

Jonah is part of what we call the minor prophets in the Old Testament. That certainly does not mean that they had a minor impact, rather it reflects more the length of their writing. When we look at the twelve minor prophets, each wrote what has become one to twelve chapters of our Bible, between the 8th and 5th century BCE.

But out of the twelve, Jonah and Amos stand as unique. Usually the prophets had a word for their own people in their own region. But Jonah and Amos were called to travel - to go to a different place in order to share their prophecy from God. Amos went to the Northern Kingdom. Jonah to Assyria, where Ninevah was the capitol.

What was not unique about Jonah was his hesitancy surrounding the call from God. While Jonah turned from the call in a spectacular fashion, there were many that came before him that said no at first, or hesitated when God called them.

Think of Moses when God came to him in the burning bush, giving him the call to go to Egypt and set the Israelites free. What was Moses’s first response - surely not me God, I’m not a very good speaker. Or Elijah, at one point during his time of prophesy told God that it was simply getting to be too much, he didn’t have enough support to be listened to. Or Jeremiah, who straight up told God that this message was going to get him killed and he was too young to die.

But where other’s hesitated - Jonah fled. The word of God came to Jonah, telling him to go to Ninevah and cry out against it - in other words take them a prophesy from God that they are not going to be too happy about and he boarded a boat for Tarshish instead. Ninevah was the capitol of Assyria. Tarshish was thought to be around where Spain is located. So Jonah went as far as possible in the opposite direction.

Why did Jonah flee? We don’t know for sure. But we can certainly assume that he didn’t want to be part of the call that God was placing on his life.

Jonah often gets a lot of flack for fleeing, but my friends, how many of us have done the same? I have had the privilege of hearing countless call stories over the years, and as part of almost every single one of them, there is a point where folks told God no. Or asked God if he was sure.

I know in my own call story - at first, I really didn’t want to be a pastor. I settled for thinking that I could be a lay speaker or lay minister and still go into psychology - what I was passionate about at the time. But God had other plans.

And it isn’t just prophets and clergy who run away in some way, shape or form. It’s many of us gathered here today. We, like Jonah, make up a list of reasons to go as far away from what God is calling us to. It’s too much time. It’s too much money. I’m still raising kids at home. I’m too old. I’m too young. I simply don’t want to do *that*, God.

Jonah must have taken a deep breath when he boarded the boat for Tarshish. Surely God will catch on that this isn’t what Jonah wants to do. Surely God will call someone else now that he is heading to what was believed to be the opposite end of the world.

But when God calls, God is persistent. So God brings up this epic storm. One where seasoned sailors aren’t even sure what to do. But this captain, finding Jonah asleep somehow in the midst of all of this, tells him to get up and pray to his god, saying “Perhaps the god will spare us.”

Here is a man who didn't believe in the God of Israel. For all intents and purposes he would have been classified as a pagan, yet he has more trust in Jonah's God than Jonah. With that one word, "perhaps", we see non-believers being open to the work and way and will of God. Eventually the sailors find out that they need to throw Jonah overboard and he is swallowed by a big fish, where he does not die but has several days to contemplate life and call and his behavior.

But the story does not end there. If we skip forward to chapter three, after Jonah has been spit up on dry land, the call of God comes to Jonah *again*. I'm not sure what Jonah thought was going to happen, but it certainly wasn't that. Maybe he thought since he learned his lesson that God would give up. But here's the thing - the call wasn't really about Jonah in the first place. Jonah was a vessel to get a needed message to the people of Ninevah. So the call of God came to him again.

We get into dangerous territory when we think that the call is all about us. When it's about what we want or wish will happen. Friends, the call of God is always first and foremost about God. About God's will be done. We are simply privileged enough to participate, even if Jonah did not feel that it was a privilege at the time.

We need hearts that turn away from self-will and towards God's will. We need to stop asking "do I really want to do this?" And start asking "God how can you be so good and loving to call me to participate in your Kingdom?"

This time Jonah did go to Ninevah, and for forty days he went around the area saying that they will be overthrown. Jonah saw this as simply doing what God asked him to do, but for God it was a grace-period that resulted in the conversion and repentance of the people of Ninevah. The people not only felt bad about their past behavior, but they acted on their new beliefs, putting on sack cloth and ashes and crying out to God.

We sometimes get tricked into thinking that the book of Jonah is about the prophet Jonah, but really church, just like the rest of scripture it's truly about God. Our God who showed mercy to Jonah in the belly of that fish and showed him grace to go again and live into this call. God who showed mercy and grace to the people of Ninevah. God who shows mercy and grace to each and every one of us as well.

All over this text we see God's care and compassion. For people who thought they were close to God and ran away and people who were far from God but turned their hearts and lives around.

What about us? As the people of God are we sharing the Good News of God's compassion and care? Or are we running away from people who aren't like us? Are we proclaiming God's mercy and grace that changed our lives? Or are we holding all of that in, like it's a secret? Let us be the people who share the love of God in all we do and say so that God's Kingdom may be made known! Amen and Amen!