

Runaway Train
Jonah 3:1-10
Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
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¹The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything.

They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I am going to begin this sermon in the style of Ben Dorr – by asking y'all a question. Who can tell me the winner of the 1994 Grammy Award for best rock song?

Runaway Train by Soul Asylum.

*Runaway train never going back
Wrong way on a one-way track
Seems like I should be getting somewhere
Somehow I'm neither here nor there*

Okay, question number two. Who thinks that a modern-day Jonah might choose a train to escape the call of God instead of a fishing boat? Well, I do.

Hear me out. Trains are economical. You can move around more than in a plane. There are sleeping berths. And dining cars. And no chance of getting seasick.

Yep, a train would have been a much better choice for Jonah had they existed back in the 8th century BCE.

Today we are continuing in our summer sermon series of exploring the call stories of the Old Testament. Many of us are familiar with the story of Jonah. Jonah being called to proclaim God's word to the city of Nineveh. Jonah instead fleeing to Tarshish on a ship. The ship being caught in a storm. The sailors throwing Jonah overboard. A whale (or a big fish) swallowing Jonah. Jonah praying in the belly of the whale. The whale spewing Jonah onto dry land. Jonah being called a second time. Jonah actually going to Nineveh and prophesying. The whole of Nineveh repenting. Jonah being angry enough to die. A lot happens in just four chapters.

Last week, Leigh kicked off our series with the call of Elijah. Only about 100 years separated Jonah from Elijah and they were both prophets in Israel during the reign of kings who were less than faithful. But whereas Elijah was called to prophesy to the people of Israel, Jonah was called to prophesy to people outside of Israel. And this was unheard of in biblical times. It was just not something that happened. It was not something that one did. So, really, it was no surprise that Jonah took off running, like a runaway train, in the opposite direction.

Have you ever wanted to take off running in the opposite direction? I have. A few times. Most recently two Saturdays ago when my fellow Sr. High Witness and Service trip mates and I saw the room we would be sleeping in for four nights. Now, we knew we would be sleeping in a church, in Sunday School rooms. What we didn't know was that the females would actually be sleeping in a separate building across the parking lot from the church. It was full of sewing supplies, but room had been made for our 10 air mattresses and cots. That first night, there were lots of bugs and a few lizards, lots of uncertainty, and we hadn't quite figured out how to work the air conditioning. I'm not going to lie. I thought about concocting some reason for me and me alone to move my air mattress into the sanctuary each night, but I didn't think I should leave the girls alone. In a separate building. With bugs and lizards and finicky air conditioning. I wanted to run away. And the girls with me surely did, too. It's a natural human emotion when faced with a challenging circumstance or situation. Thankfully, we stuck it out and God stuck it out with us. By the end of our four nights, I had come to be thankful for our home away from home and the hospitality of Buckingham Presbyterian Church.

Let's take a moment and settle ourselves geographically in the story. Jonah is from the region of Galilee, where Jesus would do much of his ministry 800 years later. He was called to go to Nineveh which was the capital of Assyria. Modern-day Nineveh is known

as the city of Mosul in the country of Iraq. From Jonah's hometown to Nineveh would have been a journey of roughly 500 miles. Now Tarshish. That place was FAR AWAY. How far away, we don't really know, but to the people of Jonah's time it was the end of the known world, literally the ends of the earth.

Galilee in Israel. Nineveh in Assyria. Tarshish at the end of the earth.

One Hebrew scholar said, "Although Jonah was well aware that God was able to reach remotest parts of the earth, he hoped at least to flee from God's prophetic calling."¹ If any of us were in Jonah's shoes, I think 99.9% of us might have tried the same thing...just maybe on a train. Here's why. Nineveh was the sworn mortal enemy of Israel. Their kingdom of Assyria wanted to control the whole region, including Israel and Judah and Phoenicia and Egypt. So why would Jonah ever voluntarily go there? His God was not their god. Why would he proclaim God's word to the Ninevites? He would be ignored, harassed, maybe even killed! This was a big ask for God of one of his prophets. Take a moment and think. Who or what would your Nineveh be?

So, the song, Runaway Train, from the early 90's? It became an anthem. One that resides in the corners of our minds. It resides in my mind. That's why it's the sermon title today. But all joking aside, it became a song that mattered. Soul Asylum lead singer and writer of the song, Dave Pirner, wrote the song as a way of trying to describe the depressive episodes he dealt with. They felt like a "runaway train", out of control. The lyrics of his song gave voice to his experience and opened the way for conversation about mental health in our country. The song also mattered because of its music video. The band had the idea to feature pictures of missing children in their music video. Milk cartons, which used to be the way of alerting the country to missing children, had gone by the wayside. Maybe this was a new way to bring awareness. Over the course of time, Soul Asylum featured 36 missing children in their music video. 21 were found and returned home.

Jonah's story also resides in the corners of our minds. We may have first learned about Jonah in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School or from Veggie Tales, and it has stuck with us. Mainly the whale...but also other things. It is a story that has rich meaning for us as people of faith. There are so many lessons we can take away from it. There are so many ways we can use it to open up our hearts and minds. But today I want us to focus on three things regarding the call of God.

Number one. **God's call can come to us a second time.** Did you catch that in our passage for today? Chapter 3 verse 1, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time..."

¹ Miguel A. De La Torre, "Liberating Jonah".

Did y'all know that I heard about the job here at Westminster a whole year before I even put my name in? Mark Kemp reached out to me in late 2015 seeking advice for Westminster's search for an Associate Pastor for Youth. At the end of his email, he casually dropped, "Or do you just want to come work at WPC so we can pay you for helping us out?" Now, Westminster was not my "mortal, sworn enemy", but at the time, I was not looking for a new call. However, about a year later I was. And thankfully, God's call came to me a second time. I texted Mark and casually said, "Is Westminster still looking for an Associate Pastor for Youth?" One thing led to another. I submitted my information. I had phone interviews and zoom interviews.

I traveled to Greenville in January 2017 for an in-person visit and I started as your Associate Pastor for Youth in April 2017. Thank goodness God's call can come to us a second time. Sometimes it's our own stubbornness that necessitates this. Or our fear. Or life circumstances. But God doesn't give up on those in whom he sees potential. And let me tell you, God sees potential and unique gifts and abilities in each human life he has created. And God can use us for important work in the world.

Number two. **God's call is broader than we think.** Jonah couldn't believe that God would need a prophet in Nineveh. That God would need him to proclaim to another nation. To foreigners. To those unlike himself. To those horrible people. But our ideas and our beliefs and our plans aren't God's.

And God's plans are often broader and wider and deeper and more complex than we could ever imagine.

Miguel De La Torre says, "God's ultimate hope is that the prophet's message makes punishment unnecessary."² God wants the city to be overthrown not by his punishment but by repentance. Did you notice how the passage referred to Nineveh as that "great city" that would take a person 3 whole days to walk across? Now, there is no archaeological evidence that Nineveh was that large. But I think God is trying to tell us something by this description. That there is a whole, wide, diverse world beyond us and our bubbles and our experiences. And that we are called to engage that world. That we are called to see the broadness of humankind that was lovingly made in the image of God.

People who have the capacity for faith and repentance and right living.

It's not just us that have that privilege and opportunity. I don't think it is a coincidence that Jonah and Jesus were both from the region of Galilee. I don't think it's a coincidence that they both, at first, proclaimed God's word to the people of Israel. I don't think it's a coincidence that Jonah was called to go to Nineveh and Jesus' last words on earth were, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..."

² Miguel A. De La Torre, "Liberating Jonah".

Number three. **God's call is inclusive.** One of the things I love about the story of Jonah is how it includes all manner of creatures and aspects of creation. You have the tumultuous sea and the whale. You have cows in sackcloth. You have a bush and a worm and a sultry wind and the harsh rays of the sun. They all have a role to play in God's story. Each aspect of creation is able to praise God and do the work of God just by being what they were created to be.

That's why our first Scripture reading today was Psalm 104 that celebrates the wonders of God's creation and God's care for all of creation. That's why our first hymn was that great text by St. Francis of Assisi, "All Creatures of our God and King".

I wonder what Jonah's life was like after all this. As the years went on and he had time to reflect upon his life. Was he able to see... Was he able to grasp how God's magnificent creation taught him important lessons? About God's call. About God's compassion. About going the wrong way and needing to be turned around. About time and space set apart to pray. The book of Jonah ends with a reminder of God's great compassion and care for people. For animals. For all of creation.

And this is also a reminder for us. To include all of creation in helping us understand the world. Life. Faith. God. Creation can bless us and help us and point us in the right direction.

Sadao Watanabe was a Japanese print maker who was active for much of the 20th century. He is probably the most famous Japanese folk artist and known for "his depictions of biblical subjects using traditional Japanese techniques."³ Watanabe became a Christian in his teens after a neighbor invited him to church. And faith became the most important aspect of his life. There were some stories from Scripture that fascinated him – that he depicted again and again through art. One of those stories was the story of Jonah. Watanabe considered his art-making to be a form of worship and shared his process – "he would read the passage several times, going over the words again and again; next, he spent time meditating on the theme; then, before setting to work, he prayed." "As I grow older," he said, "my work becomes less of myself and more of my Lord."⁴ No matter your age, as you continue to grow in faith, let the story of Jonah reside in the corners of your mind. And bring it out every now and then to remind you, to teach you, to show you the power of God's call. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ John A. Kohan, "Faith, Profound Beauty: The Life and Art of Sadao Watanabe."

⁴ John A. Kohan, "Faith, Profound Beauty: The Life and Art of Sadao Watanabe."

