

White Flag – When Resistance is Futile  
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I'm excited because today we are starting a new series on my favorite story from the Old Testament. It's the story of Jonah. And this is such a rich, rich story. There is so much to see in Jonah that we won't be able to talk about it all, but I'm sure in some places in this story you will find yourself saying, "Yep, I'm like that," and it will be a time of growth and challenge. As we begin, please take out your program and notice the space on the front for notes, and also this week's study guide...

They say confession is good for the soul, so let's start with a little confession time today. It's OK, this won't be too embarrassing! How many of us, sometime between the time we learned to walk and the time we got our driver's license, ran away from home at least once? Twice? Keep them up. Five times? How many are still running!

Isn't it interesting how common this experience is? And if we had time, it would be very entertaining to hear all the stories about when and why we all ran away. Usually, it has to do with our parents, right? They did or didn't do something, they said or didn't say something and we got mad and decided we didn't want to be there with them anymore and we took off.

One time I was really mad and thought that I would run away. I don't even remember what I was mad about, but I came out of my room with a small bag packed with some stuff and walked through the kitchen where my mom was cooking supper. I told her I was running away and don't try to stop me. That's when she asked me if I was hungry and she wondered if I was going someplace where I would get supper and I said, "no" and then she asked if I'd like to stay for supper and then run away. So I stayed for supper.

Supper was pretty good and during supper I thought, "Where am I going to sleep tonight?". And that's when I decided maybe I wasn't going to run away after all. Maybe you have a similar story. Maybe you were actually gone for awhile, but eventually you came back home because you didn't know where you are going, you just know where you didn't want to be.

Now's here another question...another confession. You don't need to raise your hands, but we all probably could. How many of us have run away from God? This usually happens sometime after we get our driver's license, doesn't it, sometime between when we were 16 and right now? Some of ran hard sprints, some of us ran marathons. Some of us may think we haven't run at all.

As we look into the story of Jonah, one of the Bible's best known runners, I think we will find that we all have run from God in some way or another, and there may still be ways that we are running...ways we are not even aware. Through Jonah, we are going to learn some things about ourselves, and we are going to see again how much God loves us, and I hope we will be ready to surrender to God's purposes and move deeper into the life that really is life.

Now before we get into the specifics of the story, we need to take just a couple minutes to talk about this story. There may be some of us who get hung up on whether or not the events described in the story of Jonah, specifically getting swallowed by a great fish only to get delivered via regurgitation 3 days later, actually happened. Don't let this keep you from exploring this story! As far as Jonah goes, there are deep truths in this story that remain the same whether or not we believe it is historically accurate, so let's look at those meanings and truths because you will find them relevant for all of us.

*What we teach about Biblical interpretation here at Saint Paul's is that there are three ways to interpret scripture; literal, figurative or metaphorical, and contextual. Literal means something means exactly what it says. Figurative means that there are meanings beyond the literal. And contextual means that we consider the context of the message to its original recipients and bring that message into our context. What we also want you to know is that no one method of interpretation is an adequate way to read scripture...all three are needed.*

Let's get into the story of Jonah. Jonah is a prophet, and the prophets had tough jobs because they were sent into very tough environments to deliver a message that the people needed to hear, but no one wanted to hear. So prophets in general had it tough. But at least in Israel, the people knew that the

prophets had their place and as much as the people didn't want to listen, they recognized that God used prophets to deliver messages to the people...it was part of their culture and so the prophets weren't always treated well, but their role was somewhat accepted.

Jonah's mission was especially difficult. This is how the story begins...

***The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah 1:1-2 TNIV***

We learn a lot in two sentences here. Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh and preach against their wickedness. Nineveh is a foreign in a country called Assyria. These people didn't believe in God and they were the dominant world-power of that time, always a threat to Israel's security, and they had a reputation for cruelty. And Jonah is supposed to call this city to repent or be destroyed. Jonah is to go to Nivevah and convince people he despises that the Lord, a God they don't even know exists, is angry with them and wants them to repent or their city will be destroyed. You can almost hear Jonah saying, "Am I on candid camera?" because it almost sounds like a joke. Why would God offer a saving opportunity to a nation that is an enemy to Israel?

So what does Jonah do? He takes off immediately, to the other side of the world!

***But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD. Jonah 1:3***

***MAP – Jonah on the run!***

Jonah is supposed to go this way (east on land to Nineveh, but instead goes as far west as he can in the known world.

So Jonah, the person we are meant to identify with does what you do and I do, he says at least to himself, "Thanks but no thanks!" He doesn't want to do that and he's not going to do that. It doesn't mean that he is abandoning his faith, but this is one job that he doesn't want to do and isn't going to do. So he takes off...runs away.

And here is one of the life lessons for us...**runners run from something, not to something.** Remember when you ran away as a kid. You ran away from your parents, from your problem. When we were kids, we didn't have a goal other than to get away. Some of us are still running from our problems.

What we have done or maybe are still doing when we run away from God is that we run away from what we know we ought to do. We run away from what we know is right. Maybe we run away from God because life is disappointing and we confuse life with God. Life is bad, God is bad. Maybe it's a hardship or tragedy that we blame on God and we run from that. Maybe we had a bad experience with a judgmental Christian and we confused their judgment and rejection as God's judgment and rejection of us and we run away from that. Maybe we run away from the very idea of God, that there even is a God. I have run from that in my life. God doesn't make sense, God doesn't fit into anything logical or rational, so we run. Maybe we run away from God because we see God as this legalistic set of do's and don't's. People have run, I have run away from God for more than one of these reasons. You've probably been there at some point...maybe you are today. If so, stay tuned.

But when we look at why Jonah ran, we see another reason. Jonah was running away from something God asked him to do. Jonah was running away from a mission. Apparently, Jonah was good with God in all sorts of ways. He was connected to God (we would assume since he is a prophet), worshiped God, received messages from God. There was just one thing, one aspect, where Jonah chose to run. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, he didn't want to go to his enemy. He didn't want to get on this mission with God.

And this is really where we are a lot like Jonah. There is some aspect, some pocket of our being that is not surrendered to God...we are still running. Maybe it's financially...we know God's teachings about money, we just don't want to do them. We pray, read our Bible, go to worship, do good deeds, etc. Just this one thing...we are still running.

Or maybe it's a moral issue. We have our relationship with God, we go to church, read our Bible, etc, but there's this one part of our life. We know what we ought to do, but we don't want to or we know we shouldn't do it but we want to. So in this part of our life, we continue to run.

Or maybe, like Jonah, God is calling you to do something for God's mission and you are running from that. You are good with God in all the other areas of your life, but you don't want to serve, or you don't want to serve where God is asking you to serve. Maybe you feel like you should be serving somewhere in the community, but like Jonah, you are afraid to go...it's too far outside your comfort zone. So you run from it.

Let's leave that for just a minute and take a look at another life lesson we pick up in just these few verses. **People who are running are also looking for places to hide.** Jonah decides to hide in a boat. He's running from something, not too something and he's looking to get as far away from where God wants him to be so he can hide out there. So he climbs on board a ship, which proves to be a near fatal mistake in the long run, but I'm kind of getting ahead of myself.

When I was 5 or 6 years old, I did a really bad thing. I called a neighbor girl a dirty name. I didn't have any remorse in the moment, at least not until she started walking to my house and knocked on our door. That's when I took off! I didn't know where I was going, but I wasn't about to stay around for what was coming next. So I just ran, around through our back yard and climbed over a chain-link fence to the other side of our neighbors house and I hid in the bushes. I heard my mom calling, but I didn't want to come out! I really can't tell you how long I stayed there. It seemed like a pretty long time; what felt like a couple hours was probably like 20 minutes. Anyway, once I figured out that I couldn't hide forever, I came out and faced the music. My mouth tasted like bar soap for about 24 hrs!

The point is runners will hide in all kinds of places. Some of us hide in relationships, moving from one to another. Some of us hide in substances like alcohol or drugs. Some of us hide in our busyness or in our excuses. Some of us hide in our intellects. Some of us hide in false-humility. Some of us hide in our self-sufficiency. Sometimes we construct worlds around us that conceal our secret lives.

Runners run from something, not to something and they are looking for places to hide. So what are you hiding from God, from others, from yourself even? When we're looking for a place to hide, we can put ourselves into some strange places. Jonah hid on a boat...not the safest hiding place.

Now the story tells us next that the Lord sent a great storm. Jonah is still hiding down in the hold of the boat while everyone else is praying to their God and throwing the cargo overboard...fighting to survive. There are several fun, interesting lessons in this story at this point; the pagan sailors are fighting for their lives and praying while Jonah the prophet of the Lord doesn't even realize there's a storm going on; Once Jonah is awakened, he knows how to resolve the chaos and the storm, but the pagan sailors refuse and first and continue to fight to save him. They even sought God's forgiveness for what they had to do, which was that they had to toss him overboard, so that's what they do. The story is crafted in a way to be sure we notice that once we resolve not to run from God, not to ignore God's wisdom and calling, that peace and serenity return.

I personally don't think God creates storms and calamities in our lives to teach us a lesson. But the story clearly links our running from God's wisdom, running from God's purposes and mission, with chaos and turmoil. I don't think God causes the storms in life, I think we bring them on sometimes because we are running and hiding from God and sometimes they just happen, but I do believe that God uses our troubles and turmoils to grab our attention...to wake us up...to pull us out of our hiding places. God does this not because he wants to judge us and belittle us...not to punish us or pay us back...but to win us back. God wants to lead us to fullness in life, and God knows the way to that fullness. When we run, we run away from that. God wants to win us back, love us back to living the life that really is life.

So after Jonah is thrown overboard, a big fish gives him a ride to shore. I love how the scripture phrases this:

***Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:17***

We are clearly told that God provides the fish. The point is that Jonah is not left to languish in the waters on his own, but God provides a way for Jonah to get back to the life that is life, to fulfill what he is purposed to do. What Jonah learns through this episode is the last of the life lessons for today: **You can run from God, but you can't outrun God.** The point is not that God pursues us, but that God is already

with us in our hiding places! We may want to be alone, we may think we are alone, but the truth is that God is already there ahead of us, trying to win us back to the life that really is life.

Jonah discovers that even in the belly of the fish, God is there. What has been my experience is that in all my dark hiding places, I am not alone. God is there.

In college I ran from God...period. I hid in all kinds of places, and when God would somehow show up, I would run again and again and again. God kept showing up, and at one point, I let myself get found.

Throughout my Christian life, I have been running from God's mission or purpose or wisdom in one way or another. There have been times when I didn't want to let God teach me about finances, or sacrifice or something else. I hid those parts of my life, only to find that God was there and when I awoke to God's presence and gave God my darkness or my chaos, God created life and calm and peace.

Recently I found that I was hiding something else in my life. There is an interesting parallel between the call Jonah receives to go to Ninevah and the call of Jesus to follow him. Jesus wants us to follow him to Ninevah...to a place where we love our enemies, where we serve selflessly and sacrificially for the redemption of people who may not even know our God. Jesus wants us to follow him on a mission that doesn't serve our interests, but serves God's plan. I think these calls scare us just as much as Jonah's call scared him. They scare me. Jesus calls us to uncomfortable places...and we don't want to go.

For years I have been running away from truly serving. I believe that Jesus is calling us to go out into our community and love the unlovable. In the past, when I said "God calls us", I really meant "God calls YOU". I have been hopefully part of encouraging and empowering you to get out there and serve in the community to make God-sized differences in our world. But I've been running from the idea of getting my hands dirty, of getting my life too closely connected to people with too many needs. It's not comfortable, out of my comfort zone! I've been hiding...hiding in my role as a pastor. I'm doing my part by organizing....

Well, God has made himself known in my hiding place. I'm not always quick to listen, so it's taken some time for me to really hear one of those voices of challenge. My wife, Jennifer, a woman with a beautiful and compassionate heart, has been challenging me about this for some time now. "Some time" should probably be measured in years, not months. Last fall, she got me off my keester and pushed me outside of my comfort zones to participate in a ministry in our neighborhood called Life House. That involvement, along with prayer, has resulted in us dreaming about far-reaching ministries that we could launch through Saint Pauls that could really change the lives of children in need in our community.

A few weeks ago, you heard about ways that we can as a church support the lives of foster families. There is an article in your program this morning about that if you need more information. Next week, we are going to introduce new opportunities to hear God's call and step out of our comfort zones to serve the children at Cecil Floyd Elementary School. This time, I'm not just administering things from the safety of my desk. I wouldn't equate it to going to Ninevah, but I am moving out of my comfort zone to be a lunch buddy – giving a lunch hour once a week to build a relationship with an elementary kid who could use another loving, adult relationship. Honestly, I'm nervous about that, but I also feel the deep peace of fulfilling God's mission.

Like I said, not exactly going to Ninevah or "loving my enemy", but it is a step into God's mission. It's no longer running *from* something. It's no longer hiding. It's stepping toward God's mission of demonstrating Christ-like love to anyone and everyone, not just the ones I'm comfortable with.

So how about you? What's your Ninevah? What are you running from? Where are you hiding? What is God asking you to do that is outside of your comfort zone or skill set or personality type? Something your heart is saying "yes" to and your mind is screaming, "no way".

If you're running right now, your Heavenly Father is looking for you, not to pay you back, but to win you back. The good news is that you can't outrun God. God loves us enough to find us in our hiding places and call us back into the mission, back into life, back into joy and fulfillment and peace. Stop. Get Found. And Get back into life!