

NOT THERE!

The Call to Unpleasant Places | Not That Series (Part 3)

Text: Jonah 3

We've been studying this month the amazing story of Jonah. As we've learned by now, Jonah was a prophet – a person commissioned by God to share his message with others – yet Jonah did not want to fulfill that calling. God had instructed him to go preach a message to the people who lived in the capitol city of Assyria and Jonah fled in the opposite direction. I remember when our boys were young and Amy or I would say, "It's bedtime!" and point toward the stairs and they'd run the opposite way to hide in the living room. Jonah was like that, only not so cute! In the course of running from his calling, Jonah risked the lives of his traveling companions and did serious damage to his own soul.

Of course, Jonah believed he had good reasons for what he was doing. As we shared in the first episode of this series, the Assyrians of the eighth century BC were notorious for their brutality toward their enemies. They made a science out of torture and an art out of conquering and enslaving others. The biblical prophet Nahum summed up how most people in Israel felt about those who lived in Ninevah: **Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall for who has not felt your endless cruelty? (Nahum 3:1, 19)**

In other words, Ninevah was in Jonah's mind (and that of many other Jews) a profoundly unpleasant and hopeless place. Nothing could heal it. Its wound and wickedness was clearly fatal. You can send me a lot of places in life, God, Jonah thought, but that one is pointless. Nothing good could possibly happen in that environment. **NOT THERE!**

If we are self-aware or honest, most of us have some NOT THERE places in our life – spaces we've written off as irredeemable. There's just no way that person would ever listen if I spoke the truth. There's just no way that circle of people would ever accept me if I got involved with them. There's just no possibility that situation could ever be improved even if I poured everything I had into it. There's just no chance that condition in my school, or my workplace, or my church or family or society will ever change. It's too deeply ingrained. There are too many people or forces against me. I can't make a difference. Not there. There's some Jonah in all of us.

But God is not "practical" like we are. He has a pattern of calling people to unpleasant, apparently irredeemable places to advance his purposes. This is why the rallying cry of the Christian faith is not "Sit here!" but "Go there!" **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15)**, says Jesus. **"Go make disciples**

of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Go out and be **the salt of the earth** and **the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14).** And we are tempted to say: *"But the world is complicated and people are hard-headed and who will listen to us if we preach? And how can we possibly make disciples of all nations when we don't even like those other people groups? And I don't really want to be salt where things are decaying or light where it is so dark."* But Jesus still says, GO; and so we often say, NO, and run, like Jonah did.

But when we run from God's calling we often wind up in even worse places. We saw that last week, as Jonah's determination to flee from the Lord sent him into the midst of a storm and then down into a whale of a lot more darkness. It wasn't until Jonah had resolved to respond faithfully to God's calling that he saw the light again. **Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."** And this time, **Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it (Jonah 3:1-3).**

Have you noticed how often we hear that phrase "three days" in Scripture? When you hear that phrase think: "Full engagement." Jesus is in the grave over a period of "three days," fully dealing with death. Jonah is in the belly of the fish for "three days," fully experiencing the cost of fleeing God. Now Jonah is in Nineveh for "three days," fully engaging God's command to preach. When you think of making a commitment to someone or something, don't think in terms of doing it once or twice and calling that "faithful." If you're going to follow God's call to control your tongue, or discipline your appetites, or take the role of a servant-leader, or be an encourager, or start spiritual conversations with others, sustain your engagement for day after day after day.

Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Can you imagine how much courage it took for Jonah to preach that message there? It would be like you walking into the center of the most violent drug cartel in the world and saying, because of all the ways you are hurting people, in a little over a month, this entire business is coming down. Which would they do first? Kill you or laugh at you? If Jonah could go and do that is there really any place in our lives so unpleasant that you and I couldn't go?

Clarence Jordan was a man with doctorates in both agriculture and Biblical languages and the potential to do almost anything he wanted with his life. But Clarence Jordan heard God's call to GO and serve the poor. During the 1940's he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, that became a haven of hope for poor whites and blacks struggling to survive in the wake of the Great Depression.

As you might imagine, an institution like Koinonia Farm didn't go over very big in the Deep South of the 1940's. Over the course of fourteen years the folks in his neighborhood showed them just how much they liked his vision -- boycotting him, slashing the tires of Farm members, and threatening worse. Finally, five years before I

was born, the Ku Klux Klan decided they'd had enough of Clarence Jordan. In the middle of the night they came -- many of them (ironically) members of local churches; they came hooded to the Farm, set ablaze every one of its buildings, riddled Jordan's home with bullets, and chased off every family on the Farm, save one.

The next day, a newspaper reporter came out from town to see what remained of the Farm. Walking through smoldering rubble and scorched land, he found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting. *"I heard the awful news,"* he called to Clarence, *"and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing."*

Recognizing the voice of the reporter as belonging to one of the hooded figures who'd been there the night before, Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting. Determined to get a rise out of this man who ought by now to be packing his bags, the reporter continued prodding and poking, till in exasperation he could contain himself no longer. *"Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them PhD's and you've put fourteen years into this Farm, and there's nothing left of it all. So tell me, Doc', just how successful do you think you've been?!"*

Finally, Clarence stopped hoeing. Straightening his back, he turned toward the reporter, and said quietly but firmly, *"I think we've been about as successful as the Cross, sir. You see, I don't think you really understand us. What we are about around here is not success; it's faithfulness. We're staying. Good day."*¹

I think of the thousands of people since that day whose lives have been touched by the ongoing ministry of Koinonia Farm and the little organization it spawned. You may have heard of it. It's called Habitat for Humanity. Whether it is in farming, or marriage, or parenthood, or our ministry and mission any PLACE else, one philosopher summed up the truth this way: *"The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted, in something which makes life worth living."*² God does not demand success from us. He simply asks for faithfulness. And what God can do with that one seed is pretty amazing indeed.

What Jonah couldn't see as he made his way through the streets of the great city, is that God had gotten there before him and hoed the ground in preparation for the receipt of his message. Historians tell us that during the period leading up to Jonah's mission there, Assyria had endured a cascade of plagues, famines, eclipses and uprisings that locals had come to see as portends of an even greater judgment to come. The nation's culture of violence had also wrought such damage to even the internal life of the country, that many Assyrians had come to a newfound place of humility and openness to a different way.

And, thus, against every expectation (and even hope) of Jonah's, the Bible says:

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth – a traditional symbol of repentance and mourning. When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened (Jonah 3:5-10)

It is amazing how patiently and brilliantly, domino-by-domino, God brings to pass his redemptive purposes. Reflecting on this providence, Rich Stearns (the retired head of World Vision) tells the story of Robert Wilder, a young man graduating from college in the 1880’s. Feeling a call from God to GO share the Christian message with people in other lands, Robert signed a pledge that he would fulfill that call. Physical frailness prevented Wilder from fulfilling that promise, but the young man realized that he still had the power to encourage others to take up the task. And a single domino fell.

While addressing an audience in Chicago some years later, Wilder’s passion for the spread of the gospel into the world, sparked the imagination of another young man named Samuel Moffett. Moffett signed Robert’s pledge to bring God’s message to a place that needed it and, two years later, landed in a nation called Korea. A second domino fell.

A few years later, Sam Moffett shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with a man named Kiel Sun-chu. Kiel had become disillusioned with his traditional Chinese religion and put his trust in Jesus Christ. Another domino fell.

In 1907, Kiel Sun-chu became one of the principal leaders of a Christian movement in another “Great and Feared City” like Ninevah, called Pyongyang. In January of that year, a season of spontaneous prayer and confession of sin broke out during regular church meetings in that city and mushroomed into a dramatic spiritual revival. Literally thousands of dominoes fell, birthing an incredibly vital and influential Korean Church.

When Kiel Sun-chu died in 1935, 5,000 people attended his funeral. The church in Korea now numbers about 15 million devoted followers. It sends more missionaries to spread the Christian message and way of life than any other country beyond the U.S. Because of its influence, millions of dominoes continue to fall.

As a curious sidebar, the son of Samuel Moffett would go on to teach at Princeton Seminary. Among many of the students he would help catch a vision for the Christian mission, was a young man who in 1997 became the senior pastor of this church. This past month I became the chairman of the Board of Fuller Seminary, one of the principal institutions now training leadership for the Korean Church. I think we all get how important the spiritual condition of Korea is for the future of our world.

So, here's the point I want to make in closing and I will paraphrase my friend Rich Stearns: "As Christians, we are all dominoes in the chain reaction set off by Jesus two thousand years ago. The amazing thing about dominoes falling is that the chain reaction always starts small — with just one seemingly insignificant domino" who reluctantly or passionately answers the call of God to GO – to bring his message and way of life to some ONE or some CIRCLE or some CITY of people who matter to Him.

Perhaps you are just talking with your children about faith. Maybe you are just working to reconcile one relationship. Perhaps you are just inviting one friend or family to church. Maybe you are investing your time seriously in just one ministry of our congregation or just one mission beyond this church. Perhaps you have the ability to expand your financial support by just one more percentage point of your income. Maybe you only have the bandwidth to insert the values of God's kingdom in just one circle of your workplace, school, or community. Don't take that commitment lightly.

Here's the reality that even our friend Jonah struggled to grasp: When you finally answer the call to do what GOD asks and represent Him in some unpleasant or difficult PLACE, "you have no idea what how big the impact will be as God multiplies your faithfulness."³ So, let's each find out what actually happens when we stop worrying about ourselves and our success and just faithfully DO what Jonah did and obey God's call to GO.

Please pray with me...

Lord, you know where we SIT today and the place to which you've called us to GO. Give us the courage to respond to your Word and trust you for the life-change your providence makes possible. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

¹ Story paraphrased from Tim Hansel's *Holy Sweat*.

²Friedrich Nietzsche – as quoted in Eugene Peterson's book, *A Long Obedience*.

³ Rich Stearns, "Spiritual Dominoes," *World Vision Magazine* (Winter 2011)