

At the last church I served each month I was given the task to lead preschool chapel. This was always a fun time for me to hang out with the kids, to share with them about God, and to celebrate who God created them to be. Every year, my friend Whitney the Preschool Director would task me to share the story of Jonah in the Old Testament.

Now you may or may not know this about me by now, but I am an all or nothing person. So, each year I would set up a linear path with pictures that told the story of Jonah. I would take the kids around the room and through the pictures ask them what they thought happened. Their responses to this day are still my favorite rendition of Jonah.

The culminating event of chapel that day was sitting with them under the cardboard and blanket belly of the whale.

The kids loved this story and especially loved retelling it over and over again running around the room and leaping into the belly of the whale. Looking back, I remember, they also liked the being spit out part to where they would jump out of the mouth of the whale.

The call story of Jonah is one of the most amazing call stories in the Old Testament, I mean who else could say they were swallowed by a large fish and lived to tell the tale?

This week I learned that there is only one other person who was almost swallowed by a whale. His name is Rainer Schimpf and he is a 51-year-old South African wildlife photographer. In March of 2019 he became trapped in the mouth of a whale “while he was shooting footage of a sardine run off the coast near Port Elizabeth Harbor in South Africa.”¹

The story goes that he was only trapped for a couple a seconds and the whale let him go. Ironically his son’s name is Jonas...

We like Jonah, and like Rainer, have not had the experience of being swallowed up in the belly of a whale, and still we find that Jonah’s call story is still so relatable.

God called him to go to Nineveh to preach repentance to the people and he turned around in exactly the opposite direction and boarded a ship to Tarshish. Jonah was wrestling with God. He did not want to do the will of God, he wanted to do what he wanted to do, so he ran, but God continued to call him.

In Jonah 1-2 we hear how Jonah ran away, how God created a storm on the sea, how Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard so that they may be spared and how Jonah was swallowed by a large fish which became his home for three days and three nights.

These three days are important because this amount of time shows the transformation that was occurring and the new life that God had called him to. Just as Christ rose from the dead on the third day, so also Jonah on the third day in the belly of the fish was about to be born anew.

That is where chapter three comes in and says, “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...”

The beautiful thing about the God we serve is that God is merciful and offers us grace as we try to figure out how to respond to the voice of God.

Jacob chose wrestling with God as his method of discernment, Samuel needed Eli’s help to hear the voice of God, and Jonah chose to run away.

So often we are like Jonah. We choose to run away from God’s calling upon our lives. We do this for many reasons.

1) First, we may still be uncertain like Samuel that God is calling us, and we want to be absolutely sure before we respond. We may think we hear God calling, but life gets in the way and we forget about this call.

2) Second, we know we are called like Jonah, but the responsibilities of life do not allow us to respond. Maybe it is the pressures of work, or the responsibility of taking care of a family member. Whatever the reason, we find ourselves wanting to respond, but unable to do so.

3) Third, maybe we choose not to respond to God because we are afraid. Maybe this is what Jonah was experiencing. We know that when we respond to God calling upon our lives that nothing will ever be the same and we fear the unknown.

We all have our reasons for running away from God.

The good news for our lives today is that God is persistent and will continue to call us again and again until we respond.

Today we celebrate Jonah’s call which commentary tells us was to arise, go, and call.ⁱⁱ

In life we all have choices to make, but so often we find ourselves paralyzed unable to move forward. In Jonah’s call story we are reminded that the moment we take that first step God continues to propel us forward.

One interesting fact that I learned about as I studied this text again is that when Jonah was spit out by the large fish, he was still three days away from the people of Ninevehⁱⁱⁱ. On this walk I think he had a lot of time to think and prepare for the task God had called him to complete. In his moving forward on this journey he arose to the task at hand and began walking forward in the new life that God had called him to.

When Jonah was called by God a second time he did not hesitate or run away. He obeyed and went to Nineveh.

It is amazing what can happen when we heed God’s calling to go. We end up serving people we never would have met otherwise. We end up being inspired and encouraged, we end up filled with hope.

You see Jonah arose, he went, and then he called. He called the Ninevites to repentance in what commentary tells us was the “briefest of all prophetic utterances.”^{iv} What is amazing is that they responded immediately.

They believed in God, they wore sackcloth as an embodiment of this repentance, their leader and king covered himself in ashes and called for a fast and God in God’s mercy spared their lives.

That day Jonah was a part of God’s salvation of humankind. God used Jonah as a instrument for God’s saving action in the world. We too are called to respond to this call, to take part in God’s saving action in the world so that others may know the love and grace of God.

We serve a God who does not allow us to run away or be lost. We serve a God who always comes looking for us. We first see this in Genesis 3:9, where after Adam and Eve committed the first sin God went looking for them asking: “Where are you?”

In the two parables for today from the Gospel of Luke chapter 15 we hear about two lost things: a lost sheep and a lost coin. We first hear the parable of the lost sheep where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep, just to look for the one lost sheep.

This is what God does for us. Each of our lives are important. God keep calling us and looking for us when we run away or when we are lost.

In the parable of the lost coin again shows how God will continue to look for us and rejoice when we have been found.

Maybe you are feeling lost today. Perhaps it is grief, or illness, or fatigue. God has not left your side and God is still calling you to serve.

Maybe today you are not sad but rejoicing in the blessing of this new day. Maybe you are rejoicing like the shepherd or the woman who found her lost coin. You are called to continue to journey with those who feel lost and point out that God is still with them offering them grace, mercy, and compassion.

Jonah was lost. He didn't know where to turn. He found himself in turbulent sea water a long way from home. Through the large fish, God provided a way forward for Jonah, although I am sure this is not what he felt in the moment. Sometimes we are unable to see how God is bringing us into new life.

Through the whale, God showed that all of creation is part of God's salvific plan in the world.

So church, how will you take part in God's saving action in the world? How will you like Jonah arise, go, and call others to take part in the kingdom of God on earth?

We do this when we take time to celebrate the joys in life. So often after watching the news it is easy to think everything in the world is bad and there is no hope, but we are a people of hope. We celebrate the one sheep that was found, we celebrate finding a penny under the couch curtains. We celebrate that God comes looking for us when we are lost, and the people of God come looking for us also.

The good news is God is with us as we respond to this calling upon our lives. The good news is God will never stop calling us to serve. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.today.com/news/diver-survives-almost-being-swallowed-15-ton-whale-t150169>

ⁱⁱ The New Interpreters Biblical Commentary. Vol. VII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1996. P. 511.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.