

Jonah 1:1-3:3 (The Message)

One day long ago, God's Word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." ³ But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from God as he could get.

But God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering.

The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, "What's this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we're in trouble and rescue us."

Then the sailors said to one another, "Let's get to the bottom of this. Let's draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who's responsible for this disaster." So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

Then they grilled him: "Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?"

He told them, "I'm a Hebrew. I worship God, the God of heaven who made sea and land."

At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, "What on earth have you done!" As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from God.

They said to him, "What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?" By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control.

Jonah said, "Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It's all my fault. I'm the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you'll get rid of the storm."

But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging. Then they prayed to God, "O God! Don't let us drown because of this man's life, and don't blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best." They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down. The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.

Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish's belly three days and nights. Then Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish. He prayed:

"In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God.

He answered me.

From the belly of the grave I cried, 'Help!'

You heard my cry.

You threw me into ocean's depths, into a watery grave,

With ocean waves, ocean breakers crashing over me.

I said, 'I've been thrown away, thrown out, out of your sight.

I'll never again lay eyes on your Holy Temple.'

Ocean gripped me by the throat.

The ancient Abyss grabbed me and held tight.

My head was all tangled in seaweed at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root.

I was as far down as a body can go, and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever—

Yet you pulled me up from that grave alive,

O God, my God!

When my life was slipping away, I remembered God,

And my prayer got through to you, made it all the way to your Holy Temple.

Those who worship hollow gods, god-frauds, walk away from their only true love.

But I'm worshiping you, God, calling out in thanksgiving!

And I'll do what I promised I'd do!

Salvation belongs to God!"

Then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited up Jonah on the seashore.

Next, God spoke to Jonah a second time: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." This time Jonah started off straight for Nineveh, obeying God's orders to the letter.

NO ESCAPE

WITHIN THE PAGES OF the Old Testament are preserved for us the stories of the stalwart heroes and heroines of our faith, the stories of men and women who responded faithfully to the call of God and were able to perform deeds of great renown because of it. In the book of Genesis we are told that God called upon Noah and Noah faithfully built an ark to house animals from every species on earth and save them from the deadly waters of the Flood. Then, in the book of Exodus we are told that God called upon Moses and Moses faithfully set out to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage with nothing but a shepherd's crook and his brother Aaron to write his sermons. Then, in the book of Judges we are told that God called upon Deborah and Deborah faithfully lead the nation of Israel against all odds to victory over the Caananite army. Then, in the book of 1 Kings we are told that God called upon Elijah and Elijah faithfully stood in defiance of and finally defeated 450 prophets of Baal. Then, in the book of Isaiah we are told that God called upon Isaiah and Isaiah faithfully responded "Here I am. Send me." and went on to prophesy to the elite of Judah and advance the cause of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Then, in the book of Jonah we are told that God called upon Jonah and Jonah *ran away in the other direction*.

While perhaps not as inspiring as these other characters of the Old Testament, Jonah is, at very least, lovable; it is hard not to find endearing his brazen if ill-conceived attempt to outrun God. Indeed Jonah's is a story so outlandish, so hyperbolic that we can't help but to laugh a little when we read it. And I believe this is exactly as the author intended it to be. The story opens with the Word of God coming to Jonah, telling him to go and call the Assyrian city of Nineveh to repentance. By way of his reply to God's call, Jonah in short order gets up and runs away to a place called Tarshish. To fully appreciate the humor of this scene you need to know two things about Tarshish. First, it was Phoenician colony located on the southern coast of Spain, directly west from Nineveh. In other words, after being called by God Jonah set out for a destination that was in the exact opposite direction from where God told him to go – Jonah was supposed to go due east to Nineveh but instead he went due west to Tarshish. Here the author wants us to know that Jonah was not just disobeying God's call but he was doing so with gusto. The second thing you need to know about Tarshish is that, being located 2,300 miles away from Jonah's homeland, it represented for Jonah and for other Israelites the very edge of the known world, meaning that so far as Jonah was concerned there was no better, no further place on earth to which he could flee away from the presence God than Tarshish.

So Jonah goes to a port and boards a ship bound for this far-off land, presumably breathing a huge sigh of relief and patting himself on the back for footwork so fancy that he was able to outmaneuver God. But soon after the ship sets sail, Jonah finds that God is still in hot pursuit in the form of a huge storm that threatens to tear asunder Jonah's getaway vessel. The author tells us that Jonah's shipmates are utterly terrified, calling out to their gods in desperation and throwing their possessions overboard to lighten the ship's load. And in the midst of this chaos and terror what does our protagonist do? Jonah, of course, goes down into the hold of the ship and takes a nap. When Jonah finds that in the process of trying to escape from the calling of God he has endangered both his life and the lives of all those around him he takes a nap. If this sounds at all ludicrous to you, that is because it is completely so. There is no rhyme nor reason to it, it is a completely nonsensical thing to do. The author of the story includes this scene, I believe, to reinforce for us the complete and utter absurdity of what Jonah was trying to do, that is, the absurdity of trying to escape from God.

But sleeping provides Jonah with the refuge he is seeking only temporarily because he is soon awakened by the captain of the ship and it is learned by the crew that Jonah is the one responsible for the storm. In a seeming act of courage and self-sacrifice Jonah tells his shipmates to throw him overboard that God may be appeased, the storm ceased, and the ship saved. Though initially they hesitate and try other means to save themselves they finally decide there is no other way and they toss dear Jonah off the side of the ship. Here the artistry of the author is at its very finest. Up to this point Jonah has tried to escape God physically by running away, he has tried to escape God mentally by going to sleep, and now here in an act not of courage but of desperation Jonah tries to escape God spiritually by allowing himself to be thrown to his death. But the author doesn't let Jonah off that easy. Even by death Jonah is unable to escape God. In a grandiose conclusion to today's already grandiose reading the author has God send a huge fish to swallow Jonah, saving him from a certain death by drowning. And after three days and three nights during which Jonah shouts thanksgivings to God from inside the fish's belly, he is, and I quote, "vomited" up onto the seashore where God tells him once again to go to Nineveh. Unsurprisingly, our heretofore reluctant prophet sets off to his assigned destination without so much as a word.

Now, despite its great levity, despite its cartoonish quality, and despite the absolute ridiculousness it depicts on the part of Jonah, I believe we are meant to be more than just entertained by this story. Amidst our chuckles and our smiles as we follow Jonah on his ever so misguided journey, we need to ask ourselves the important question of why we are following Jonah at all – after all to the best of our knowledge this story has only the most tenuous historical grounding. If we ponder this question long enough I think we eventually arrive at the answer that this is not a story about a historical figure but a story about you and about me and about us and about our God.

As members of a church in the mainstream of Protestantism we spend much of our time talking about a God of love. This is as it should be – the Bible tells us that God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16). This, however, makes it especially confusing for us to understand why anybody would want to escape from God. Who in their right mind wants to escape from love? If anything we in the UCC profess that we cleave to God: we put our monies towards efforts for social justice, we support the full inclusion of all of God's people into the life of the church. we sing politically correct hymns, we try to be good stewards of the environment around us. We do all of this in the name of getting nearer and nearer to God and, I'll tell you what, it feels good. There are not many Sundays I walk away from this church building not feeling more joyful than I did when I walked in. I ask again, why would anyone want to run away from God? But if the story of Jonah is to teach us anything about the inescapable love of God it teaches us that the love of God is not nearly so warm nor so fuzzy as we would like it to be. The love of God is not always gentle, it does not always leave us feeling all warm and squishy inside. Sometimes the love of God will feel more like a storm trying to sink you at sea, more like a fish trying to gobble you up. Perhaps you have felt this dimension of God's love when you, like Jonah, have tried to shirk your own calling in this world. Perhaps the experience of God's love in that moment felt like a pang of guilt, a prick of shame, twinge of remorse, or even a bout of fear. In that moment did you want to rush away from it physically, mentally, or spiritually as did Jonah? If so, I would just like to say to you, "Welcome to the club; it's called being human."

I think it is safe to say that a person who has never tried to escape from God has never experienced the God who really is God. That is to say, if a person has never felt challenged by God,

or irked by God, or pushed or prodded by God they are worshipping something less than God, they are worshipping a god of their own devising. As humans we tend to seek out the comfortable, we value the safe, and, like Jonah, we run quickly away whenever we sense discomfort on the horizon. Many of us are uneasy with the notion of a God who makes us uncomfortable and shakes our very foundations by issuing to us calls that challenge us to be more than what we think we are, calls that stretch beyond the bounds of the habits of our everyday life. Even some of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament that I mentioned earlier did not immediately accept God's call for them but rather tried to escape from it. If you will recall, before Moses began his career as the deliverer of Israel, he said to God "O my Lord, please send someone else" (Exodus. 4:13). However, the God of Moses was not a domesticated, convenient sort of god with whom we can live comfortably but rather a god of unrelenting provocation. As the story of Jonah tries to show us, ours is not just a God of blue skies and calm waters but a God who calls us by gale force winds, stormy seas, if necessary, by the appetites of giant fish.

If you are in real relationship with the real God of the real universe, the God depicted for us in the story of Jonah, there will be times in your life when you find the waters of your soul being troubled to their inmost depths. There will be times in your life when you feel called to step far beyond the boundaries of your comfort, times when you feel called to your own personal Nineveh and it will not feel nice. Though at these moments we may want nothing more than to run away, nothing more than to escape from God, these are the moments in which we can be most certain of the real presence of the love of God inside of our lives. The Christian vocation at its most essential level is to lean ever more into these callings, ever more into this unsettling love from which there is no escape – uncomfortable, untimely, and unfashionable though it may be.

I would like to leave you today with the words of the Psalmist who in Psalm 139 celebrates the fearful yet wonderful, discomfoting yet encouraging, inescapable love of God. It reads as follows:

*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.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"
Even the darkness will not be dark to you;
The night will shine like the day,
For darkness is as light to you.
For you created my inmost being;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*