

Nowhere to Run

Jonah 1:7-17
(October 8, 2000)

Often times, when we think about the call of God we usually visualize it on a grand scale. God calling someone to give up everything to be a missionary, or God calling you to salvation in Christ or God calling you to make some other dramatic life change. But the fact is God is calling us on a daily basis in many of the seemingly little things in life. Like when God urges you to turn around and say hi to that person standing behind you in the grocery line, or when God urges you in the middle of a day to pray for a friend, or when God speaks to you about some activity or action to stay away from or to embrace. These are all moments where God is calling you and whether the call is to take the gospel to the jungles of Africa or the call is to take some cookies to your next door neighbor, how we respond to the call of God can make all the difference in our relationship with God. How we respond to the call of God can determine whether we will experience peace and joy with God or turmoil and unrest.

Well, this morning we are going to examine more closely Jonah on the run from God's call. One of the things I appreciate about these OT stories is that the authors don't try to gloss over the character flaws and mistakes of the characters, and it is that way with Jonah. The author here tells it like it is. When we last left Jonah you will remember God had called him to go to Ninevah and call out against it but Jonah runs in the opposite direction. In fact, Jonah buys a one-way ticket to Tarshish, about as far as you could get in Jonah's day from Ninevah. Pick up the story in vs 4-17. As we see Jonah running from the call of God, I want to point out to you 3 things this story has to teach us about

running from the call of God. The first two points will be more observational and the final point will be more instructional.

The first thing this story has to teach us about running from the call of God is that when we run from God there is no peace. We have all been there. God calls us to do something and for whatever reason we say no. We turn and run in the opposite direction. And since we have all been there we know the result of that kind of action. When we run from God there is that feeling of inner turmoil. There is an uneasiness, an unrest that cannot be quieted. The old school preachers had a word for this. It is a word unfortunately that is dropping out of the Christian vocabulary. It is conviction. That uneasiness, that unrest, that inner turmoil we feel when we run from God is called conviction.

In our scripture reading this morning we read where Jesus said when he leaves the Holy Spirit will come. If you keep reading through John 16 you will find where Jesus says part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to convict when people are moving in the opposite direction from God and what God wants them to do. When you are running from God the Holy Spirit brings that unrest, that uneasiness, that conviction. When you sense that inner turmoil it is the Spirit of God saying, "you are moving in the wrong direction. Turn around. Turn back to God." There is no peace in running from God and that is what Jonah finds here.

Jonah boards the ship to run from God and he find a place in the hold of the ship and falls into a deep sleep. On the surface it may look peaceful, but what does Jonah wake up to find? Great turmoil. A violent storm is threatening to break up the ship.

Jonah wakes up to the cries of the captain urging Jonah to pray so that maybe they will not die. It is a perfect illustration of what lives become when we run from God--chaos.

Let me make this observation. Sometimes there are storms in our lives precisely because we are running from God. God brings this particular storm because Jonah is running from him, and I don't think the storm is necessarily punishment. I think the storm is God's way of saying, "Jonah, turn back to me." The storm is God's way of giving Jonah the chance to rethink how he will respond to God's call. When we won't listen to the conviction the Holy Spirit brings into our lives, the storm is another way of God getting our attention. Sometimes that storm in our life is God's way of saying, "quit running. Turn back to me." The first thing we learn here is that when we run from God there can be no peace.

The second thing this story teaches us about running from God's call is that when we run from Him we lose credibility as an effective witness. I know that there are many of you here this morning actively seeking to be a good Christian witness to lost friends, family members, and co-workers. As believers we are all entrusted with the responsibility of being good witnesses for the gospel. But one thing we see here is that our credibility as a good witness is damaged when we run from God. And here is how our credibility is damaged. What hurts the Christian witness more than anything? It is hypocrisy, it is when our actions no longer match our words.

Notice in verses 7-10 Jonah was the unlucky winner of this lottery, so the crew wanted to know who he was, where he came from, and who was responsible for making all this trouble. Now, notice Jonah's response in vs 9, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord (Literally I fear the Lord or I am in awe of the Lord), the God of heaven, who made

the sea and the land." Now, Jonah claimed that he feared the Lord, that he was in awe of the Lord, that he worships the Lord, but do his actions match his words? I would submit to you that they do not. Jonah's actions give no indication at all that he fears God. In fact, if you were just to look at Jonah's actions, his disobedience, you would never come to the conclusion that this is a man who worships God.

I think even the pagan sailors could see Jonah's words and his actions didn't match. The text tells us the sailors knew he was running from God. They had just heard this great orthodox confession by Jonah and in the mind's of the sailors the words and the actions didn't match up. If Jonah was this great believer in God as he confessed then why we he running from God? The sailors asked, "what have you done?" They could see his words and his actions didn't match. For those around us who have not yet accepted Christ they too will be able to see when our words and our actions fail to match up. If we make these great confessions about our relationship with God then we run from God, those around us will take notice. They will see the inconsistency just like the sailors saw the inconsistency in Jonah. And ultimately that inconsistency, if it goes on long enough will hurt our credibility as an effective Christian witness.

A final thing I want to notice here about running from the call of God is this. Seize the opportunities that God gives you to turn back to him. We talked about the conviction that God's Spirit brings when we turn from God. That is God giving us the opportunity to turn back to him. Seize that opportunity. We talked about how, as with Jonah, when we turn from God sometimes God will bring along that storm into our lives. That is God giving us a chance to turn back to him. Seize that opportunity. Ultimately, what we are talking about here is repentance. When you turn from God's call he will

always give you a chance to repent and turn back to him. Often he will give numerous opportunities to repent, and Jonah has that opportunity here.

The sailors say to Jonah in v12, "what should we do to you to make the sea calm down?" At that moment in time with the waves crashing around him Jonah has a choice. He has an opportunity. There is a way here for Jonah to calm the storm. It isn't said explicitly but I think it is implied in numerous ways. All Jonah had to do was repent. All he had to do was say, "God, I have acted like a fool. I repent. I am ready to do it your way." That was the whole purpose of the storm anyway. To get Jonah to turn back to God. Jonah has that choice in v11. But instead of repenting what does he say? Throw me overboard.

Now, we know the fish is coming but Jonah doesn't. To be thrown into the sea meant certain death. In fact the sailors didn't want to do it. But Jonah would rather face death than repent. Now fortunately for Jonah, and fortunately for us, God often protects us when we make foolish choices. God will not let Jonah die. But what I want you to see here is that Jonah had a chance to repent and he didn't take it; and because he didn't take the opportunity to repent he is facing yet another storm. This one is inside the belly of a great fish.

So, we come full circle. It is what we were saying at the beginning. When we run from the call of God there is no peace. There will be inner turmoil, there will be storm after storm until we turn back to God. One of the lessons of this story is if you are running from God take the first chance you get to repent. Take the first chance you get to turn back to God. And if you do you will find peace.