

Midweek Lent 1 2017 Fleeing in the Dark

When we think about fleeing from God, Jonah comes to mind. Do you remember the story?

God asks Jonah to go to Ninevah (now that's in Iraq but then it was in the meanest empire ever: Assyria) to preach judgement there and to call the people to repent.

Jonah does not want the job.

He's afraid they will kill him, so he buys a ticket on a ship heading in the opposite direction. Jonah thought he was running from God but God was right there with him.

Then there is a huge storm and Jonah tells the people on the boat to throw him overboard and that God would stop the storm. And that's what they did. And the storm stopped.

Jonah, however, was swallowed by a big fish (not a whale by the way), which eventually spits him up on the shore of Ninevah, the very place that Jonah did not want to go.

So, Jonah finally delivers God's message to the evil people of Ninevah...and the people there repented and God did not destroy the city.

The irony is that Jonah ran from God because he thought that if he went to Ninevah the people would kill him. Instead his trip saved the 120,000 people living there.

People still run away from God.

Some people don't know about God and others are indifferent but today/night I am talking about once faithful people who believe in God and know all about him but end up turning their backs on God and their faith.

People who run from God, know God well but choose to go another way.

People, who run, understand God's expectations but find living a faithful life too limiting or too daunting.

Running from God means that, in spite of what we know and believe about God, we intentionally go another way.

I knew someone who left the church because his father was a difficult man. To stay in the church meant that forgiveness would be in order. It was easier to leave the church than to face the possibility of reconciliation.

Others leave because they don't like the idea that God has a claim on our time or our money. It's easier to run than to share.

And some run from God because faith promises change and they don't want to change. It is too hard to give up a familiar life, even if it is destructive. They like what they know and fear the unknown of transformation. The problem may be addiction or abuse or hatred. Running may seem the best option.

I thought about it a lot this week and I think that underneath all of the reasons people run from God, there is a common fear, a fear of God.

Luther would say it is fear of God's law without the joy of grace.

I think Jonah was afraid of the Ninevites, yes, but perhaps also of God. Was Jonah worried about disappointing God? If he failed, surely the Ninevites would kill him.

It is not just Jonah's fear of God or his fear of the Ninevites.

When we look closely at the text, Jonah is also afraid of success. If he succeeds, if the Ninevites listen and God forgives them, and they are no longer the terrible enemy, where does that leave Jonah?

At the very end of the story, we hear Jonah pray: *O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshis at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*"

Sometimes, remaining faithful means we have to accept God's compassion for others may lead to their change. God's grace for us or for someone else can be hard to accept.

Are you running from God? This week I read a story of a lawyer who was trying to deliver an important paper to someone. Thinking it was some kind of a subpoena, the intended recipient avoided the attorney. But this was a very persistent attorney, and he would not give up. This went on for 14 years, until the man ended up in a hospital bed, dying of cancer. As he was lying there, the lawyer arrived at the hospital room.

The man said, *"I don't even care anymore. I'm dying of cancer. Give me the subpoena."*

"What subpoena?" the lawyer asked. *"I have a document here to prove that you've inherited \$45 million dollars!"*

Read more at <http://www.wnd.com/2017/01/running-from-god-good-luck-with-that/#OwIgVO4XrYK94O3g.99>

Too often we simply can't imagine God's gracious gifts of grace given to us in Jesus Christ and so we run. However we cannot out run God!

When we look at the cross, we learn that God is with us in the worst of places. God is nipping at our heels, ready to forgive and save and welcome us back into the kingdom of God.

This is good news for all who flee from God.
Amen