



You Are Called. Need Directions?

TEXT
Jonah 1

September 9, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I love this story of Jonah, who is called by God to serve as a prophet.

I don't know if you have noticed, but being a prophet is a job that nobody really wants. Jeremiah said he would rather die than be a prophet.¹ Moses tried to substitute his brother Aaron for the job.² Isaiah asked, "What do you want me to say?" When God told him, Isaiah responded, "How long do I have to do this?"³

Evidently, to have the word of God so clearly in your heart that you are confident in telling others what God wants these days is not easy. So, it's understandable that Jonah is reluctant. Even Jesus, in the Gethsemane garden, tells God, "I do not want what you want."⁴

It's difficult because, when the word of God comes, it never comes as information or simple insight. The word of God always comes as a calling. It is a word that shapes who you are in this world. That's the rub. And Jonah, no doubt, wished the word of God had come to anyone else. He probably wondered, "Why did this word have to come to me? Why didn't God choose someone else? Anyone else?"

The word of God says, "Go to Nineveh and cry against it for their evil has come before me."

Now if Jonah didn't know God as well as Jonah knows God, he might have received this as good news. For Jonah hated the folks of Nineveh, so to get to tell them judgment is coming, why wouldn't he want to do that? The problem is Jonah knows God. Jonah knows that God can be surprisingly gracious. God can forgive anyone of anything.

This is why Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh, so he goes to Tarshish — or tries to. Where is Tarshish exactly? I'm not sure really. But it's clearly west because Jonah goes to Joppa, the sea coast city, and he sets sail in the Mediterranean for Tarshish. The thing is, Nineveh is east, and you can't get there by boat. He appears to be lacking directions, but he knows exactly where he is going.

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. Assyria was Israel's enemy. Did you know that Assyria invaded Israel? Assyria overthrew them, everything north of Jerusalem. They scattered the Jews all across the ancient world. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, scattered, lost.

So, God is calling Jonah to go to the last place on earth he wants to go.

This week we welcomed Sonia Warshawski to Village, here at our Mission campus. The movie *Big Sonia* showed Wednesday night, and Thursday evening she spoke in this sanctuary. I am grateful to the Stephen Ministry and Village U who coordinated this effort.

Sonia is strong, winsome and funny. "Big Sonia" is so short that when she carries a shopping bag, the bag drags on the ground. And how she sees over the steering wheel of her car is a mystery to me.

Many of you were here, so you know she lost almost all of her family in the Holocaust. She watched her own mother marched to the gas chamber, as they were separated in line. Sonia went to the right, her mother to the left. It was her mother's last hour.

After enduring the war in three different camps, she survived, somehow. She still has the serial numbers on her arm, and she still has scars in her heart. For most of her life, she has not really talked about her experience, but she changed her mind. She said she listened to voices of hatred in America

today, and she realized they sounded just like the voices she heard as a little girl in Germany. She realized she needed to say something.

Someone asked her, “After all you have lost, how did you forgive them?”

She said, “I haven’t forgiven them. I can’t, not now. God will have to do that.”

I cast no judgment on her feelings there. She is stronger than me, and I have no reason to believe I would be half as gracious and loving as Sonia is had I experienced even a portion of what she suffered.

But the unsettling thing is, I think God can forgive anyone. There are no limits to grace. Jonah knew that, and he hated it. He would have given anything if the word of God had just come to someone else, anyone else. Because the thing about the word of God, it never comes simply as information or insight; it comes as calling. And it is calling Jonah to do something Jonah would never choose to do.

So, he runs, he hides, he tries to get lost from this calling word. But it doesn’t work out well. He boards a ship. But a storm comes. The confused and terrified sailors reluctantly toss Jonah overboard, which calms the sea. But the story doesn’t end there. God sends a fish, a big one — a fish that evidently feeds on prophets. And for three days and three nights, Jonah lives in the belly of this fish. No magazine; no iPad to play games; cut off from all responsibilities; just Jonah, in

a fish with his thoughts — kind of a mini-sabbatical.

Now, since we will spend the month with Jonah, let me stop the sermon for a minute and offer this aside. I know some folks get to this part of the story, and it trips them up. They ask themselves, “How did this happen? Did he really spend the weekend in a fish? What kind of fish is that? Are we sure this is true?”

OK, I could say it’s just me, but it’s not just me. The fact that the prophet gets swallowed by a fish and survives in that fish for three days and three nights and then gets spewed up on the shore as whale vomit and is happy about it ... evidently not even this fish can stomach Jonah ... all of this is a clue. This didn’t really happen. It’s just a story. But it’s also the truth. Sometimes the best way to communicate real truth about the biggest things in our lives is to tell a story. With this story, the important thing to ask is not did it happen, but does it teach us the truth?

This Jonah short story is about many things, but it’s not about how long a human being can survive inside a fish. If I understand the text, it is about this: The word of God comes to everyone — to you, to me, to everyone. We are all Jonah. And it never comes simply as information or inspiration; it comes as calling. And that calling is always going to challenge us. Because this word always, always calls us to be as gracious to one another as God is with us.

And Jonah hated it, because he just knew God would be gracious even to the folks of Nineveh. And as he sat in the belly of that fish, I am certain he thought, “Why me? Why did this calling word come to me? Why couldn’t God send someone else?”

I’ll tell you something: I don’t think Jonah ever figured it out. I think God called Jonah, not simply because God needs his word to be carried to Nineveh, but because Jonah needed to speak this word to those he hated. Jonah needed to be an instrument of grace.

The truth is, that is always and every time the calling of God: for God’s people to be an instrument of grace. That is our calling: to be as gracious to one another as God is to us.

I experienced grace this summer. I went with some of you to Kenya, to a backwoods village called Thwake. You are being an instrument of grace there. You raised the funds to build a multipurpose hall for the Presbyterian Church in Wote. When we arrived, the building was almost ready to receive the roof. They invited us to join them in a worship service to symbolically “lay the cornerstone.”

Rev. David Nzioka and I placed a couple of cinder blocks, proving that God did not call us to do construction. We publicly gave thanks to God for you and for the Christians in Wote who are being instruments of grace. Others gave thanks to God for those construction workers who came

right behind David and me and fixed those cinder blocks before the concrete dried; they were pretty crooked.

But not only that ... I watched with amazement as Jerry and Vickie and Diane brought over 100 patients to their dental chair and gave incredible care in a room with no electricity. I saw grace at work as Lucy and Kathleen and Parker sterilized dental equipment using a pressure cooker over a gas canister. I watched Jim and Bob make sure patients got the right eyeglasses. I saw grace as Cole and Chase delighted the children as they flew a drone over their heads taking their picture.

I watched Dee and Sherri and Melanie labor without stop, placing medications in Ziploc bags to be given to patients. David and Lauren and Scott and Dan carried blocks to the site to finish the building.

I saw grace as Barbara painted protectant on children's teeth. She painted thousands of teeth, looking into the eyes of each child with a smile that convinced me she was seeing the image of God in every one of them.

I saw grace as Andrea got down on the floor and played games with the 12 girls who are living in the orphanage built by this Presbytery. And I watched those little girls giggle with joy as they received the dresses sewn for them by Mission Sewing, and I fought back tears when each of those young girls came proudly wearing their new dresses to Sunday worship.

And I saw grace as Kansas Citians and Kenyans told stories and learned truth, as we feasted every day on food cooked over open fires. And through it all, we delighted in the discovery that we are human together, and human when we are instruments of grace — because the word of God calls us to be as gracious to one another as God is to us.

Now here's the thing. It was pretty easy to do there. We had no issues of a history of hatred. We easily enjoyed one another, which is why it was so important to live as instruments of grace, when it was easy — because as Jonah and Big Sonia remind us, it won't always be easy. And we won't have a chance of being gracious when it's hard if we don't learn how to practice grace when it's easy.

So, we must learn to be gracious with one another, where it's easy, and build from that. This world needs us to keep on being as gracious to one another as God is to us.

It's not easy, and it is often uncomfortable, but it is holy, and it is human, and it is our calling. And I believe it's also the truth.

¹Jeremiah 15:10

²Exodus 4:10f

³Isaiah 6:6–13

⁴Matthew 26:39

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.