

You Can't Run Away From God

Jonah 1: 1-17

Rev. Philip Parker

June 23, 2024

During the frontier days preachers were sometimes hard to find. So the Methodists came up with the idea of sending out circuit riders, preachers who would travel from place to place telling people about God. One of these circuit riders was a man by the name of Richmond Nollie. He had been traveling for several days without meeting anyone when suddenly he came across fresh wagon tracks in a remote section of Mississippi. Following the tracks, he came across a family who were in the process of unloading their wagon at a new homestead. Greeting the family, Reverend Nollie said, "Hello and may the Lord be praised."

The response of the farmer was none too pleasant. Seeing the unmistakable appearance of this circuit riding evangelist, he replied, "What? Another Methodist preacher? I left Virginia to get away from preachers like you. Moved my family from Virginia to Georgia and no sooner had I arrived than a Methodist preacher had my wife and children in church. So I hitched up our wagon and bought this piece of land way out in the middle of nowhere and looked what happened. Here's another circuit riding preacher before we can even set up camp."

In response, Reverend Nollie gave the farmer small comfort. He said, "Friend, if you go to heaven, you'll find some Methodist preachers there and if you go to that realm below, I'm afraid you'll find some there as well. You've moved twice and you can't escape us, so I reckon it's better to come to terms with us preachers and be at peace." Try as he might, the farmer couldn't get away from those circuit riding Methodist preachers. The same was true for Jonah. Try as he might, he couldn't get away from God.

Now Jonah was a prophet. Other than the book of Jonah, we don't know a great deal about him. His name is mentioned only one other time in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 14:25, the Bible tell us that he was a prophet who predicted the prosperity that blessed the nation during the days when Jeroboam was the king of Israel. It says that he was the son of Amittai and that he came from a little town in northern Israel. That's all that we know until we turn to the account of his life in the book of Jonah. It begins with the Lord commissioning him to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it because of its wickedness. Instead, Jonah boarded a ship for a distant

destination, perhaps as far away as modern day Spain. He had no intention of obeying the Lord's instructions.

Why? There are a number of reasons. He may have been afraid. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were a cruel nation who didn't deal kindly with their enemies. Bringing a word of divine judgement could easily get you thrown into jail if not worse. Perhaps Jonah was just plain tired. Serving God can be a fulltime job. How many times have you perhaps said, "Lord I just can't do another thing? I'm just too worn out." However, I think the real reason was his bitter animosity towards this heathen nation. He didn't want to have anything to do with them. They were a heartless adversary of Israel. It would have been like asking a survivor of Pearl Harbor to go and preach to people of Japan at the height of their power and glory during the early days of World War II.

So Jonah got on that ship in Joppa and thought he could get away from fulfilling his calling as a prophet. Of course, we know that his efforts were in vain. Sound asleep in the bottom of the boat, he was not aware that a storm was raging until awakened by the captain. Fleeing from God can wear a soul out. Soon he and everyone else on board realized that he was the cause of the storm. Try as they might the sailors could not row the boat back to shore. Admitting that he was the cause of the storm, he told them, "Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I know that it's my fault that we are caught in this violent storm." At first the sailors refused, but since the storm was still gaining strength, they complied with his wishes. They threw him into the sea and immediately it subsided. Fortunately, however, that's not the end of the story, for the Lord had prepared a great big fish to swallow up Jonah and keep him alive for three whole days.

Jonah had tried to run away from God and he discovered that it's a very difficult thing to do. In fact, it's nearly impossible, because first of all, **you can't run away from His presence.** He's everywhere. That's one of God's essential attributes. He's omnipresent. He is the creator of the universe and is uniquely present in all that He has created. Even if we could hop on a space ship flying at warp speed to a distant galaxy, we could not escape His presence. Jonah thought that a boat ride to the other side of the Mediterranean would be sufficient. He was wrong. Listen to these words from Psalm 139, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I go 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" (Psalm 139:7-10). Neither Jonah nor you, nor I can run away from the presence of the Lord.

Here's something else that Jonah should have taken into consideration with regards to the Lord. **You can't run away from His calling.** Jonah was a prophet. He was a spokesman for the Lord. It was His job to proclaim the word of God. Fleeing on that ship was a direct violation of his commanding officer's instructions. He was to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. When we are a servant of the Lord, a child of God and He asks us to do something, there are consequences when we resist and turn aside from His calling upon our lives. Listen to the words of another prophet by the name of Jeremiah. Beaten and incarcerated for proclaiming God's judgement against the sins of his people, Jeremiah was tempted to forsake his prophetic calling. But he couldn't do it. He said, "But if I say, 'I will not mention Him (God) or speak any more of His name,' His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9). If the Lord has put upon our hearts what He wants us to do or say, we will have no peace until we fulfill His calling upon our lives.

Finally, there was something else that Jonah could not run away from. **He could not run away from God's love.** God did not have to save Jonah. He could have let him drown in the sea. He did not have to provide a big fish to swallow him up. He could have said, "Jonah, you failed to do what I asked you to do. Away with you!" But He didn't. He cared enough to save Jonah's life, perhaps not in a very comfortable way, but nevertheless God kept him alive for three whole days and nights in the belly of that leviathan of the depths. Hundreds of years later Paul echoed that same sentiment in his letter to the Romans. Like Jonah, he too had faced some difficult times—stoned, beaten, imprisoned. It was almost like being thrown into the bowels of an angry sea monster. But through it all he knew that God still loved him and was watching over him. This is what he said, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

So there you have it. Jonah couldn't run away from God. He couldn't run away from His presence. He couldn't run away from His calling to be a prophet. Most importantly, he couldn't run away from God's love. I am reminded of that parable that Jesus told about the one lost sheep. The shepherd left the ninety and nine to go looking for that one lost lamb). That's what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. He sent His good shepherd into our world to go looking for lost lambs, lost lambs like you and me.