

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
February 17, 2021, Ash Wednesday
 Jonah 1:1-3

LENTEN SERMON SERIES: "THE SIGN OF JONAH --- GOD IS CALLING"

During the Season of Lent we are going to be on a journey with the prophet Jonah. The last time you spent time with Jonah you may have been in Sunday School, and really the only thing you remember about Jonah's story is that it's about a really big fish, or a whale!

But it isn't! It's not about the fish. What you are going to find out during Lent is that this is story about God's expansive love and about us. And yes, of course it's also about Jonah. Tonight, I want to give you a little introduction:

The little book of Jonah, only 4 chapters long, (you can read it in about ½ hour). It is a comedy about grace, and a drama about, grace. Grace for the heathen city of Nineveh, grace for the heathen sailors, even grace for the stubborn prophet, Jonah himself. God's love is the big story in this little book, a story that we always need to hear, and no time more than in Lent.

So, we begin – there's Jonah, minding his own business when along comes God and God has a job for Jonah. Jonah is supposed to go to the most hated enemy of his people, a nation who doesn't even believe in God, and tell them, not at all subtly, that unless they clean up their act, God's going to smite them.

This is like telling you to go, say to North Korea, and tell them to shape up or God's going to get them. If you're Jonah, you've got to be wondering – why would I ever think of doing this? All of us here in Israel hate those horrible people of Ninevah.

Go ahead, God, let the smiting begin! Let's all pull up chairs and watch!

Oh, and just for the record – in case Jonah ever really did consider going, why would they listen to him? Let's remember again – he's their enemy. They would be more likely to kill him than listen to him.

So, to get out of this really impossible, miserable job, Jonah runs away. From God. We all know that probably wasn't going to work out. Very likely Jonah knew it wasn't going to work out. But he decided to give it a try. And he didn't just run a short distance away. Jonah really, really ran away. He was in Joppa, near Tel Aviv in Israel. Ninevah, where he was told to go, was the capital of Syria, hundreds of miles to the northeast,

And Jonah gets into a ship heading west to Tarshish 3,000 miles away in southern Spain. Jonah really, really doesn't want to follow God anywhere.

But while we are smiling knowingly about poor old, stupid Jonah, trying to run away from God, we unwittingly get ourselves caught in the trap being set for us, the trap that God is springing on us even now.

While we are saying, "Poor old Jonah, didn't he know he couldn't run away from God?" we may suddenly discover those places in our own lives that we are also trying to run away, that we are also trying to get out of doing that distasteful thing we hear God asking us to do.

This story may push us into seeing the ways that we have plugged our ears and run in the opposite direction from God's voice.

The truth is, Jonah, silly, misguided Jonah is holding up a mirror for us to look into. Theologian Eugene Peterson says, "Jonah is not a hero too high and mighty for us to identify with – he doesn't do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah as a companion in our

ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right – like preaching, finally in Nineveh – he does it wrong – by getting angry with God. But the whole time God is working within and around Jonah’s very ineptness and accomplishing God’s purposes in him.”

Silly Jonah can be a guide for us in Lent, who will help us see ourselves, catch ourselves, and find ourselves working to see God, listen to God, love God, and follow God more.

As we begin the season of Lent today, we remember our own failings, our own faults, our own ineptness. We remember how we have tried to run from God, how we have tried to ignore the work God has given us as followers of Jesus.

Today, Ash Wednesday, we confess to God how much we have missed the mark, how much we have sinned against one another, against the earth and against God.

In Jonah we see a very human human, someone who does exactly the wrong thing. And we see that God still manages to get done what God wants done. You’ll hear more of the story – of Jonah, and the storm, the sailors and the great, big fish, of Nineveh and most of all, about God’s unending grace, as we journey into Lent.

We will see weekly that God’s will will be done, regardless of how much we try to run away, regardless of how much we miss the mark, regardless of how inept we are. God is not going to let a little thing like human nature get in the way of God’s will to be merciful, full of compassion, and abounding in steadfast love.

Never fear, beloved children of God, no matter how much we try to run away from the work God has called us to do, God will use us.

Just ask the guy over there, the one who’s scowling and who smells strongly of fish.

AMEN