

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 25, 2009
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

“No Way Out”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

The sermon today begins with a pop quiz.

You just heard the Scripture Reading “assigned” for today from the Common Lectionary: the Book of Jonah, Chapter 3, verses 1-5.

Did one word in the first sentence in today’s passage jump out at you?

That’s the quiz.

One word might have jumped out at you if you know the whole story of Jonah and his ill-fated trip to Nineveh, including his three days in the belly of the whale.

The reading for today did not even mention the whale—the passage in the Lectionary for today begins with Jonah dutifully heading to Nineveh because God has called him to go there and preach the bad news.

But ONE word in the very first sentence of today’s reading might have struck you as interesting and important.

Listen again to the first line:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

Okay, who heard the key word?!

For me the key word is SECOND...*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND time...*

We should be curious about what happened when the word of the Lord came to Jonah the FIRST time...because (I think) it is Jonah’s FIRST response to God’s call that holds an important lesson for us.

The verses chosen and assigned in the Common Lectionary for today tell of Jonah actually GOING TO Nineveh. But that is not the whole story.

When God FIRST called Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh and “cry out against the city,” what did Jonah do? He ran the other way.

Listen to how the story about Jonah actually begins (remember today’s Lectionary reading is from Jonah Chapter 3, listen now to Chapter 1):

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

God calls Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh and with a prophetic voice share the word of the Lord—and Jonah runs in the opposite direction. He hops a boat for Tarshish. And in response God “hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.”

And then what happens? The sailors (“mariners” the Bible calls them) are afraid. They throw cargo overboard to lighten the load so maybe the ship won’t go down. Then they realize that maybe the terrible storm that is hurling their boat around is because Jonah is on board. And so they interrogate him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

Jonah answers, “I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Then the men are even more afraid and say to Jonah, “What is this that you have done!” The Bible says, “For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.”

So the sailors pick Jonah up and throw him overboard, and the sea “ceased from raging.” And God provides “a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” While in the fish, Jonah prays to God, repents and asks for deliverance. And the Bible says, “The Lord spoke to the fish and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.”

And then the next line is:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND time...

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND time because Jonah ran from God the first time.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND time because Jonah did not quite get it the first time.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND time because God is a nag and God will stay with you and stay on you until you turn and acknowledge that God is calling you to do something, or to confront something, or to be something. God is a nag. God will stay on you until you move through what has been placed in your path.

God nags and when you are meant to do something, confront something or be something, THERE IS NO WAY OUT BUT THROUGH.

Jonah should have known better.

Because when it comes to God, you can run but you cannot hide (as the Chambers Brothers sang so beautifully).

My brothers and sisters, when it comes to God, there is no way out but through. Whatever it is you need to do with you life whatever it is you need to confront whatever it is you need to solve or resolve there is no way out but through. God will nag you until you do the work you are meant to do.

I know this to be true in my own life and you probably do as well. (I am probably not telling you anything you don't know.) You know that God pulls and prods, leaves signs and messages, and leads by pushing until you face the very thing you hoped to avoid.

Jonah had no intention of going to Nineveh. Travel to Nineveh, be God's spokesman, tell the people in Nineveh that they are evil and that God is going to visit great calamity upon them? This is not something Jonah chose or wanted to do. So it seemed a reasonable idea to flee, to run the other way, take a boat to Tarshish....that's a good plan.

The problem is (Jonah should have known this, we have come to know this) that if you are called to do something, if you are meant to do something, if you need to do something, God will nag you until you realize there is no way out but through.

I remember experiencing a call to the ministry when I was in my early 30s. This can't be right I told everyone....this is not a real call. I can't be called to be a pastor, that's not in my future, it's not in the cards.

For TEN FULL YEARS I walked around saying I think I am called to the ministry but I also think I'm not. For ten years I avoided my call to the ministry. I not only took a boat to Tarshish, I moved there for a decade.

But God nagged and nagged, God left little notes and messages. God brought up my call in a variety of ways and in numerous settings. Until one day I finally said OKAY OKAY OKAY I'm called to the ministry, you win.

At my Ecclesiastical Council I was asked about my call to the ministry and I said I felt that God was like one of those little yapping dogs....you visit someone's home and an annoying little dog nips at your heels and yaps while you're talking and follows you when you go into another room, yip yip yip and yap yap yap and you finally turn around and acknowledge the dog and pet the dog and pay attention to the dog and the dog calms down.

I don't know what it is you are meant to do, or what it is you need to confront, or who at your core you are supposed to be as a fully actualized person....but I do know that you will get signs and signals, dreams and suggestions, pushes and pulls and uncomfortable proddings until you do the work you are meant to do.

**What is the Nineveh in your life? What are you running from?
What are you working hard to avoid?**

Maybe you have unresolved issues and wounds from childhood that plague you and prevent you from being the joyful person you are meant to be...well there's no way out but through. You need to do the hard work of confronting those issues, working them through and releasing them.

Maybe you cling to an addiction that drains your energy and makes you preoccupied, unhappy and prevents you from being the fully realized person you are meant to be...well there's no way out but through. You need to get into recovery so that you can claim your full, beautiful, unencumbered self.

Maybe you keep feeling that you want to be close to God but you rely on shortcuts to feel that sense of belonging and don't invest the time and attention in your spiritual life to experience the presence of God as you hoped that you might...well there's no way out but through. You need to spend time with God like you would spend time with any friend you want to be close to, and see what unfolds in the silence when in prayer.

Maybe you keep thinking that next year you'll find work that is fulfilling and uses all your God-given gifts and talents, next year something will turn up, next year next year, next year....well there's no way out but through. You need to commit to finding meaningful work and take brave and bold steps to live the vision you hold for yourself and God holds for you this year, now.

Whatever it is that is in your path to deal with, there is no running away. You CAN run but you cannot run forever. Like a yapping little dog, God will nag and nag and you'll feel more and more restless and agitated until you turn and confront or change or do what it is you have been avoiding. There is no way out but through. Just ask Jonah.

Friends, God never promised us easy lives.

God promised that God would be there when our lives are difficult.

"I will not leave you comfortless," Jesus said. "I will come to you."

John 14:18

When we face that addiction and get into a 12 step program, God is there.

When we finally go to Divinity School even with a small child at home and a program almost two hours away, God is there.

When we take a leap and change jobs and are filled with fear and uncertainty, God is there.

When we delve into counseling to confront and release the wounds from our past, God is there.

God never promised us easy lives. God promised to be there when life is difficult and we are dealing with what is ours to confront.

Remember the words from Psalm 139 that we said together at the beginning of our service today:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast.

God promises to be there to lead us through, to guide us along, if we do the work that is in our path to do. Even if we make our bed in Sheol, which is hell, God is there. And knowing some of your stories, you have made your beds in Sheol—you have surely visited hell. You have been hurt and wounded, you have been in the clutches of addiction, you have felt alone and frightened, you have felt unmoored and crazy, you have run from a true calling, you have endured boredom and stagnation in jobs and in relationships....you have made your bed in Sheol. And God has been there.

And when you decided there was no way out but through...that you had to make a change, take a step, take a stand, find a way, make a shift, or start anew, God was there to hold you fast, as the Psalmist says.

God called Jonah to travel to Nineveh and Jonah left on a boat for Tarshish. Jonah did not realize what I am telling you today: there is no way out but through. Eventually, after almost drowning, Jonah went to Nineveh and shared his prophetic words. He did what he needed to do in Nineveh. Like Jonah, you are equal to going through what it is you must go through.

God will not take you where God cannot keep you.
So be of brave heart.
Face the task that is before you to do.
Do the work that is before you to do.
Even if you make your bed in Sheol, God will be there.
And God will hold fast as you find your way out of the depths to the dawn.

There is, my precious Sisters and Brothers, no way out but through.
And we have, my Beloved Ones, a trustworthy God who will walk with us every step of the journey.

Amen.