

Rev. Janet Newman  
 Sermon January 21, 2018  
 Westminster Presbyterian Church  
 Auburn, NY

### **Jonah 3:1-10**

*3The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So 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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*

*<sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then 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. <sup>8</sup>Human 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. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” <sup>10</sup>When 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.*

### **Mark 1:14-20**

*<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” <sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

### **Feeling Comfortable?**

Jonah heard a voice. It was a persistent voice. He heard it as the voice of God and it was telling him to go and do something that Jonah did not want to do.

Sometimes, we can hear a voice calling out to us to go or do something that is totally out of the realm of possibility. It is so bizarre that we will most likely ignore it, until it comes back to us again and again. I have a feeling that it was that way for Jonah, and when the voice did come back to him, Jonah was so afraid of what that voice was asking that he decided to run away, to get as far away as possible and maybe, just maybe, he could hide from it and it would not find him. But how do you hide from a voice in your head?

What Jonah was hearing was that he should go to Nineveh and tell the people there that they had only 40 days more and God would destroy them. Jonah tried, oh, he tried, to hide. He decided to run the other direction across the Mediteranian Sea to a place called Tarshish. But, when you try to hide from the echoes in your head, they only become louder. Jonah buried himself in the lower hold of the ship and tried to sleep. But the seas

raged, the ship was in danger and all the people on it. Still, Jonah slept, trying so hard to ignore the danger, until the captain shook him and they all wanted to know who he was. Jonah finally confessed to his turn away from God and said he was to blame and they must throw him overboard and save themselves. But the people on the ship did not want to throw Jonah overboard, they were very much afraid that do so, would convict them of murder, so they did try to save him. However, in the end they did throw him overboard and the seas calmed...for them.

For Jonah however, he faced certain death, until God sent this giant fish to swallow him up and throw him up safely on shore (Yeah, that's a likely fish story!) At any rate Jonah ended up where he began, still hearing that voice saying, "go to Nineveh!"

What was it about going to Nineveh, that had Jonah so terrified?

Nineveh at that time was to Jonah, the enemy. It was the capital of Assyria, which had fought Israel and occupied it. Going there might be comparable to walking through Tokyo after Pearl Harbor or Kabul when the Taliban ruled, or Pyeongchang... And as countries will do when talking about enemies, they will often exaggerate or tell false stories about them, building up how evil the enemy is. Eventually, the people begin to believe those stories and see the enemy as a whole. It becomes almost impossible that there are individual people, with lives of their own, yearning for a life worthwhile, for love, caring for families, mourning their losses, planting gardens, fixing daily meals...among those of the enemy. Jonah must have thought the Ninevites so terrible that he was willing to risk everything on the sea and defy God.

Besides, what would the neighbors think? If Jonah did go to Nineveh, and they were saved by God, how would he ever face his own people ever again. "Yeah, there goes Jonah, he went to our enemy and now they flourish. Turncoat! Traitor! They should have been destroyed!"

Or perhaps, he thought, who was he to think he could be the word of God? Sometimes, we are so afraid of owning our faith and trusting its power, that we belittle ourselves. What if he did go to Nineveh, and no one listened to him? They would certainly laugh at him at best or tear him from limb to limb at worst. But, God is merciful and God just might save them...Jonah, if the truth be told, would rather have them destroyed.

No, God! Jonah was pretty comfortable...just stop talking to me! Jonah wanted the Ninevites to be destroyed. What was it to him? It wasn't his city, not his people and maybe things would be better if they were gone. It's not up to me. (Fred Rogers: We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, "It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem." Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.)

All these thoughts, swirled around in Jonah's head drowning him into complacency! Like the belly of a whale, they immobilized Jonah and kept him from going to Nineveh. His fear made him defiant to God. Not until things get turned upside down in the storm, when all that complacency is washed away, is Jonah willing to say, OK, I'll go.

So Jonah goes to Nineveh and miracle of miracles, his one small voice is enough. It didn't take an army, or force, or violence, or Armageddon, he wasn't torn limb from limb and no repercussions fell on his neighbors. No, Jonah's voice telling them the truth as

God told him was enough. “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Perhaps the people still had a fear of God and so they listened and they changed their ways, and God saved them.

And then...

After all that Jonah had been through, all the refusals, the running away, the thing with the fish, and then the warnings, Jonah was angry with God. *“The Hebrew reads roughly, “it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned” (Jonah 4:1).* Jonah was not happy that the Ninevites were saved and God has one more lesson for Jonah. For God reminds Jonah that it is God’s divine love for every creature, including the Ninevites and their animals, and even Jonah that saves them...and that is God’s choice. Jonah finally went to Nineveh in obedience, but God saved Nineveh out of love. That God loved the Ninevites still made Jonah angry and the story ends, not with Jonah singing God’s praises, but with Jonah simmering.

The moral of the story of Jonah is ultimately about God’s overwhelming love for all of creation...for Jonah and for the Ninevites and even including their animals. God wants them all to be well.

There is also the response to God’s call that has stuck in my mind and is evident in our gospel reading as well, as Jesus walks along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee and says to Simon, Andrew, James, and John; “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” God’s choice, God’s call to those who will speak up to point the way to God’s love. This time however, there is no running away. The gospels have us believe that these men dropped everything they were doing to follow Jesus. It’s almost as if they had been waiting for this call all their lives.

Whether it is a voice in your head or someone calling out your name, that call to action, to go somewhere you might not want to go, may not always be welcome. There was a time in Martin Luther King, Jr’s ministry where he confronted a difficult choice. In 1963, he and the rest of the leadership had begun the protests in Birmingham, Alabama. They started with small lunch counter protests and boycotts of stores and built up as the days progressed to marches on city hall. The next day, April 12, 1963, Martin and Ralph Abernathy were to lead the demonstration and they all knew that Martin and Ralph would be arrested. They received word however, that there was no money left to bail them out of jail and the leadership told Martin that he could not lead the demonstration, because they feared that with Martin in jail, they would not be able to raise the funds. Martin knew that if he did not march however, the people of Birmingham would lose faith, lose trust, in his leadership. In his book, Why We Can’t Wait, (Harper and Row, 1963) Dr. King describes the moment.

*“I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by loyal friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that crowded room.*

*I walked to another room in the back of the suite, and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing also at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought*

*of the twenty-four people, waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting. Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, past city lines and state lines, and I thought of 20 million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt.*

*I pulled off my shirt and pants, got into work clothes and went back to the other room to tell them I had decided to go to jail.*

*I don't know what will happen; I don't know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act."*

Martin marched. He was arrested and spent time in that Birmingham jail. Others raised the money and after eight days, Martin and the others imprisoned were able to post bond.

Martin's faith act was his response to the call of God that held him to act in love for all those desperately needing hope, searching for light in the darkness of oppression.

It is never an easy choice. It calls us out of our comfortable places. We may even refuse to listen, but God doesn't give up on us and persists.

In my own small way, that voice has been ringing in my ears. I have over the years, entertained the thought of finding a mission trip. Something to a warm climate in the middle of winter. Someplace to offer what I can for a short term volunteer stint. I had looked on the PCUSA vocational ministries opportunities in the past. But the truth be told, I have become very content staying home, sitting every Sunday in that pew, and becoming more and more of an introvert. While the world around us feels like it is deteriorating, I am overwhelmed with the need to speak out and act, but am immobilized.

But in November last year, a very good friend of mine said she had signed up to go volunteer for a week in Tanzania with a person she had just met on a trip. Would I like to join her? I thought of how hard it is these days to do international travel, how uncomfortable it is to sit on a plane for 12 hours, how with Thanksgiving and Christmas and all the family commitments coming up, and about my Dad at 99 in deteriorating health, it just wasn't practical. I said let me think about it. A couple more times, my friend told me a little more and I listened, but didn't think too hard about it. Then, I started to look into the lectionary readings for today. How, could I talk to you about Jonah, when this opportunity had been thrown in my lap and I had said, "no." So, a few weeks ago, I called my friend, and asked if there was still room. On February 17<sup>th</sup> I will board a plane to take the two day trip to the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro and the village of Mbehe. There our little group of 7 will spend time in their village school, bringing supplies to them and doing some projects with the children. Then, we will spend a couple of days at an orphanage (children's home) and a hospital. We will take a side trip out to a mining village to serve a meal and along with the doctors help in providing some much needed medical care. I do not know at this point what will come of this adventure and I am not asking for anything except your prayers for a safe journey and for God's hand to be with us as we reach out in love. And perhaps, that you would open your hearts and listen to where God might be calling you, even right here where we live.

As Jonah, Simon, Andrew, James and John, Martin, and numerous others throughout history have discovered, when you open your heart and mind to God, don't get to comfortable! God's world is all encompassing and the need is great.