



January 11, 2015

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Dealing with Fears and Surprises – Jonah (selections)

Everybody knows about Jonah, right? Walk thru story.

There are lots of characters in Scripture that can help us see ourselves more clearly – Jonah’s one of the best. But we’ve got to get past the most compelling part of Jonah’s story – that part about the whale/fish – to really get hold of the messages that are packed into the *whole* story, and Jonah himself. Remember, it’s not so much seeing ourselves in him, as seeing him in ourselves.

By the time we get to the end of this short book, we come to know Jonah as a self-righteous son of a gun.

But that self-righteousness is driven by fear.

Fear is a very powerful emotion, and it’s one of the major players in the formation of our personality, our character, how we go through life. But it takes a lot of digging and self-examination – and, frankly, being honest with yourself – to see that fear for what it is, and to see how it shapes us. Many people never get that far. Jonah can help us.

Jonah runs away from God out of fear. We have that fear in ourselves, but it's complicated and mixed up and it's subtle fear. The Bible tells Jonah's story in a perfect way to show us our own fear.

So, Jonah runs away from God. Well, that's a good sermon-starter in itself: we all know (or at least can say) that you can't run from God.

God's Lord of the Universe, right? Scripture tells us that God knows every hair of our head, knew us thoroughly before we were even born – knew us at the very moment of the creation of the world. We know that Jonah can't really run from God.

But he sure tries, doesn't he? The question is, why? There's more than one answer.

If we look at it from the beginning of the story, we might say that he's afraid of doing what God told him to do.

Fine. That's a good reason to be afraid. God calls us to do some pretty scary things sometimes: everything from loving your enemy to trusting something – someone – you can't see to Jesus' simple "Follow me."

And part of the fear in those things is whether it's really God calling us, or just some of Ebenezer Scrooge's "sour gruel."

We could also say that Jonah's afraid of going to Nineveh. That's good, too. It sounds like even God thought it was an evil place, and certainly strange. Fear of the unknown, the threatening – fear of having to change at all – we all have some of that, too. It's sure hard to trust that God will bring you through when you don't know for sure whether God's plan means something pleasant or, well, *challenging*. An old friend of mine told me when I went off to follow what I thought was God's call that “It'll be a character-building experience. But then again, who needs another character-building experience?” Are you up for one?

You might wonder if Jonah had any thoughts about what God might do to get Jonah to do his job. Perhaps Jonah thought God would pull out Plan B, and leave him alone. Maybe pick on some other prophet to go to Nineveh? Just forget about the whole thing? But there's fear there, too. There's lots of people very afraid they're not doing what God wants, but don't know what they should do. That's scary.

So, looking at the beginning of Jonah's story, we can see layers of fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of his own discernment of God's call, fear of change – fear of God's plans, fear of God. Have any of those?

But the story keeps going, and we learn more about Jonah. He's a man of deep and certain faith: that's the second section of the book, chapter two, where Jonah sings a song of confidence in his safety from the belly of the fish.

His song throws out some of our reasons for Jonah to be afraid right there. Jonah is confident of God's care for him – even to the point of sleeping during a storm that threatened to sink the ship he was on, even after he was heaved into the ocean, even after he was swallowed – yuk – by a fish. That may throw out some of our reasons for Jonah to be afraid, but those fears may still be in us.

Then, once Jonah's clear that God isn't going to let him off the hook (sorry), he sets off to do his job.

If any of those other fears – of change, of harm, of the unknown – still applied to Jonah, we can see a path for us to follow in dealing with our own fears: face them. Do it – whatever it is – anyway. That's what Jonah sets out to do, and it's a strong example for us: just keep putting one foot in front of the other as we walk through each day, one at a time, even if that's just metaphor.

Jonah has shown us two important things already: you can't run from God, and you can't run from your fears.

So he faces the task that was giving him such trouble before: telling the people of Nineveh that God was going to wipe them out.

Now, that's got to be a satisfying job. Don't you sort of feel all triumphant and satisfied when the hero tells the villain that he's about to get what's coming to him? I know I do. Probably most of us have dreamed of being able to tell someone off like that!

This is where this story – and our experience – get a bit sideways. Because these people get the message. Nineveh, the whole kit and caboodle, repents, changes their ways, says they're sorry to God. And they do it real quick, too!

One of the things that people have trouble with is just this: repentance. Being sorry, truly sorry. Changing your ways. Let me ask you this: what do you think about all those convicted murderers and rapists who now say they've got religion? I hear "Sorry isn't good enough" quite a bit. But God's a lot more forgiving than that. Kinda takes a little of the shine off the smugness, doesn't it?

This is complicated. Reading back from this point in the story – the last part of what you have in the bulletin – I find myself in a really uncomfortable place.

God decided that these people, the Ninevites, were so wicked, he was going to destroy them. He sent a prophet to let them know in advance, and we might even think that he did that so they could ponder their evil ways and where their bad choices had led them in the few hours they had left before their annihilation.

But then, God forgave them. Just like that.

And boy, that's frightening.

Most of us don't see ourselves as Ninevites, we see ourselves as good people, which means we're on Jonah's side. Jonah's a good guy, the Ninevites are pretty bad guys. Still, Jonah's side isn't very pretty, is it? It's a cut-and-dried world. It is merciless: righteous, but merciless.

And so here's the real hard medicine to get down: Jonah's fear, way back at the beginning, the fear that drove him to try and run from God, was based in what he knew for certain about God: that God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. Jonah is a prophet because he knew God well. That doesn't mean he agreed with God or accepted God's judgments – he doesn't. I've had people in this congregation tell me that Jesus was wrong! But Jonah knew God.

Jonah wanted no part of that part of God that forgives. Why? Well, do you like being embarrassed by someone else? Did you like having your boss tell you to tell everyone the opposite of what you'd just ordered everyone to do? Do you like being made a liar by the truth you know before you tell the lie?

Jonah's pride was hurt. And that's the key to his story. His fear was that he'd lose face, that he'd be shown to be wrong – even when he was right. And why was all this going to happen?

Because God made the decisions, not Jonah. God makes the decisions, not you or me.

If you're feeling confused or uncomfortable by now, good. Thank you! You've been listening. God is simply not like us. God does not have to meet our approval; we meet God's.

God, as Jonah knew, as so many know, is not bound by what *we* think is right or wrong; God's justice is quite literally the ultimate.

So, what fear inside yourself can you see in the light of what God showed Jonah? Where's the Jonah in you?

If you fear God's wrath, know you can be forgiven.

If you fear God's call, know that God will bring you through safely. Not necessarily the way you'd like, but God's way.

If you fear the future, know that God is waiting for you in it.

And if you fear being wrong, your fears will come true.

But none of those fears are of God. Surprise.