

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Jonah 1:1-16

Sermon Title: "Nowhere to Run to and Nowhere to Hide" (In the Belly of a Whale Lenten Series)

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Jonah is one of those characters that everyone seems to love. "Children love this story [especially the part about the man being swallowed by a whale], but adults are also fascinated with [the tale]. Outsiders who have minimal knowledge or interest in our Scriptures know enough about Jonah to laugh at a joke based on the story. And scholars write learned articles and books about [Jonah, searching for the deeper meanings behind the story.]"<sup>1</sup>

As we read Jonah, we might think of fairytales like Pinocchio, that story of a marionette who wanted to become a little boy. Toward the end of the story, Pinocchio gets caught up with a whale, and gets swallowed up. Inside the whale's belly he meets Geppetto, the toymaker who created Pinocchio as his only child. We also might think of another whale story, *Moby Dick*, in which Captain Ahab is so infuriated with a white whale that he must hunt it down and kill it, no matter what the cost. That story does not end as nicely as Pinocchio does: Captain

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 9.

Ahab finds his whale but gets caught up in the harpoon rope that he shoots at Moby Dick. He is drug to the bottom of the sea with the injured whale, never to see the sun again.

And then we come to Jonah. We know about his encounter with a whale, and from a child's point of view it is silly. It is fun to think he could have lived in a whale's belly for three days. Maybe those curious children would like to try that some day. It might be like living in a tent or treehouse all night. On the other hand, from an adult's point of view, Jonah's residence in the belly of a whale is not so fortunate. Jonah does it to himself, putting himself in a sticky situation. As we look at Chapter 1 of Jonah, we discover that he really was a pigheaded individual.

The word of the Lord comes to Jonah the son of Amittai. Jonah is a prophet of Israel, a minor prophet to be sure, not as well-known as Isaiah or Ezekiel, but one of God's prophets nonetheless. The word of the Lord comes to him like any other prophet. And when the word comes, it has a mission attached to it. "I want you, Jonah, to go to that great city of Nineveh, and I want you to speak against that city, because it has done many wicked things."<sup>2</sup> When the word of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jonah 1:2.

Lord comes to Isaiah, he says, “Here I am! Send me!” When the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah, he is scared. He makes excuses about being young and not speaking well. But Jeremiah moves forward with God’s message.<sup>3</sup> The word of the Lord comes to Jonah, and he runs away. He hightails it out of there, going the opposite direction from Nineveh, looking for a ship to carry him far away. This is a huge mistake on Jonah’s part, because nobody can ever run away from God.

I remember a professor once saying that Jonah made a huge location mistake. He failed to understand the far-reaching arms of God that may reach across all national borders and even across the world. This professor said that there was an understanding among people during Jonah’s time that each god had its territory. Each god has its turf. Babylon had their gods that could only affect the people within the borders of Babylon. Beyond those borders their gods had little power, unless Babylon invaded another country and claimed that land as their own. Assyria and Egypt also had their gods with limited powers. And so, it was thought that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could only influence the

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1, respectively.

Jews as far as their borders reached. If they went to a foreign country, then they believed God's power would be diminished. They would have to put up with some other god that had more power within that region.

Jonah escapes the borders of Israel and wants to travel to Tarshish, which is located in southern Spain, just west of the rock of Gibraltar. Jonah thinks he can travel far enough away from God to escape his power. God cannot touch me in southern Spain, Jonah thinks, which is practically the end of the known world.<sup>4</sup> Beyond Spain is the vast Atlantic Ocean, and nobody goes out there. So, Jonah believes that he may live at the end of the world, beyond God's outstretched arms, until things change for him.

Big mistake. Jonah doesn't fully understand that the God of gods and King of kings can reach across the world, and even across the universe, and his power is never weakened. God proves this by throwing Jonah's ship into a panic with a fierce storm. God proves he can influence Jonah by getting him thrown overboard. God proves he is still calling Jonah to ministry in Nineveh by having him become dinner for a whale.

King David asks in Psalm 139, "Where can I go from Your Spirit [O God]? Where can I flee from your

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<sup>4</sup> James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, cf. 42.

presence?” The answer is nowhere. We cannot escape God in such a way that his holy presence is not surrounding us, and we are finally on our own.

This is a scary idea for some people, especially those who like to do what they want to do without God’s interference. It is obvious that God is present here, because this is a church. This is God’s house. But out there, people want to believe God loses his power somehow. He cannot control the unpredictable things that happen in the world.

People want to do their own thing. They want to act like everybody else around them is acting. They don’t care if they tell people off or put people down. They want to prove they are big and tough by their boastful words or their superhuman actions. They want to do what they want to do, and they don’t want God messing around with them. They don’t want to be considered Christians out there, because it’s too much work. They think it is so much easier just to blend in with everyone else, act like they do, talk like they do, even though it’s un-Christian. People justify their actions by saying or thinking, “I’m not in church right now. I don’t have to act holy like I do in worship.” They believe they can limit God’s reach.

A Presbyterian pastor and author once said that

people, even Christians, have a problem with the ubiquity of God. The word *ubiquity* means “to be everywhere at the same time.” We would attach the word *omnipresent* to God. Some people don’t like that, the idea that God is always watching over them. God is always aware of what we are doing. There is no escape. God is at the bar, if we are there. God is at the nightclub on Friday or Saturday night. God is in the bedroom. God is in the house when we might be home alone with a certain boyfriend or girlfriend, and our parents don’t know. God is in the grocery store, if we are thinking about stealing some food. God is in the car, when we honk and share hand gestures with other drivers. God is everywhere. We cannot turn out the light and make the room dark enough, so that God cannot see us. We cannot hide off in the woods in the small damp cabin, and think God cannot find us.

For those who want to do their own thing – for those who would like to sin unconditionally – God is there as they sin. God will know. He even knows our deepest, darkest secrets that we have shared with nobody.

Jonah thought he could escape God, and that was a huge mistake. At the time he got caught on that ship, with the wind whipping up all around him, he

could have thought negatively about God finding him out. He might have thought it was a bad thing that God discovered him, and that Jonah was in a heap of trouble with his Lord.

However, Jonah was a prophet of God, so he must have known something about the grace of God. He must have learned about the encouragement of God to call us to some task and then to give us the wherewithal to carry out that task. We who love the Lord God don't want him to be somewhere else, far from us. We never want God to leave us alone, or we would be completely helpless. A theologian from the 1800s once said that if God "takes our breath away, we vanish into dust."<sup>5</sup>

So we who love our God are happy with the ubiquity of God. We are thankful that God is taking care of some poor soul in India or China, and at the same time God is directly involved with our confused and pathetic lives. We love to imagine the far-reaching arms of God, stretching across the universe and even reaching the dark corners of our deep sin. So if we were in the far reaches of the sky, God is there. If we were deep in the ground, God is there. Even if the darkness closes around us, it becomes as a light to God, and God's right hand holds us fast.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> C.W. Christian, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Psalm 139:8-12.

When we stumble, when we fall, we are thankful that God is nearby, always, to pick us up. We won't stay on the ground for long. God won't keep us down, giving us a swift kick in the back to cause us to remain in our mistakes. God will lift us up. He will spend some time with us to show how we have stumbled or fallen; and then he will encourage us to move forward.

God surrounds us with people to encourage us. The fellowship of Christians is a great place to be in order to receive prayers and support for the things we need to do for God. God gives us prayer, so we may be in direct communication with God. Through prayer God instructs our hearts and puts ideas in our minds and surges our bodies with energy. Through prayer we discover God's will, and then may carry it out.

Scripture is the place to discover how God moved through people's lives. We may read Jonah, and see his mistake of fleeing, and realize that God was not calling him to something that he could never do. God wasn't placing a burden on his shoulders just for laughs. Jonah simply did not want to serve God, because he hated the people of Nineveh. He hated having to leave Israel and those comfort zones that he carefully constructed around himself like tall, thick



stone barriers. God destroyed those barriers in order for Jonah to do something important, something vital for others. If Jonah did not visit those Ninevites, they were going to die in their sin. His visit was a matter of life or death.

God moves through our lives as well, sometimes taking us out of our carefully-crafted comfort zones. We live in bubbles that need to be popped, especially if those bubbles have isolated us from people in need. We see in Scripture how God is constantly popping bubbles so that ministry might occur: people may be healed, and lives may be spared.

We are at the beginning of a season of Lent, in which we should reflect on our lives. How have we fled from God, thinking we can outrun him when we can't? How have we disregarded doing something that God wants us to do, all in the name of being lazy; and God refuses to allow us to be lazy? God will continue to hound us, if we want to see it that way. Or, God will continue to strengthen our hearts. God will continue to show us how to serve, even when we don't expect it. During this time of Lent, we might as well give ourselves over to God. We should just stop running or stop being lazy. In either case we lose our breath, and only God may breathe life back into us. We might as

well answer God with a “Here I am, Lord, send me,”  
and enjoy where God will take us next.