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Jonah (chapters 1-4)
"He went the OTHER Way"

Of all the people who were called in Scripture, to me, Jonah is the most human. Moses comes close, but I think it is Jonah who has the most human response to God's call. Other than one big plot point, I would bet that the details of Jonah's story are lost to most of us. When you think of Jonah, you think of _____ (invite their response)

Right, the Giant whale who swallows Jonah and then spits him out. We focus on the most fantastical portion of Jonah's story and miss the fact that God points Jonah in one direction....Ninevah; Jonah runs in the exact opposite direction! Tarshish

Does that sound familiar to anyone else? It feels very familiar to me... Jesus told his disciples to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick.... Jesus pointed us towards Ninevah, that great city with all its needs But through all these years, in one way or another, we Christians have found ourselves fleeing to Tarshish...

But let me stop myself and look a little closer at Jonah. What is so special about Jonah? Why did God feel he was the right person to send to Nineveh? The truth is, we never really know.

At the beginning of this story Jonah is busy living his life. We never find out what he does for a living; we never find out if he has a family. Apparently, these details do not matter... This story starts off like the horses at the beginning of a race; we shoot right out of the gates.

All of a sudden God comes a callin'. God, calling Jonah to leave all he knows and go to Nineveh; To NINEVEH of all places. What is so bad about Nineveh you ask? Well, it was a city on the east bank of the Tigris River in Assyria. Umm, there's the problem.

The Assyrians were not too popular in Israel. In the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the Assyrians plundered Palestine looting and burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. They destroyed Israel.

In other words, to the original audience of the Jonah story, Nineveh was an abomination, the object of intense hostility. Jonah had no desire to go to Nineveh for any reason. In his mind, if God was going to wipe out the Ninevites, so much the better. It was no skin off of his teeth; plus, the Ninevites were Assyrian and there was no reason to sacrifice himself because they would surely not appreciate his presence.

If God called Jonah to go somewhere else, a different city, perhaps it might have been different, but as it was, God was calling Jonah to Nineveh; God was calling Jonah to face his own biases, his own racism, his own fears. And for Jonah, that was just too much to face up to. So instead of heading out for Nineveh, Jonah heads down to Joppa to hop a boat to Tarshish, the farthest city he could find from the Assyrians.

Jonah hops his "Cruise" to Tarshish – I like to imagine he was in his room laughing to himself...Yeah, right...Ninevah?!? As if!

And then he drifted off to sleep. While he sleeps, God makes a scene. God involves everyone around Jonah in order to get Jonah's attention. We learn from Jonah's experience that God has a way of finding us when we ignore God's call. For Jonah, it was a HUGE storm and an even bigger fish.

Now listen, some of us get caught up in the reality of the fish. Did a fish *REALLY* swallow Jonah? I get this question ALL the time.

Let us not forget that this is a story and in stories, God can reach us in powerful ways.

The truth this story communicates is that our God is *persistent*. God calls us, we ignore God. God calls us *again*, and *again*, and *again*. God does what is needed to get us to open our ears and hearts. God does not give up on us, even if God has to send us the proverbial fish to get us to pay attention.

God gets Jonah's attention and Jonah finally listens. Off he goes to Nineveh, that great city of sin, half-hoping that no one there will listen and God will level the city with God's mighty wrath. But, instead, the whole town, including the King, comes forward in sackcloth to fast and pray for God's forgiveness, and Jonah does not know what to do with them.

I imagine he had a good laugh at their expense, saying "Yea right, like that is going to happen!" But the laugh was on him. He pitches a royal fit when God's mind is changed by the actions of the Ninevites. It becomes clear that Jonah never could understand God's forgiveness; he never quite understood the "wideness" to God's mercy. Jonah has lost all perspective.

Small reversals, trivial defeats loom so large in his mind that he can see nothing else, and so God has to teach Jonah the importance of perspective. How true this is in our own lives. How often the things which anger and frustrate us, almost to the point of incapacitating us, turn out to be but foolish and unimportant when we look at them with a little detachment and see them in their proper perspective. I am not sure Jonah ever really learned this lesson though. He heads off into the hills to build a booth and pout. God tries to correct and teach in that moment, but the book ends without the Disney ending. Things are not tied up in a pretty little bow for us.

This is why I love Jonah so much. He is a wonderfully flawed human being who, like us, so often allows the mess of his own life to disrupt the message of God's love. In some ways, he steps up and listens to God's call, but it seems he only allows that call to permeate so deep. Like so many of us, he tries to control God and God's claim upon his life.

May we be bold enough to listen to God's call, may we be bold enough to trust God enough to walk into the Nineveh's of our life and proclaim God's message. But at the same time, may we be bold enough to loosen our grip, to let go of the reins, to surrender to God's call, allowing it to wash in and through us; filling us with God's love and strength so that we might be transformed for God's service. We do not know how Jonah's story ended; how long he ended up sitting on that hill bemoaning the fate of Nineveh. But those facts really do not matter.

What I am more curious about is how our story will end? How will we respond to God's call? How will we walk into Nineveh to demand God justice from the systems of this world? Because God is calling! Can you hear it? Can you feel it?

You might want to listen closely. If not, I would avoid the lake this summer.

Thanks be to God.