

(Jonah) No Place to Hide

by John Vissers

The sermon explores Jonah's flight from God, emphasizing the futility of running from divine purpose and the need for spiritual awareness in the face of life's storms.

Duration: 37:57

Scripture: Jonah 1:4

Topics: "Jonah", "God's Pursuit", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

John Vissers preaches on the story of Jonah, emphasizing that one cannot escape God's presence or purpose, as Jonah attempts to flee from God's command to preach to Nineveh. The sermon illustrates how Jonah's disobedience leads to a storm that endangers others, highlighting the spiritual numbness that can come from running away from God. Vissers draws parallels between Jonah's experience and the modern church's struggle to recognize God's call amidst distractions and challenges. Ultimately, he reminds the congregation that God relentlessly pursues His people, and there is no place to hide from His presence. The message encourages self-reflection on our own spiritual awakensness and responsiveness to God's call.

Transcript

Turn with me to the scripture lesson for this evening from the Old Testament prophet, the book of Jonah, where we're going to read in the first chapter, starting at verse 4 through to the end of verse 10 this evening. Let's turn then to Jonah chapter 1 tonight, reading at verse 4. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own God, and they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, how can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.

Then the sailors said to each other, come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity. They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you? He answered, I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.

This terrified them, and they asked, what have you done? They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word this evening. Let's pray together, shall we, before we look at its teaching for tonight.

Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, this evening to receive your word. Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word tonight, we may indeed also obey your will for our lives. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray, amen.

A number of years ago, I heard a young man give his personal testimony about how he had come to faith in Christ, about how he had become a Christian. We were in a class on personal evangelism together, and in fact, I, at the time, was also a relatively new Christian, and we were taking this class in an effort to try to learn what it meant to share our faith and how we might be more effective in sharing our faith with others. And so he told us his personal testimony.

It was one of the class assignments, to give a testimony to how you had become a Christian, or to give a word of witness describing how you had come to faith in Christ. And I remember how moving this particular testimony was. He talked about what it meant for him to come to faith in Christ.

He talked about how God had sought him. He talked about how God had cared for him. He talked about how God had persevered with him, how God had saved him, how God had delivered him, how God had given him a new life, and how God had set him on a new path, and how God, indeed, had even healed him.

It was a tremendous word of testimony to the glory of God. After it was over, the instructor in the class, a well-meaning older Christian, said, you know, that was a tremendous word of witness, a tremendous testimony, and I think we all appreciate everything that you've shared with us, but you didn't mention anything about your part in what had happened. You didn't tell us what you did.

You didn't tell us how you came to Christ. And you really need to mention your part in salvation if you're going to be effective in your personal witness and effective in evangelizing others. And I can remember how perplexed this young man was, and he thought for a moment, and then he replied, well, I apologize.

I appreciate your encouragement, but I really apologize. I really should have mentioned, I guess, something more of my part. But as I think about it, my part was simply running away, and God's part was running after me until he found me.

And I think there's a profound truth in what that young man experienced and how he understood the faith, because he understood that what it meant to become a Christian was finally really to give in to the relentless pursuit of God in his life. It wasn't so much that he had gone after God, but that God had indeed gone after him. Well, when we left Jonah last week, he was running away from God.

He was fleeing from the presence of God. He'd heard, you remember, the word of the Lord which had come to him. He was a prophet of Israel.

The word had come to him. He had heard God's commission to go and to evangelize a great world-class city. But his narrow-minded nationalism and his limited worldview, as you'll remember last week, made him unwilling and even unable to extend the offer of God's saving grace to a people he despised.

And so as we discovered last week, Jonah, unwilling to listen to God's word, unwilling to hear God's call, unwilling to obey God's commission to his life, headed in the opposite direction. He headed west instead of east to escape the presence of the Lord. And he began, at that moment, a flight of perpetual descent.

And it's very interesting how the text describes it in verse 3, which is the verse we looked at last week, because it begins to describe a downward movement. It says he went down to Joppa, where he bought a ticket for a ship bound for Tarshish. And after paying for the fare, he went down to the waterfront, he went down to the shipyard, he boarded the ship, and then he went down underneath into the hold where he intended to get some peace and quiet.

He went below the deck and he hid himself in a corner of the ship. But as we discover this evening in the passage that we read, God isn't finished with Jonah yet. Jonah discovered that you can run from God, but ultimately you can never really hide from God.

And what happens in the passage that we read this evening is that his self-centered ideology runs smack, runs headlong into the invincibility of God's purposes. He discovers that indeed there is no place to hide, not even in the dark corner of the hold of a foreign ship bound for the other side of the world. And in this section of chapter 1, verses 4 to 10, I want to suggest to you this evening that we learn a number of important lessons about our own lives as the people of God.

We need to be reminded as we work through the book of Jonah that Jonah is about us. Jonah, in fact, is us and we are Jonah. The book was written to remind us that we as God's people are to identify with Jonah.

It might be true of our own personal lives as we struggle with the call of God, with what God wants us to do. It might be true of us as a congregation of God's people in this place that we are Jonah, struggling with God's call, with God's commission to our community, to our neighborhood, to the city in which we find ourselves, to our denomination. It may be true of the Church of Jesus Christ as a whole in Canada and in the Western world at this moment in history as we struggle and try to come to terms with what it means to be God's people at this moment, at the end of the 20th century in Canada, on the verge of the 21st century, the third millennium.

What does it mean to be the Church of Jesus Christ? And it may well be true of the Church globally as we seek to be the people of God in our global village. And so the question is, what do we learn about Christian living, about being the people of God, about being the Church of Jesus Christ, about being the Christian community from the fact that Jonah could find no place to hide? I want to suggest to you this evening that as we explore this question that we look at the scene set forth in verses 4 to 10 from three very different perspectives. And imagine, if you will, in your mind's eye that this is a one-hour docudrama.

Now, I'm not going to preach for an hour, so don't get worried. But imagine that the scene before us is a kind of one-hour docudrama. And the story is being filmed by three different cameras to pick up the three main movements of the story, three different camera angles, as it were, with the film rolling, with the videotape taping the events, three aspects of the drama, three concurrent storylines unfolding as the events are described for us.

And the first camera catches the storm and discerns the presence of God in it. The second camera focuses on Jonah asleep in the bottom of the boat. And the third camera videotapes the frantic struggle of the sailors as they fight for survival, as they try to come to grips with what is going on around them.

All three cameras going at the same time, the events unfolding rapidly in a frantic way, and the events they catch on film are taking place at the same time. The action tells the story. Well, first of all, then, the film catches God in the midst of the storm in verses 4 and the beginning of verse 5. Jonah makes his great escape.

Jonah turns tail and runs, and he thinks he can outrun God. He probably thought he was in the clear. He breaks for it, he runs, and he probably thinks he's now safe.

We don't know how far the ship had gone out of port before the storm started. It might have only been a few hours. It might have been a few days.

The ship might have traveled a few days out into the sea before the trouble began. But the text says, The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. And the sailors were afraid, and they each cried out to their own God, and they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

Jonah had done his part. He had heard God's call, he had received God's commission, and he had turned tail and run. And now the story turns, and God does his part.

God lifts his hand. God moves in on his delinquent prophet. God pursues his fugitive saint.

God has had enough of his rebel servant. And God will bring Jonah down to a place of repentance, of penitence, and ultimately, obedience in his life. God throws down a gale upon the sea so furious that even the experienced sailors are frightened.

We've been watching in the past week and a half, two hurricanes come up the east coast of the continent, and the kind of havoc that such a hurricane, that such a storm, can wreak on people's lives. Well, that's what they were facing. And we're reminded, really, of the words of the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 23 and verses 19 and 20, where the prophet says, See the storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.

The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. And we're reminded, as well, of the words of the psalmist in Psalm 95, in verse 5, where the psalmist says, The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. This is the God of the universe that Jonah now has to do with.

And although he doesn't yet realize it, Jonah is bumping up against the sovereignty of God in his life. He's bumping up against the purposes of the living God of all creation in his own personal life. He's beginning to realize, although he may yet not discern it as he sleeps, but he's going to learn that God is God and that this is the God with whom he has to do in his life.

William Cooper put it this way in his well-known hymn, God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the deep and rides upon the storm. And I want to suggest to you this evening that the first lesson that we need to draw from this story, from this passage, from this narrative this evening, from the prophet Jonah, is we need to begin to discern the providence of God in the midst of the storms of our lives.

Storms are sometimes sent into our lives to stop us, to stop our descent downward, our spiraling descent into hell. Now it's not always the case, and of course it doesn't mean that everything that happens to you

that may be difficult, that may cause suffering, is brought upon you as the judgment of God. The Bible is far more complex than that.

The dynamics of how God works in our lives is far more intricate and detailed than that. But it is the case that sometimes those who are on a downward spiral in life, in flight from God, experience the judgment of God in the midst of the storms of life. The pagan poet Virgil wrote these words.

He said, The descent into hell is easy. That's true, isn't it? The descent into hell is easy. When we choose to disobey God, God sometimes lets us go.

Perhaps if we stop reading scripture, if we stop praying, if we stop joining in fellowship with other believers, God lets us go at least for a time. At least at first. But then the storms come, and something happens to shake us out of our slumber and to stop the spiraling descent, which often has picked up speed until it seems to be absolutely out of control.

Things often get rougher before they get better as we start to pay the consequences of our own foolish choices. Until in the end, sometimes God stops us from ourselves, from making the choice that will ultimately lead us astray. It reminds us, of course, of the story of the prodigal son.

The prodigal son who fled from the father's house, who fled from his homeland, who's out in the distant country, out in the distant land. You remember how the text goes? He finally is eating the food that is thrown to the pigs. And what does the text say? He came to himself.

He came to his senses. He realized that his life was spiraling out of control. That his flight from the presence of his father's house, from the presence of his family, from the presence of all that he knew that was good, had brought him, in fact, to a place where life had no meaning for him at all and where his suffering was intense.

And so sometimes we need to discern the hand of God in the storms of life, how God carefully crafts our lives to bring us back to himself, how he sometimes puts up the barriers so that we cannot go any further, any further in our descent away from his presence. But the camera is still rolling. And the camera shifts, or if we go to the other camera, if we put it this way, we find another scene as it's lifted up here in this passage in verses 4 to 10, and that is Jonah's asleep in the boat.

Now, Jonah has not yet discerned the providence of God in the storm which is raging about him. And I think this is very interesting in the way that it's given to us in this passage. While the storm winds howled and while the hurricane-like rain pelted down, where was Jonah? Well, Jonah was sleeping.

He'd gone below deck to find some peace and quiet. Well, why was he sleeping? Well, there could have been a number of reasons as to why he was sleeping. He might have simply been exhausted from expending nervous energy.

You think of the experience he's been through. He's been confronted by the word of the Lord. He's received this commission to go to Nineveh to preach to this world-class city, to people that he doesn't really like.

He decides that it's not for him, that this is not his calling, that this does not bring any dignity to a Hebrew prophet, so he takes off in the other direction. A kind of traumatic experience. And so he might have just finally flopped down in the belly of the boat and said, I'm just so exhausted and so tired expending all this

energy and running from God that he just sort of dropped and fell into a deep sleep.

Well, that may be one of the things that happened. Or it might have been the case that, in fact, he was so secure that he thought, in fact, he had actually escaped the presence of God that he was so relaxed about things now that he kind of put his feet up and kind of put his head back and just went to sleep. After all, he had outrun God, so he thought.

Well, either of these things might be true. We're not really told in the text. It seems to me, however, that there might be something else at work here.

I was reading this past week a book by Jacques Ellul called *The Judgment of Jonah*. Jacques Ellul was a well-known French scholar, a theologian, a Christian leader in the Reformed church in France. And this is what he says in his book *The Judgment of Jonah*.

Jonah flees from the presence of God and during the tempest, he sleeps. The point is that he refuses even to contemplate the storm. He refuses to see it except as a natural phenomenon about which he can do nothing.

He will not see in it God's act, God's appeal, God's pointer. He prefers to know nothing about it. He continues to flee by plunging into unconsciousness in order not to know that it comes from God.

Now what is Ellul saying here? What he's saying is that Jonah's running from God has made him spiritually numb. Jonah's flight from God has made him spiritually insensitive to the presence of God in the midst of his life, in the midst of this storm, and it's made him insensitive to the needs of those around him frantically struggling for survival. He hasn't got a clue, it seems, that it's precisely because of his flight from God that everyone on this boat finds themselves in this predicament.

He doesn't seem to be aware that it's his actions, that it's his decisions, that it's what he's done that could result in the loss of an entire ship with its crew. And I want to suggest to you tonight, my friends, that that's what running from God often does to us. It dulls our spiritual senses.

It dulls our spiritual sensitivities. It places us in a deep spiritual slumber so that often we do not any longer recognize the presence of God around us in the events that are unfolding, and furthermore, we become insensitive to the needs of those around us who in fact may be struggling for survival. We become, as someone has said, like the walking dead.

We rest in peace while those without faith can find no peace. And in the quietness of our slumber we banish every care and every concern for others from our minds while those around us are being torn up with anxiety in the midst of the storms of life. And what we don't realize is that sometimes it is our disobedience which has resulted in fact in the peril of others.

And I suggest to you that sometimes this can happen to us even when we are busy. Not necessarily when we're asleep, but we can be spiritually sleeping even when we are busy in the Lord's work. Busy with our good works, busy with our committee meetings, busy with our fellowship groups, but sometimes we miss the call of God.

Sometimes we miss the spiritual reality which is unfolding around us, the real opportunities and the real needs. I think actually the picture of Jonah asleep in the bottom of this boat is intended to be really a picture of God's people both in the Old Testament, first understood in terms of God's people, Old

Testament Israel, and then in the New Testament in terms of the church of Jesus Christ. Because isn't it the case that often the church is asleep at the switch? The people of God are asleep on a ship bound for Tarshish instead of alert and awake on a caravan headed for Nineveh.

And the Christian community often is slow to discern the presence of God in the midst of the storms, in the midst of the events that are unfolding around us. We become spiritually numb, spiritually insensitive to the will of God, and we forget about the Great Commission and the Great Command and the call that God has placed upon us as the church of Jesus Christ. And I want to suggest to you that if there's ever a picture in the Bible which portrays the church in North America at the end of the 20th century, it's this picture of Jonah asleep in the bottom of the boat.

Not realizing what is going on. And as we live in our secular and in our pluralistic world, as we face a new millennium, what is God calling us to do as the church of Jesus Christ? What is it that's going to wake us up out of our slumber to the call that God has for us in our day? And then thirdly, we come to the final camera. The final shot, the final angle of this great event as it unfolds.

When the storm hits, the sailors are terrified. They're aware of the crisis. And they all send out SOS prayers to their own gods in the hope of being saved.

They begin a frantic effort of throwing the cargo overboard in the hopes that by making the ship's cargo lighter, the weight lighter, that they'll be saved, that they'll be able to ride out the storm. Now Jonah, it says, is awakened by the captain. Now it's not clear from what we're told here whether the captain went down deliberately to wake up Jonah to call on him to pray or whether in fact they might have just gone down below to get some more of the cargo and as they lifted out some of the stuff, they found in fact there was Jonah asleep in the corner.

But nevertheless, the captain goes down and is awakened. He awakens Jonah and confronts Jonah. And the sailors are trying to figure out who's responsible for the mess in which they find themselves.

And they conclude that it's Jonah's fault. And Jonah admits to them that he's a Hebrew, that he worships the God of heaven who made the sea notice and the land. And the sailors are terrified.

And they conclude that it's Jonah's disobedience which has resulted in the storm. They discern the presence of God and the providence of God before Jonah does. And again, we're confronted with a real picture of our world.

When the storm clouds gather and the winds begin to pick up speed, everyone runs off into their own gods. When the storm clouds gather, people may not know where to turn, but they know they have to turn somewhere, to something, to someone, to find strength, to find security, to find a refuge in a time of trouble. The sailors on this boat would exemplify the well-known expression, I think, there are no atheists in foxholes.

Because whether any of them believed or not, they certainly were shaken up through this experience. And it's true that those who neglect God in times of prosperity often are shaken up during times of adversity. A crisis sends people scurrying for salvation.

But the tragedy in this story is that the crisis, the storm, is unleashed by the unfaithfulness of one of God's own prophets. And the people around the prophet are placed in peril. And sometimes the perils around us, the storms unleashed, are unleashed by the unfaithfulness of the Church.

And sometimes the Church has to be awakened by the world, awakened by others around them, as people are on the verge of death and hell itself. And that's really what's going on here. Jonah is brought back to an awareness of his situation and the presence of God through non-believers.

There are really a number of great ironies in this story. Irony is a great literary device. And Jonah is filled with irony.

We're going to see it not only tonight, but also, in fact, in the coming weeks and some of the other chapters. But think of the irony of this story to this point. Jonah is a Hebrew prophet who's called to preach the gospel, to proclaim God's judgment and God's salvation to the people of Nineveh, a pagan people.

He runs away from that commission and he's ultimately stopped by a storm. Jonah, who's the so-called man of God, the prophet, is asleep in the boat while the pagan sailors are praying for their lives. Ironic, isn't it? And after being awakened, Jonah is finally forced to tell the heathen sailors about the Lord.

I love how our section ends in verse 10. Verse 9, he says, he answered them, I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. What's ironic here is here is Jonah running away from God because he refused to preach to pagans.

And what does he end up doing? He ends up speaking about the God who has called him to pagans, to these pagan sailors. I think God, in his own way, has a wonderful sense of humor and accomplishes his purposes despite what his prophets might do. And so like Jonah, we need to understand that there is no place to hide.

God will accomplish his purposes. And one of the greatest ironies, it seems to me, of life, and one of the greatest ironies in the history of the Christian church is that those who resist God's call the most are often those who ultimately and finally are forced to give in. We see it in Jonah.

But think of the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul in the New Testament, a Hebrew of Hebrews, one who persecuted the church of Jesus Christ, one who sought to eliminate the Christian believers in the first century. What happens to him? He becomes a Christian missionary to the Gentiles.

A wonderful note of irony. Think of Augustine who ran away from God, raised by a godly mother, fled from that upbringing, turned his back on God, studied all kinds of philosophy, studied all kinds of other religions, lived a kind of playboy existence in the third and fourth centuries, finally stopped dead in his tracks when he overhears, of all things, someone reading a passage from the book of Romans. And it transforms and revolutionizes his life.

Or think of someone like C.S. Lewis, the celebrated Oxford atheist who finally was surprised, as he describes it himself, by joy, surprised by the grace of God. Or think of, in our own day, Charles Colson, the Watergate hatchet man who became a Christian, went to prison for his part in the Watergate scandal. Do you know what he's doing now? He heads up prison fellowship ministries.

His whole life is taken up with sharing the gospel with men and with women who are in prison. A wonderful note of irony. You see, there's an irony to the sovereignty of God.

God's purposes will be accomplished. The sovereign God will not let go. Our times are in his hands.

It's what the psalmist discovered when he wrote in the 139th Psalm, Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, sounds like Jonah, doesn't it? Even there your hand will guide me, and even there your right hand will hold me fast.

In one of his songs, song writer and singer James Taylor, who's probably the quintessential voice of the Baby Boomers, sings this, You can run but you cannot hide. This is widely known. Why do you give in to your foolish pride and stand by yourself alone? All of us probably at one time or another try to run from God.

Are you trying to run tonight? Are you struggling for survival in the midst of a spiritual storm? Or are you asleep in a deep spiritual slumber from which you need to be awakened, perhaps by the world to its needs and to what is going on around you? There is no place to hide. As the poet Francis Thompson so eloquently wrote in his poem, The Hound of Heaven, God is relentless and indefatigable in his pursuit of his people. I fled him down the nights and down the days.

I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind. And in the midst of tears, I hid from him.

And under running laughter upvisted hopes I sped. And shot down, precipitated a down titanic glooms of chasmed fears from those strong feet that followed, followed after. Is the Hound of Heaven on your trail tonight? Let us pray.

Gracious God, our Father, we bow before you tonight in the midst of our own circumstances in life, in the midst of our own struggles, in the midst of our own needs. And we pray that we might be able to know and discern and feel and experience your holy presence, your providential care in the midst of our lives. And if for some of us we've been seeking to hide, seeking to run, Lord help us to know that you are relentless in your pursuit.

Help us by faith and according to your grace to yield to you even tonight. Through Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Amen.

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