**Hide and Seek. January 24 2020 Jonah !:1-17**

Do you remember playing hide and seek with a toddler. Their understanding of the concept of hiding is often under-developed and hence they operate on the basis that if they can’t see you, then you can’t see them. Hiding under tables or behind curtains with legs and even whole bodies clearly visible or just burying their head on the couch, It reminds me of Jonah’s efforts to hide from God.

We often speak of Jonah running away from the task that God gave him, and that is true, but the text speaks of him *“fleeing the presence of the Lord”.* We spoke last week of God’s all-pervading knowledge of humanity and the reality that this was a concept well accepted by the Israelites. So the fact that Jonah decided to attempt to “*flee the presence of God”* seems like a desperate measure. What was it about this task or about himself which prompted his actions?

Many of Israel’s prophets disputed their call with God. Moses and Jeremiah felt ill equipped to speak for God, Gideon and Jeremiah believed they were too young, but in each case God reassured them that God would be with them and would provide them with eloquence, courage, and all that they needed.

In this story however, we have no record of Jonah disputing his call with God and no indication that he felt ill-equipped to fulfil this call. In fact Jonah appears resolute in not wanting to communicate with God regarding his call. He just wants to get away from God.

We know that the presence of God can bring comfort and reassurance, but we also know that the presence of God can be deeply confronting. The ways of God are not necessarily the ways we may choose to take.

The covenant service states “Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our own inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The call to Jonah was clearly one which did not match his own inclinations, in pleasing God he would not be pleasing himself, he was being called to obey God by denying himself and he did not want to do that. The call was challenging and confronting so he tried to escape. Jonah acts out a defiant no to God’s call to Nineveh.

He fled physically, he didn’t want to talk about this, he took action, he aimed to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. Tarshish was in completely the opposite direction. His physical flight was bold, the Israelites were generally not sea-faring people, so his choice emphasises his determination to escape God’s call.[[2]](#footnote-2)

He fled emotionally. On the ship he continues his downward journey, he had fled down to Joppa to get the ship, then he fled down into the hold of the ship and there he lay down and escaped into a deep sleep even despite the mighty storm that raged overhead.

Yet here the captain intervenes and encourages Jonah to pray to his God, in the hope that God may act and they may not perish. He says *“What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your God! Perhaps the God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”* The sailors were already so disturbed by this storm that they had been praying to their gods. So Jonah is being urged to reconnect spiritually and pray for their deliverance from the storm. The captain indicates a respect for Jonah’s God.

However, there is nothing to suggest that Jonah did pray, despite their urging insistence. There is nothing to indicate that Jonah desired to reconnect with God in any way.

The storm continued and the sailors cast lots to determine who may be responsible for the storm. They firmly believed that this calamity was the consequence of someone’s actions. Jonah’s name was the result, so they interrogated him and he acknowledged that he worshipped the God who made the sea and dry land. They knew that he was running away from his God so they were aghast. *“What is this you have done!”* they said. The sailors show a healthy respect for Jonah’s God.

There is still no indication of a change in Jonah’s attitude towards God. Jonah does have to admit to himself and the crew that the storm is related to him seeking to run from God. He suggests that if they throw him overboard the storm would therefore cease. The sailors however, are keen to preserve his life and their own, so they try unsuccessfully to get back to land.

There is still no indication of Jonah seeking God, but the sailors begin to pray to Jonah’s God asking that his death would not be held against them. Then he was thrown into the sea. The storm stopped and the sailors demonstrated their respect for Jonah’s God by offering a sacrifice and making vows to God.

Then the great fish appears in the story giving Jonah another opportunity to return to God, and finally Jonah prays and his life is spared.

It’s a dramatic story that encourages us to consider why did Jonah do this. *Why did he persist in ignoring and running from God?* Why was he so determined not to obey God and go to Nineveh? He was even surrounded by Gentiles who were encouraging him talk to God, but he would not. People who ended up responding to God themselves. It’s a strong story highlighting human determination regardless of the wisdom or foolishness of such determination.

Presumably Jonah must have had a powerful reason for his response to God. The clearest indicators of his reasoning come in chapter 4, after he finally goes to Nineveh and declares God’s message to them. The Ninevites whole heartedly repent and Jonah gets angry with God! *“Oh God is not this what I said…I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* So…. Jonah was worried that God would forgive the Ninevites! *This was what caused him to seek to runaway from God. Why was this so disturbing to him?*

The Ninevites were renowned as a brutal nation. It was the capital of Israel’s enemy and oppressor Assyria. It is seen as a *“haunt of wickedness meriting destruction”[[4]](#footnote-4)* like Sodom or Gomorrah. The prophet Nahum said, “*Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?”* and “*All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The prophets of Israel were normally called to go and rebuke their own people for their failure to follow God, but Jonah was called to rebuke Israel’s enemy, Nineveh. Jonah knew God well enough to know God’s grace, compassion and forgiveness, but he did not want this town Nineveh to experience God’s mercy.

So here through this Old Testament story we are reminded as followers of Jesus of his challenge to us not just to love our neighbours but that this includes loving those whom we may view with reserve or suspicion, loving even our enemies. We are called to be a blessing even to those people whom we don’t particularly like.

It is often difficult to identify our own bias, are *there people around us who can challenge us about our bias?*

On this weekend, as we think particularly of this nation it may prompt us to examine our attitudes towards our first peoples particularly, and our attitudes towards those of other races and faiths.

The story of Jonah may prompt us to consider: *What prompts us to move away, to run away from God? What do we fear, what do we avoid?*

1. Uniting in Worship 1 p73 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leslie C. Allen*, The books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah,*(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1976) 205 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jonah 4:2 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Allen*, The books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah,* 203 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nahum 3:7, 19 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)