

When the call from God reached Jonah, the music stopped in Jonah's life. Like the sound of a needle being dragged across a vinyl record, the beautiful soundtrack to Jonah's life came to a screeching halt. I expect Jonah found himself caught up in the relentless demands and opportunities of his ministry; but activity is a poor substitute for obedience, and God's call revealed how far Jonah was from living a God-centered life.

Jonah enjoyed the blessings God bestowed upon him, and he didn't want to give them up when God called him to something new. The fact is, the more comfortable we are, the harder it is to embrace God's call. Whatever it is that makes us comfortable – our family, our career, our house, our neighborhood, our ministry – that thing can easily become an idol, taking our focus away from God. When God interrupts our life, God breaks that idol, and that can be hard to take.

When I accepted the call to Federated Church, God had to break some idols in my life. I'd always lived on the East coast. I had family and friends there. I knew my way around. The customs, accents, and even the traffic patterns were familiar to me. Although I prayed to God for a change of ministry, I did not realize that change would require moving halfway across the United States, leaving my family and friends, to work among people I did not yet know, in a state I'd never visited, and where I still cannot get straight if "dinner" is at noon or at six in the evening! But although I would leave behind those comfortable things, at least I knew I would be working among God's people.

Jonah faced a much tougher call. In Jonah's day, the Assyrian Empire dominated the Middle East. The Assyrians were a brutal people, known for excessive cruelty, and scaring their neighbors into submission. Nineveh sat at the center of this violent empire. The prophet Nahum describes Nineveh as "the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims" (3:1). Not exactly the kind of place you would choose for a vacation or a career. Yet this is where God called Jonah to go and preach.

Many in Israel prayed for the destruction of Assyria, but praying for Assyria's overthrow is very different from going and preaching Assyria's destruction. If God simply destroyed Nineveh, as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, there would have been great relief and rejoicing in Israel and the surrounding nations. But God loved the Assyrian people: they were part of God's creation. God saw their wickedness, and yet God had compassion on them and reached out to them by sending Jonah.

Nothing is more disturbing to a comfortable faith or a comfortable church than God's passion for the world. Jonah happily served his own people, but when God called him to serve another people in a hostile country, God exposed the selfishness of Jonah's heart. God showed just how out of touch Jonah was with God's heart and God's mission for the world. Jonah was far from living a God-centered life, but he didn't know it until God stepped in and disrupted Jonah's comfortable life.

God's call turned Jonah's world upside down, and Jonah discovered that he valued his comfort more than his obedience to God. Recoiling from what lay in the future, and knowing that he could not hold on to the past, Jonah quit. *Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish* (1:3); he went in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Now, Jonah knew better! As a prophet, well-versed in Scripture, Jonah knew that God is present everywhere. Jonah knew David's words: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence...If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast* (Ps. 139:7, 9-10). Jonah knew he could never escape God's presence, but Jonah felt that he could avoid God's call. By boarding the boat, Jonah effectively resigned from the work God gave him in Nineveh.

Jonah placed boundaries on where he would live, what he would do, and how he would serve. When God disrupted his plan, exposing Jonah's selfish heart, Jonah quit. When he arrived at the port and found a ship bound for Tarshish, my guess is that Jonah interpreted this as confirmation that he was doing the right thing. To Jonah, the ship to Tarshish looked like an attractive option, but it was a ship headed into a storm. If temptation involves a convergence of inclination and opportunity, then in Jonah's case, inclination went looking for opportunity and found it in the form of a ship headed to Tarshish.

There will always be a ship in the harbor ready to take us in the wrong direction, so we must be careful not to confuse opportunity with the will of God. The pattern is always the same: when you pour yourself into work, family, or ministry and then God intervenes, you find that the work you are doing, the family you are raising, or the ministry you are leading is more important to you than the God you set out to serve. You fall in love with the dream, the dream becomes an idol, and God brings that idol down.

When God calls us to something new, God is always up to something good. However difficult the call may be, it is one of grace and it is for our ultimate joy. God had a far greater purpose for Jonah than had yet been realized in the confines of his comfortable life, and despite Jonah's faithless response, God's grace prevailed in the end.

Reflecting on Jonah's predicament, forces us to consider the contrast between Jonah and Jesus. God called Jonah to leave a good place, where he was doing good work, and enjoying a good life to move to another place, to do hard work, among bad people. Jonah said "no." Jesus lived in heaven, ruling the universe, adored by angels: he lived in the best place, doing the best work, and enjoying the best life. Then God said, "Go to another place, where you will be utterly despised and rejected. Live a life that will lead to torture and crucifixion and death. Do the work of becoming a sacrifice for the people I love, people who are facing my judgment." And Jesus said, "Yes!"

"No" was the only answer Jonah could give because his needs and dreams displaced God from the center of his heart. Jesus could say "yes," because he lived a God-centered life. When the going got tough, Jonah quit and ran from God; Jesus prevailed, even in the face of death, with God's help. Jonah wanted to stay with the life he knew, among the people he knew, doing the work he knew; Jesus went where God sent him, to people who hated him, to do the work God needed done. Jonah refused God's call, seeking only his own well-being; Jesus embraced God's call, aligning himself with God's redemptive purpose for the world.

When God interrupts our dreams and calls us to something new and different, it can be hard to take. A new call may disrupt our settled life, overturn our plans and dreams, and make us decidedly uncomfortable. But, as we see with Jonah, embracing God's call inevitably leads to something better and bigger than we can imagine.

Prayer: Lord, make me less like Jonah and more like Jesus. Save me from being the kind of person who cares more about my comfort, my reputation, and my success than I do about the people You are calling me to serve. Help me to keep my dreams on Your altar and be ready at all times to respond with faith and obedience to Your call. Amen

Source Material: This sermon series draws heavily on Colin Smith's book, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.

# Embrace God's Call

**Sunday, June 25, 2017**

**Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Jonah 1**

There's an old joke that says if you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans for your future. God has a way of disturbing our dreams. We plan our families, our finances, and our futures. Then God breaks in and suddenly life is set on a different course. When God interrupts our life, God is calling us to follow a new path. By breaking into our settled pattern, God is moving us to a new place where we can make fresh discoveries of God's grace. Embracing God's call is never easy, but this is where the pursuit of a God-centered life begins, and where the shame of a self-centered life is exposed.

Jonah only discovered his own self-absorption when God disturbed his comfortable life. Early in this ministry, God gave Jonah a prophetic scoop that established his ministry: Jonah announced that the borders of Israel would expand during the reign of King Jeroboam, and when this happened, it secured Jonah's reputation. From then on, Jonah enjoyed the luxury of a loyal and responsive audience. Godly people wanted to hear God's Word and Jonah found himself in great demand. If he was in ministry today, Jonah would have a full schedule of speaking engagements, his books would all be best-sellers, and his Facebook page would have ten million likes. Jonah enjoyed a good life doing good work in a good place. He was living the dream until God interrupted his life.

Then, *the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me"* (Jonah 1:1-2). Put yourself in Jonah's sandals for a moment: he has a successful ministry among God's people; he is well-known and appreciated; he is a local celebrity; he is settled, fulfilled, and contented, but now God wants to disrupt that comfortable life.

God calls Jonah to leave the people he loves, move to a new location, and venture into an uncertain future. His assignment is to serve strangers, people of another race and culture, who regard him as an enemy, and he is to preach *against* them. Instead of prophesying God's blessing on the people of Nineveh, Jonah is to pronounce God's judgment on them. He is to be the bearer of bad news to bad people.

