

Today we begin a four-week journey with the prophet Jonah. We will culminate our journey with All Church Worship Service on July 30th at 10:00 a.m. Each week we will explore part of Jonah's story and see if we can find ourselves in the story. So let's begin, by listening to God's word for us today from Jonah, Chapter 1, verse 1 through verse 16.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." The word of the Lord... it was clear, specific and to the point. Jonah knew exactly what the Lord expected of him. His preaching skills were needed not for his own people the Israelites, but for Israel's enemies the Assyrians.

The word of Lord... clear, specific and to the point. Oh, how I have prayed for such clear instructions from the Lord! I mean wouldn't it be easier to know exactly what the Lord needed from us? Wouldn't it be easier if the Lord just gave each of us specific assignments with specific instructions? Wouldn't it be easier if the Lord said to the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands: house those without homes; welcome every nation in your community, incorporating their gifts and talents in worship and leadership; create a space to encourage young artists and musicians; wouldn't it be easier if the Lord just gave clear, specific instructions?

The word of the Lord was perfectly clear to Jonah, yet his candid response was clear, too, "Not Me, Lord!" Now Jonah didn't exactly say these words, but he enacted them. He ran for the nearest seaport and boarded a ship headed in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh. With his actions, Jonah said, "Thanks, but no thanks, Lord. I know what you want from me, but that job, well, it's just... Not Me!"

In case you are wondering. "Not Me" is a common response to God's call. Moses was full of excuses: "I don't know your proper name, Lord; what if Pharaoh doesn't believe me; and by the way you really do have the wrong guy because I'm not eloquent, I'm slow of speech and slow of tongue." Moses was doing everything he could to convince God, it's "Not Me" you want. Elijah fled from denouncing the regime of Ahab. Jeremiah gave the excuse that he was merely a boy, too young to be God's mouthpiece. Amos and Isaiah found the message God wanted delivered just a bit too dreadful to announce. Even Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed fervently, "Take this cup from me." Yes, "Not me" reverberates throughout scripture in response to God's call.

Now if you know anything about Nineveh you'd probably understand why Jonah ran! The great city he was being sent to had quite a reputation; it was the capital of Assyria. Let's listen in to what the prophet Nahum (3:1-4) (Eugene Peterson style) has to say about the great city of Nineveh: "Doom to Murder City – full of lies, bursting with loot, addicted to violence! Horn blaring, wheels clattering, horses rearing, chariots lurching, horsemen galloping, brandishing swords and spears, dead bodies rotting in the street, corpses stacked like cordwood, bodies in every gutter and alley, clogging every intersection! And whores! Whores without end! Whore City, fatally seductive, you're the witch of seduction, luring nations to their ruin with your evil spells."

Nineveh is not one of the top vacation spots of its day - in fact this is the nation that eventually invades and destroys Israel in 721BC (you can find that in 2 Kings 17). And it's to this group of people, to this great enemy nation; to this enemy city that God

calls Jonah to go. Go and announce their wrongdoings! Is it any wonder the Jonah said, "Not me?"

Have any of you ever run from God? Have any of you ever had a clear sense of what God is calling you to do, but out of fear or rebellion, you run in the exact opposite direction? The call on your life might not be to a place as dangerous as Nineveh, but it certainly feels like it.

- A call to change your behavior – but instead you do everything you can to avoid the topic.
- A call to be more public with your faith – but instead you keep your faith under wraps.
- A call to forgive someone for harm they have done to you – but instead you avoid them at all costs in order to harbor your grudge.
- A call to quietness and prayer – but instead you fill your life with incessant noise.
- A call to a specific ministry or use of your spiritual gifts – but instead you put it on the back burner until a more opportune time.

Not me... Not now... not ever God. You see, running in the opposite direction like Jonah seems to be what all of us do at least some of the time when God calls, whether individually or collectively.

Yet, our passage tells us that God doesn't take no for an answer! Or, as Eugene Peterson said through the psalmist, "God's love chases after us everyday of our lives." God's call in our lives is motivated by his love for us. God doesn't call us to make our lives miserable, challenging maybe but not miserable. God doesn't call us and then abandon us either, for God didn't ask Moses or Jonah or Jeremiah to go it alone.

Yet, God does call us to stretch and grow, to take leaps of faith trusting in his providential care. When God calls us, God equips us and then uses us in ways that will surprise even us, in ways that will make our lives far more abundant than we could ever imagine.

You see Jonah thought boarding the ship bound for Tarshish ended his discussion with God. But Jonah's "Not Me" led God to implement Plan B. God gets Jonah's attention through a storm tossed sea, some sailors and a captain.

The storm tossed sea causes the sailors and the captain alarm. From their cultural frame of reference, a god must be upset, so each prays to their own god. Yet, the captain finds Jonah fast asleep in the hull of the ship oblivious to the threat being caused by the raging storm. So, he orders him to get up and to pray, to pray to his god for mercy.

The sailors take a different tact and resort to lots, a game of chance. The game of chance reveals Jonah as the source of their calamity and he confirms it saying, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." Jonah knows what he has done. God said, "Go," but Jonah said, "Not Me!" Jonah has said "No" to the God who created the seas and the dry land, said "No" to the sovereign God of all creation!

The sailors don't know what to do! Jonah's God is the one who made the sea and the dry land, so they fear that Jonah's God will be mad at them for tossing him overboard. So, first they try even harder to row the ship towards land, but when this fails they pray to Jonah's God for mercy and finally toss Jonah overboard!

What I find amazing about Jonah in this 1st chapter is that he would rather die... he would rather die than answer God's call. Jonah would rather drown than to preach to the Ninevehites! It is interesting to note that Jonah didn't volunteer to throw himself overboard though; he wanted others implicated in his demise.

What extremes have you used to run away from God's call? What creative maneuvers have you instigated? How have you used others to help you run? Would you rather die, than respond to God's call?

Saul used his self-righteousness to hide from God. He had confidence in his pedigree. He was circumcised on the 8th day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Saul was still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, when a light from heaven flashed all around him and Jesus spoke saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul was struck blind and only in his blindness did his heart begin open to God's call on his life.

God's persistence is sometimes dramatic - storms, flashes of light, a voice from heaven! God's persistence though may speak through more natural circumstances... through a friend, through a job loss, through a difficult relationship, through a call to service, through an opportunity to use your talents. God is able to get our attention using a variety of ways.

The God whom Jonah, as well as you and me worship, is persistent. God didn't give up chasing after Jonah when he said, "Not me." God didn't give up on Saul when he stood and watched the stoning death of Stephen with glee. When God hears, "Not Me," from Jonah and Saul, from Jeremiah and Moses, from you and me, God always has a Plan B. God chases after us, never giving up, because God loves us. God wants all of us to experience the fullness of life that comes from responding to God's call on our lives.

I know that my life is more meaningful because I have answered God's call in all sorts of ways. When God placed on my heart the desire to be a foreign exchange student I was excited until I heard I was going to Africa! I wanted a European country, my top choices being Austria or Germany, not Africa. My year in South Africa was challenging to say the least, but I am thankful my "Not me," acquiesced into "Okay, I'll go!" God was palpably present and my faith was deepened in ways I could not have imagined.

Then God placed on my heart... get involved as a hospice volunteer. I hid for a couple of years, but finally through God's persistence I said yes. My experiences with the hospice patients and their families shaped the pastor I am today.

When God placed on my heart to be a police chaplain through Steve Lafond, I said, "Not Now." Yet, God was persistent and a year later I said yes to being a volunteer police chaplain. My experiences led me into places I would rather not go... to Nineveh type places; to the doorstep of a mother who didn't know her son had just been killed in a motorcycle accident; to the doorstep of a woman whose mother had just died in her sleep; to the side of a young adolescent girl who had just been date raped; to the hospital where two moms were uncontrollably weeping for their toddlers who had just drowned; to many suicides and shootings and the aftermath of anguish for families. Yet, these challenging experiences have tested and refined my understanding of who God is

and how God is present in all of life, especially in the anguish of tragic death and devastated dreams.

If God had not persisted... had not tried Plan B... I would have missed out on all of these experiences. If God had not persisted I certainly would not be your pastor today, for I said "Not Me" the first time I was approached by a member of this church to consider submitting my PNC. Yet, before this call, I even ran from God's presence concerning my call to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. I have said, "Not me, not now, not ever," more often than I can remember!

Not me... it's a common response, but let me attest to God's persistence, because we are not created to sit on the sideline when it comes to God's work. We all have gifts and skills that God can use. I firmly believe that God wants to use every one of us to bring a bit of heaven on earth this day and in the days to come. God wants to use the gifts that only you have. God wants to use the collective gifts that only we have as a congregation. God may not call us to go to Nineveh, but God will call us to places we would rather not go.

I wonder, if you... are we as a church are ready to respond? Or are you... or are we still saying, "Not me!" I wonder what it will take for you... for us to claim the call God is placing on our hearts today... a flash of light or a violent and raging storm?

Where do our interests, passions and God given gifts address a need in this church, in this community or in this world? God is calling... Will we respond to God's call or will we run in the opposite direction? Jonah ran because he perceived the work to be too hard, too uncomfortable, too scary and possibly even life threatening. Jonah ran... will we? I pray not! Amen.