or even unhappy. And Jonah is not the first or last to resist it. He stands in a long line of those called by God whose first, often insistent response is "No thanks...I'm good." At least one reason for this is that the call of God in Jonah's life, and perhaps ours as well, asks him to go somewhere he doesn't want to go and say things that others won't want to hear. Not exactly a job anyone would leap to pursue. In Jonah's case, the call is to go to Nineveh. For now, here is what you should know about Nineveh—it was the capital of Assyria, the empire that, within living memory of this book's writing, had destroyed all of Israel north of Jerusalem burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. Nineveh was not just any city; it was enemy ground. And God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh.

Well, Jonah makes other plans. Any other plan would do, any place but Nineveh. He boards a ship headed in the opposite direction. Others called to the work of a prophet may have resisted, but Jonah literally runs away from God. The rest of the chapter tells us precisely how that turns out for Jonah, and for those unfortunate mariners who share a ship with him. You see, it's not so easy to run from the God of all creation and so, through mighty storm and large fish, Jonah finds himself at every turn in the presence of God *despite* his earnest desire to flee from it. God simply will not let Jonah go.

One of the great pillars of the Reformed theological tradition, of which our church is a part, is the affirmation of God's irresistible grace. Here is what I think that means. We cannot outrun the grace and the presence of God. "Where can I go to get away from God," Psalm 139 asks. The answer: nowhere. "I come to the end—I am still with you."

Perhaps you've had an experience like this. Maybe you've attempted to escape God's call in your life. As we'll see, Jonah knew enough about God to know

that the final answer, even to the hated Ninevites, might just be forgiveness, might just be grace. Maybe you've been in his shoes, absolutely certain about what you *should* do and utterly determined not to do it. Have you ever held your phone in your hand, knowing that the right thing to do is reach out to a friend or family member, but making yourself do it seems nearly impossible. Have you ever stood in the doorway practicing the simple phrase, "I'm sorry," and nearly bolting the opposite direction for how hard it is to actually say the words out loud? Have you ever felt heartburn of knowing that you are called to speak up against abuse or injustice and wished you could simply disappear or tunnel out of the room? Then you know what it is to take a ship to Tarshish.

But it won't work. Despite the self-help preaching that permeates our time, Christian faith is not about our initiative. It always begins with the irresistible grace of God. God pursues you. You need not chase the Holy Spirit down because the spirit of God is coming toward you—ready or not. In this morning's example, God goes to extraordinary lengths to make Jonah's call clear and, yes, irresistible.

A brief word on those lengths. Bear with me here. I'm aware that there are those of us for whom this morning's text provokes questions. How big was the fish? What kind of fish? How could this have happened? Are we sure this is true?

Our son Ben is an energetic and joyful three-year-old who is a burgeoning storyteller. At bedtime these days, after I tell or read a story, he tells his own. They are fascinating tales of bears and cheetahs and airplanes and one character named Strongest Fastest Ben whose heroics win the day. And, when the story ends, Ben often concludes with, "it's all true, Daddy." I think he's right about that. You see, the story of Jonah is about many things, but it is not about the ability of a human to survive for three days inside a fish. No, this is the word of God—not information, not a video about the Mariana Trench—it comes to us a calling word. It is true in a far deeper sense.

The truth of this morning's text is that the call of

God is stronger than all our human attempts to avoid or evade it. Jonah *is* going to Nineveh—come whale or high water (okay, last one, I promise)—God will make sure of that. Why? Because God has a word for the Ninevites, yes. But there is another component of God's call that this story can teach us. God intends to bring Jonah to life.

Have you ever known someone who is so clearly called by God to the work that they do that they positively shine? I have. I've been thinking about them this week. Several of them are teachers, who are proving again how invaluable their vocation is to us all. Teachers whose passion for their work shines against the chaos of this uncertain time. Called by God to teach. On Thursday evening, I had a conversation with Dr. Chandy John, a part of our faith community and distinguished physician who specializes in pediatric infectious disease. Chandy shines with the call of God to do this work that saves lives and protects millions. Irresistible grace. The great mystic and preacher Howard Thurman said this about vocation, "Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." I would add, perhaps now more than ever.

God knows that Jonah needs to be an instrument of God's grace just as the Ninevites need to hear and experience it. Jonah hates the Ninevites. God is going to challenge that hatred with a very difficult truth. God's grace is for all. It's a truth that Jonah needs to learn and experience deep in his heart.

I hear and read a lot these days about the gravity of our time. There's no doubt that these are days that test faith, strain relationships, challenge us in more ways than we may have thought possible. In such a time as this, what is a church to do? How are followers of Jesus Christ to live? Let me suggest that it is not too small a thing to simply submit to the irresistible grace of God, to be shaped into a community capable of bearing the word of God, to offer the depth of moral leadership that we desperately need now.

What clear call has laid hold of your life? Where do you hear the voice of God and the needs of the world calling you? If you can answer that question, you know what you must do. Don't shrink, retreat, or resist. In the words of my favorite poet, W.H. Auden, "you owe it to us all to get on with whatever you're good at."

No running away. God's pursuit is relentless. Might as well take the plunge. Amen.