

**A Sermon by Alex Evans - Blacksburg Presbyterian Church**

**Blacksburg, VA – from Sunday, August 17, 2008**

**Selections from Jonah**

**“A Companion for Our Journey”**

In these days many of us have been enthralled by the stories coming nearly every hour from the Olympic Games in Beijing. Have you been watching? As I look out on the congregation today, I sense of bit of sleep deprivation from so many of us staying up later than usual to watch. Of course, we have been pulling for Michael Phelps to make all kinds of history with his swimming prowess and his 8 gold medals! And we have not only learned about him, we know also about his mother, and her roller coaster of emotions, and his sisters, and his training across the years, and his strange physique with his 6'2" height and 6'8" wing span, and his short legs and his size 14 feet, and more. It has been a fascinating story.

We have also heard other stories too – like about the gymnasts Nastia Liukin and Shawn Johnson – they are roommates on the US Team and came in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the women's all-around. Nastia's father won gold for Russia 20 years ago and he serves as her coach. Shawn's parents, from Iowa, took out a third mortgage so she could follow her dreams to these games.

We have heard other stories too – like about the 9 year old school monitor who saved three of his classmates in the devastating earthquake earlier this year in the Sichuan province. He got to walk into the stadium and lead the Chinese team into the ceremonies with Yao Ming, a seven footer and NBA star on the Chinese team.

All these and so many other stories have a way of grabbing our hearts, helping us think the best of humanity. All of these stories draw us closer together and move us emotionally, even spiritually, to reflect on life and its beauty. These stories may even encourage us to consider our own lives, our priorities, and how we might be better people. This is what good stories always do.

Our scripture lesson today is also a good story that urges us to think about our lives, and consider our priorities, and strive to be better. I suspect that everyone knows something about this Jonah story. It has worked its way into our folklore. It is like some of those other familiar stories in the Bible – Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath, Job and suffering – people may not really know those stories but there is a clear association: Noah goes with the ark, Job goes with suffering. So when I say Jonah, you probably say ..... “Whale.” See, the Jonah story is part of our folklore.

But where does this Jonah story come from and how does it fit into the larger Biblical story and relate to our lives? This book of Jonah appears amidst the prophets – those voices that strive to call God's people back from unfaithfulness. Jonah comes soon after Hosea and Amos – two loud prophets that scream about justice and righteousness when the people are dwelling on their “chosen-ness” around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Prophets remind people that “chosen-ness” can never be taken for granted. “Chosen-ness” means faithfulness in how people live. “Chosen-ness” manifests itself in how people care for the least, how people serve God by serving one another. Jonah is right in the middle of these voices.

But while Jonah is surrounded by prophets in the Scriptures, Jonah is not really a prophet. It is just a good story – like something that might emerge from Beijing, or from other source that speaks to our lives. Jonah is not a voice screaming about faithfulness or

unfaithfulness. It is a story about a certain person – it could be any of us, because he is quite ordinary. It is a great story not because he is a great person, but because he is like us, and he is called to do something important for God.

See, stories work differently than prophets. Stories draw us in. Stories help us see our lives in “the God story.” Stories tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. Stories help us see our lives differently, maybe even live our lives differently. When we hear the Jonah story, we start out as simply hearers of the story, maybe as spectators and critics. But if the story is a good one – and Bible stories are usually good ones - we find ourselves no longer just listening, but engaged, maybe even changed by the story.

What I want to urge today even is this: Jonah, in this story, becomes an important companion for us as we seek to journey with God, trust and serve God, BECAUSE finally God is God, and God is always working God’s purposes out! That is something we need to know and hear again and again – God is God, and God is always working God’s purposes out!

This story of Jonah begins with a call. God appears on the scene and speaks to Jonah – “Up on your feet, and on your way, Jonah. Go to the big city of Nineveh and preach to the people,” says God, “I cannot ignore their wickedness any longer.”

There has been a lot in the news in recent years about people being called to go to Iraq! The US Government has called, across the last too many years, almost all people related to any of our armed forces, to go and deal with the crisis in Iraq. We know about this. It is a tough situation. National Guard, those in the reserves, so many citizen-soldiers have been called to Iraq, called to duty. Our own John Phillips, in the Army reserves, responded to this call. Most of us know and love others who have been called out, called forth to Iraq.

Jonah is being called, not by the armed forces, but by God, to go to Iraq – that is where Nineveh is. Most people guess that Nineveh is a thriving city in Assyria which is just about where present day Mosul, Iraq is located. Going to Iraq is not, even for soldiers, the preferred place to go. Going to Nineveh, for Jonah, is the opposite of where he wants to go too.

So Jonah goes the other way, running from God’s call. He goes to Joppa, which is right on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, next to Tel Aviv, in Israel. Jonah goes to Joppa and gets on a boat in the opposite direction from Nineveh – it says, to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. No one really knows where Tarshish is. Most people suspect that it was an exotic port city in southern Spain. Are you getting the geography here? Jonah is on one side of the Mediterranean, in Israel. God says go northeast, across the desert, to Nineveh, in Iraq. So Jonah sets out across the sea, instead of crossing the desert, and heads west, for southern Spain!

If we think we can run from God, avoid what God intends for our lives in love and care and service, we have a story about that right here.

All of this geography and running makes me think about one of my favorite psalms, Psalm 139: “Is there any place I can go to avoid your presence? Is there any where I can go to be out of God’s sight? If I ascend to heaven, you are there, O Lord. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle to the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall hold me fast.” There is no where we can go where God is not with us.

But Jonah tries to run from God, run from the tasks God asks him to do, run away from God's plans and purposes, love and care. Have you ever tried to run from God? Hide from God's plans and purposes? It does not work. See, the story is drawing us in, and we have a companion in Jonah.

And the story continues with Jonah's maritime adventures. While he is on the boat, trying to go to southern Spain instead of Iraq, a storm comes. God does not just speak and call in this story, God works through nature. And it is such a bad and powerful storm that the others on Jonah's boat know that God must be involved, God must be mad: "someone is guilty and running from God and causing all this turmoil," they say. And sure enough, Jonah confesses. Jonah even invites them to throw him into the sea since he is the cause of the turmoil on the boat. They worry about doing that but finally they have no choice. They toss him and the storm subsides. The other sailors are so impressed, they begin to worship God. So, unknowingly, unintentionally, Jonah is already an instrument of God's work.

Then God intervenes in this story yet again. Should Jonah simply drown in his disobedience? No, God does not let us go. God does not leave us in the messes we make of our lives. It says that God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. This looks like death for Jonah. He is in there three days and three nights. He appears to be in the throes of despair. Jonah prays; Jonah confesses his waywardness; Jonah begs for deliverance. It is a posture of worship and reverence. He commits his life to living for and serving God. And the fish spits out Jonah on the seashore.

Then the story reveals still another intervention by God. The same words of the call to Jonah are repeated, almost exactly: "Up on you feet now, on your way to Nineveh. Preach to them, I cannot ignore their wickedness any longer." And this time Jonah knows that he cannot do anything else – in life and in death we belong to God – Jonah heads straight for Nineveh. He is back on mission with conviction and commitment.

There is often a danger in us when we have been lost and when we have had a major encounter with God and find ourselves back on task, back with conviction and commitment. Some of the most passionate, most strong-minded,.....and the most irritating, challenging people might be those who were far off and lost, and then all of sudden are turned around and filled with confidence in the certainty of their calling. You might think that Jonah would move forward toward Nineveh with some careful humility. No, too often we are not like that – we go without humility, with such confidence, even arrogance that we have finally got it right – and watch out - as God's servants we are going to wipe out every wickedness in our way! That is dangerous and even destructive "in God's service."

Famous poet Maya Angelou has a nice poem that offers us a humble corrective to our overzealous tendencies. Too bad Jonah could not reflect on these words. It would have helped him, softened him, shaped him:

*When I say....I am a Christian/I'm not shouting "I'm clean livin."*

*I am whispering "I was lost,/Now I am forgiven.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian/I don't speak of this with pride.*

*I'm confessing that I stumble and need Christ at my side.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian/I'm not bragging of success.*

*I'm admitting I have failed/And I need God to clean my mess.*

*When I say.... "I am a Christian/I'm not claiming to be perfect.*

*My flaws are far too visible/But God believes I am worth it.*

*When I say... "I am a Christian/I am not holier than thou.*

*I am just a simple sinner/Who received God's grace, somehow!*

So often we get over-confident in our zeal, especially when we feel like we are finally on the right track. We get so far away from that grateful and calm sense of God's grace that keeps us careful, kind, and shaped in humble service.

But Jonah goes with passion and conviction to Nineveh, to preach God's word, to tell the people that God cannot ignore their wickedness any longer. He tells them, "in forty days, Nineveh will be smashed." That Hebrew word for "smashed/destroyed" is a complex word. It could mean either "destroyed;" or it could mean "changed." Jonah assumes he knows what it means. But God often has other plans than the ones we are so sure about. Will Nineveh be destroyed? Or will Nineveh be changed?

Well, the story says the people listened to Jonah's words, and they trusted God. They started doing all kinds of things to reflect their listening and trusting. They began fasting. They turned from their wickedness – everyone did it: rich, poor, farmers, city people, famous and obscure, leaders and followers. Everyone turned, hoping that God would turn.

And you know what!? God turned too. God spared the city. God changed God's mind. There was no smashing of Nineveh. Nineveh changed. And God changed. What God said he would do, God did not do!

Well, Jonah was furious. But remember what this story is about? God is God, not Jonah. God is God and God is always working God's purposes out.

"My ways are not your ways," says the Lord; a great line of scripture that we should always keep before us. "The Lord is slow to anger and abounding steadfast love;" another great line that should shape our lives." "You intended it for evil; I intended it for good," says the Lord, "to preserve life." "Life is short – be swift to love; make haste to be kind, that God's love and light, peace and joy can be for all." That is what we are called to be about, all the time, as God's devoted people.

See, through this great story, we have this companion in our journey. We may, like Jonah, want to run away from God's call to love and service. We may, like Jonah, even get overly passionate about what we are doing for God and it has to be done "our way." We may forget often that in life and death, we belong to God, yet our calling is to love and care, help and serve, with humility and grace. We may not want God to be God. But what a great story: God is God; God is working God's purposes out; there is no where we can go where God is not with us. There is nothing we can do but offer our best selves in caring, humble service, in small moments and big moments. We are to trust God with our lives, and love God and others with all we are. And let that be the story of our lives, today and forever. Alleluia. Amen

**Prayer: You offer such abiding, steadfast love to Jonah and to all of us. We seek to go – not our way, but your way, in humble, loving, faithful service. That is our commitment following Jesus Christ. Amen**

**This sermon was preached as a part of morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, August 17, 2008 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.**