

Jonah 1:1-3
What's Your Cicely?
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Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

There are times in our lives when taking a leap of faith involves going somewhere you just don't want to go. Even though you know it's the right thing to do, you just don't want to move. If this is you in some way, then my friend, you have a calling. What you realize when you have the faith to go, is that the life you save is also your own.

Joel Fleishman was a newly minted physician, fresh from Columbia Medical School. To finance his education, his one and only scholarship came from a distant benefactor, the state of Alaska. All that was required of him to fulfill his obligation was a mere 4 years of his life. Needless to say, the wild and pristine lands of Alaska were less than ideal for this New York urbanite. To make matters worse, when he arrived, he found they had no need for him in the big city, and he was to be transferred to the town of Cicely, population 800. Some of you may know already that this scenario which I am describing is the plot line to the television program from the early 90s *Northern Exposure*. New York Jewish Doctor fights the calling on his life to serve the people of this tiny town. This isn't how it was supposed to go.

This morning, we are continuing our fall series called "Leap" in which we are looking at individuals from the Bible who experience God's call in their lives, inviting them to do something that requires a leap of faith. We're coming to the end of our series, and today we are going to look at the difficult idea of what to do when God calls you to go somewhere you just don't want to go. In one way or another, we will all be called by God to serve him in places we'd really rather not be, with people we find it difficult to love.

We meet Jonah this morning minding his own business when God says to him, "Jonah, pack your bags, you're going to Nineveh, that great and terrible city, the enemy of all your people, Nineveh is where you'll go. Oh, and the flight you'll take doesn't take frequent flier miles." Nineveh was a city that on the outside appeared strong, but had a penchant for decadence and immorality. Like so many, it was lost in its own deceit. Nineveh was in need of salvation.

Interestingly, the great city of Nineveh was on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates across from modern day Mosul, Iraq. This last July, the terrorist group ISIS bombed an ancient pilgrimage spot called Jonah's tomb, the place where Christians and Jews believe the Prophet Jonah is buried. There are remnants, even a fossilized whale's tooth, signifying this worldly connection to this biblical story. Now this region is controlled by

ISIS, and the people there are longing for deliverance.

Pastor and teacher Craig Barnes calls Nineveh “the enduring metaphor for what is wrong with the world. Nineveh is that place that strikes fear into our lives, Nineveh is where our enemy lives. Whatever is evil, whatever is cruel, whatever is uncertain, that is Nineveh.” And that is where God calls Jonah to go.

God, are you nuts? Jonah would just assume God destroy Nineveh, nothing good has ever come from there. Nineveh is where the enemy is. Confusing and shocking as it is, God wants to show mercy to Nineveh. And even more confusing to Jonah is the fact that God wants to send him to do it.

But Jonah doesn't argue with God over the calling. No, he quietly books passage on a ship to Tarshish. Jonah has other plans. Now Tarshish is the idealized place where Jonah can be used. A port city on the northeast side of the Mediterranean Sea, Tarshish was the place Jonah wanted to be sent. Tarshish was the mission field that was preferable to Jonah. *If God is calling me to serve him, well, then, at the very least it's going to be in the place of my choosing*, thought Jonah. But that's just not how it works.

You see, Tarshish represents our ministry dreams for God. Tarshish is our idea of what it means to serve God. We're all interested in serving God, of understanding God's involvement in the world. It's just that more often than not, we'd rather look for it in the places that are comfortable and safe for us...the problem is, that's typically not where we'll find them. We don't want to serve the sinner, the needy, or the enemy; we would much rather serve Tarshish—in Tarshish, I can serve God and enjoy all of the trappings of this world, as well. In Tarshish, my service will be appreciated. They will see what a good thing I'm doing.

When we pick the places we wish to serve, what we do in a sense is reduce God to a sort of divine version of a high school guidance counselor. Volunteer with the downtown renovation project? Sounds good. Start a Bible study with your friends? That'd be fun. Visit shut-ins? No problem, we have something for that. The problem is, the call of God doesn't work like that.

As Eugene Peterson reminds us, if you are not certain what God wants you to be doing with your life, don't start by shopping for good places to volunteer because you will never pick Nineveh. And do not rush to the Bible for clues if you are only thinking of it as a catalogue in which mission opportunities are marketed.

Sometimes we use the Bible like this, don't we? Just as a catalog of possibilities on how we might help God out with our time. The Bible is not just a book we go to when we have questions, but rather, as God's Holy Word, the Bible is the one that asks the question of us, and then waits patiently for our reply. *Will you go to Nineveh, that great city? Because I am going to rescue that city. Will you, Jonah, go where I send you?* When I ask the question of myself, “Where am I to go,” the answer is always Tarshish. When God asks the question, the answer is always Nineveh.

As it so frequently turns out, when God calls us, it is rarely to the places we thought we'd go. So often, God's call is a response to something that has happened to us. What Peter, Jesus' disciple, will find out at the end of John's gospel is that following Jesus is not the key to the life of your dreams. It is the means by which we are invited to work for God's dreams. And if it is God's dreams that you looking for, chances are, that involves being led to a place where we'd really rather not go.

When God calls people to serve him, he doesn't ask in what capacity we'd like to serve. Has there ever been an instance in the Bible when God calls and the person on the receiving end is happy about it? No. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Peter, all of them had other ideas for their lives. They were going to be shepherds, fishermen, and scholars. But when God came into their lives, it turned things upside down. In the end, they were all glad that God had encountered them this way, but the beginning? The beginning is another story.

When Jonah fled to Tarshish, he wasn't only going to find a more attractive place to be; he was fleeing from the presence of God. And the only way that we can get away from God's plans for our lives is to flee the scene and try to hide all together. But there is no hiding from the fact that God has gifted each one of you in a special way, and God wants to use you. When we refuse to let God use our gifts, whether from a feeling of inadequacy or because of past hurts, we are simply running from God. But we cannot hide in worship; that is because God will not settle for our less than becoming fully alive.

The best part of the Jonah story this morning is that God didn't let Jonah go to Tarshish. God went out after Jonah. We can flee from God...for a while. But in my experience, God always gets what he wants.

It's interesting that as Jonah is fleeing, God sends a storm on the sea. The sailors are freaking out. They're worried they are going to die in this storm. And where is Jonah? Jonah's catching some z's down below deck.

This is so often how we avoid God's call for us to take that leap of faith, by falling asleep. How could Jonah fall asleep? How could he not? Jonah's been asleep from the beginning. The way we close our ears to God's call is by burying ourselves in our work, or by amusing ourselves with that next purchase, or by spending our nights in front of the TV. We settle for a life that has bored us into a sleepy coma, when what is out there in front of us is the excitement of God's drama unfolding as we cover our eyes and ears to what is happening.

In the story, the captain comes to Jonah and wakes him up. The captain in our lives could be a neighbor who struggles with poor health, who needs her lawn cared for. The captain could be a spouse or a child who calls you as you're working late once again and asks, "Where are you?"

Where are you? This is the kind of question that can haunt us. What are you doing with your life? Is your life counting for God's kingdom, or are you settling for less than your

full God-imagined significance? Remember, there were others on the boat whose lives were in grave danger while Jonah was asleep.

Wake up, sleeper. This is the Apostle Paul's call to the Ephesians in Ephesians 5:14, "Awake o sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." You have the God of the universe with you, so rise and call upon your God, this world depends upon you. Arise sleeper, stop sleepwalking through life, because the God who became incarnate, to move out into the neighborhood, is becoming real to the world through you. Remember the Christ who indwells each of you has something good to say, to do in this world. So wake up.

The final action of this first section of the book of Jonah is what happens when Jonah finally wakes up to God's call. Do you remember what he does? He tells the sailors to throw him overboard; only then will their ship be saved. This is what it feels like when we finally surrender to God's calling in our lives. For a time, it feels like complete and utter chaos all around us. You have no idea how you will survive, or where help will come from. That's because there is no easy road to Nineveh. There is a miraculous way, but first you have to have the faith to jump in.