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Jonah 3:1-5; 3:10-4:3 (860)
The Danger in Being Called
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This morning we recall together the story of Jonah. As we look in on old Jonah, he has just been called by God to go to Ninevah to preach repentance, caught a boat to Tarshish instead, been through a storm, been swallowed by a great fish, and finally spit up onto dry land. Now God speaks to Jonah again. Listen...

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in you sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Not too long ago, a nationwide survey was carried among recent college graduates across the United States. One of the questions on the survey was, “At this stage in your life, what would you like to know more than anything, that, if you knew it would make your life easier?”

The result was telling; for the number one answer, far and away was “What I am supposed to do with my life.”

In other words, “Knowing one’s purpose, one’s destiny, one’s calling.

This result fascinates me – the belief that somehow life will be easier when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt *what* we are put here on this earth to do.

Our culture reinforces this notion with books like, “Do What you Love and the Money Will Follow,” or Joseph Campbell’s command that we “Follow our Bliss.” And yet the stories of Jonah and of Jesus and the rich young ruler all seem to indicate an alternative possibility: that knowing the real truth about your purpose on this earth can, and often *does* make your life more difficult.

There is a world of difference between what our cultural context tells us our purpose is and what God’s deeper purpose for us might be. Many of us spend a good chunk of our lives, focusing our talents and gifts on the safer, easier way – that is pursuing the goals we are taught we *should* pursue

– goals based on popular cultural wisdom and even pop theology: getting a college education that will ensure a good job making the most money we can, meeting the right person and getting married, taking on a mortgage and having children, and then and only then, going to church to seek God’s blessing on these goals that we have already chosen for ourselves.

We can easily become convinced that this “right” way as defined by everyone else, will eventually lead us to fulfillment. But what if almost no one living today really knows what real happiness or fulfillment actually is? What if many of those who have achieved these goals still feel depressed, scared, ambivalent and empty?

Many, mostly middle-aged people today have this sense – vague or overt – that something just isn’t quite right. They followed the formula and now feel stuck or trapped

– which actually may make them better off than those other poor souls making up a good portion of America right now. *They* don’t feel stuck. They feel lied to and cheated out of what they were told was their birth right as red-blooded Americans – that if you were white, male and willing to work reasonably hard you could make a comfortable life for your family here. These folks are suffering and rebelling because in America, somewhere along the way, divine blessing became absolutely equated with Eurocentric, patriarchal economic security.

The result is what we see: growing rage and unrest among those who have little in the way of an economic future;(pause) and great ambivalence and fear among those who are fortunate enough to still be able to provide well for themselves and their families – the fear that they may lose what they have, coupled with the thought that they may have *missed* their true calling.

Although this was not Jonah’s problem, it was definitely the Rich Young Ruler’s, who came to Jesus seeking his wisdom. He approached Jesus with what may also be the question on the lips of many these days – “Hey Jesus, I follow what the Bible says about how I am suppose to live. But, tell me, what must I do to inherit *eternal* life – that is to live in a way that is fulfilling and brings me to a place of peace about the eternal state of my soul – because I am afraid for my future and *something* seems to be missing.”

And what is Jesus’ response? “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and come, follow me.” And there it is – the young man’s purpose clearly revealed. But what does Mark then report? “The Young Ruler was *shocked* and went away *grieving* for he was very rich.”

There it was: the first step towards the man’s true purpose on this earth, revealed unequivocally by God himself; and his reaction? Shock and grief. And my guess is that that man struggled with depression, emptiness, and anxiety for the rest of his life. Yet he was an upright soul who did everything right according to his religion – and by every measure available to the world, he *should* have felt happy and fulfilled.

Don’t ask the question if you can’t stand the answer:

Someone once asked Socrates why it was that Alcibiades, who was so brilliant and able a man, and had traveled so much, and seen so much of the world, was nevertheless so unhappy a man. Socrates replied, "Because wherever he goes, Alcibiades takes himself with him."¹

The same could be said of us who consistently harbor negative emotions, when everything about our lives would indicate a different attitude. We cannot escape ourselves. Wherever we go we take ourselves with us.

But where we go with our lives does make a difference. And going in the direction of your destiny, far from feeling like relief, more often feels like you are risking everything with no guarantees. This was certainly the case with Jonah. The call to go and preach repentance to Nineveh could not have been clearer. But Jonah didn't like the implications. After all, Nineveh was made up of a bunch of debauched heathens who could care less about what God wanted. They weren't worth *God's* time much less *Jonah's*.

The German language has this wonderful word that the English language is lacking – it's *Schadenfreude*. *Schadenfreude*. It's a great word which basically translates to "happiness about someone else's deserved misfortune." *Schadenfreude*. This was Jonah's basic problem. His attitude was that the righteous were to be rewarded and the wicked punished. End of story. He was happy with the idea that the Ninevites receive their just desserts. On the other hand, it was very upsetting to think that they might be forgiven. It was fine if *God* wanted to forgive, but Jonah's response was "leave me out of it." *Schadenfreude*.

Jonah's attitude is rampant in the world today. No one wants to forgive anyone anymore and I am not just talking about one's enemies. Today, often if someone receives even a small slight it is enough to cause one to try and use the legal system to make them pay. And the point is often not the money. The point is deriving pleasure from making the one you think made you suffer to suffer in kind.

Now the root of this desire, at least initially, is not necessarily evil or nefarious. The root of it is a desire for real connection. The root of it is to be seen and understood. But we are living in an age when real connection is rare – so rare that it often is not even viewed by some as a possibility. And when one believes that connection with certain people or groups is not possible, then anger and being justified become the order of the day.

That was certainly the case with Jonah. The Ninevites had never shown any proclivity to loving God and following God whatsoever. So Jonah wouldn't trust anything they did and had no desire to be put in a situation where he would be called on to trust God in their presence. It just wasn't right.

Problem is, the God Jonah worships is a loving and forgiving God, a God that is offering Jonah something he had not counted on: a destiny grounded in compassion – compassion even for the enemy. It is a unique plan, tailor made for Jonah's temperament, his DNA, and hence his personality. It is THE way that will connect him eventually with abundant life, ultimate personal meaning and therefore, eternity on this side of the grave.

¹ Story collected by Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*, Assurance Publishers, 1985, pg. 1260.

The problem is that this way is hard – it involves doing the one thing Jonah cannot imagine himself doing – having compassion for those who have always been enemies of God.

We can expect nothing less for ourselves. Finding God’s unique calling for us right now will most likely cause us to have to be involved with people and situations we would rather avoid like the plague. Finding God’s calling for us right now may very well threaten those things our culture tells us are our main purpose.

And yet, I know that, in my life, every time I have gone in that direction, my life has eventually been enriched beyond measure – of course, not before feeling overwhelmed and wondering what in the world I was thinking to have chosen this.

From going on Vision quests in the Canadian wilderness, to doing Dreamwork. From going back to school when we could not afford it to become a licensed therapist, to getting training in Mindfulness. The common denominator in all of these things was that I knew it was what I needed to do, but felt totally out of control and out of my element and that I was being a burden to the people I loved most. But I can tell you that it also causing me to depend on the Christ within in ways I normally am not required to do.

The way to discovering our purpose anew is uncharted because you are the only you who has ever been, facing people and circumstances that will never be put together in quite the same way ever again. And in the end, the one making the decision to do *this* and not *that*, is no one but you.

Which raises the question: Can one choose to go against one’s destiny? Well that’s exactly what Jonah tried and look what happened. He was swallowed up by a monstrous being from out of the depths during a horrible storm. In the belly of the whale, alone and in the dark. It’s where a lot of middle aged men and women find themselves these days...

Cattlemen in these parts and further West have learned there’s a big difference between the behavior of buffalo and that of cattle when confronted with an oncoming storm. Left to themselves, cattle will generally panic and attempt to run away. As a result, many are lost to injuries, as the storm inevitably overtakes them. The buffalo, on the other hand, seem to know instinctively that the storm must be faced resolutely. They turn in the direction of the storm, heads downward, and walk slowly into the wind. Storm-related injuries or deaths for buffalo on the Great Plains are therefore practically unheard of.

I think most us are more like cattle than buffalo. We try and run from the storms that are really a part of our destiny. Hence we become casualties, as much from the fact that we run, by filling our every waking moment with activity no matter how empty, as from the storms themselves.

Over and against this cultural remedy stands the opportunity to be faithful to the one who calls us and hence be connected to that plan.

Soren Kierkegaard was an 18th century prophet and therefore critic of the institutional church. He felt even way back then that members of protestant churches were just using the church to avoid accepting Christ’s radical call. He wrote: “We need to put away our fears and stop living a life shielded against responsibility before the truth We must enter into a fullness of life where everything we do is done in relation to the eternal.”

Likewise Vaclav Havel, who became president of the Czech Republic after the Berlin wall fell, addressed his new fledgling democratic government as follows:

“The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart. ... The only backbone to our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success – responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and *only* where, they will be properly judged.”²

Our culture currently defines fulfillment as endlessly “striving for something better.” But the question is – according to whom? Empty striving after anyone else’s idea of fulfillment but God’s is a dangerous proposition. And the story of Jonah reminds us that we *have* a dangerous destiny *in* God such that it is perhaps precisely *through* the belly of that whale, *through* that difficult time, *through* that illness, *through* that deep depression, *through* that disillusionment, that we may yet have our best opportunity to be in touch with our eternal destiny.

It is certainly where Jonah found it – not on a cruise ship, living it up, but in the belly of the beast who lived *under* that ship. But let’s not wait, like Jonah to be tested. Our destiny in God is challenging enough.

Rather let us ask ourselves whether and how God might be present in the harder way and therefore the more difficult choices that may lie ahead.

Let us pray.

O Gracious God give us the courage to accept the hard way as the pathway to freedom and fulfillment; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if we but surrender to His Will for it is his name we pray, Amen.

² Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, quoted by Philip Yancey in “The Last Deist,” Christianity Today, April 5, 1999.