

# NOT THIS!

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## The Cost of Fleeing Your Call | Not That Series (Part 2)

Text: Jonah 1:4-2:10

### Down to the Deep

I imagine the shadows were just beginning to grow long when Jonah, the son of Amittai, finally arrived at the docks in Joppa that late afternoon. He'd been walking hard for several days now and his feet and legs were feeling the pace. As he sat on the edge of the dock to rest, something about the sound of water lapping against the old wooden piers seemed to echo a melancholy ebb he felt inside. Oh, he'd had the blues before. They always went away after awhile. But this time they seemed to linger.

Two hours later, however, Jonah was on board a ship bound for the coast of sunny Spain. A vacation was just the thing to cheer him, he thought. While making small-talk with some of the other passengers, a woman wanted to know what it was like to work in the King's court; and an older man kept butting in with stories about the good old days when the Word of the Lord used to really ring out through the prophets. Somehow the conversation made Jonah uncomfortable. He told the the passengers that he was tired and turning in. Maybe a good night's sleep would lift his spirits. But deep inside, somehow Jonah doubted it.

The hours that followed were like something out of a nightmare as one disastrous moment blurred mercilessly into the next. There was the angry voice and strong hands of the ship's captain shaking Jonah awake. Then the staggering rush up the galleyway onto a pitching deck, where shouts and spray and the roar of the wind blended into chaotic frenzy. And then the surges of fear and panic and grief that coursed through Jonah as the storm suddenly made sense to him, and he knew what he must tell the captain and crew to do. Then, it was the swirling darkness of the cold night sea, surging around him, sinking and sinking, till something out of the deep swallowed him whole.

Then silence -- for three days and three nights -- when cries too deep for words flew from Jonah to the only One who might hear him now: **In my distress I called to the Lord... From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help... [For] you hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me... I have been banished from your sight... The deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever."** (Jonah 2:2-6)

**Darkness Visible**

Can you hear anything that rings familiar in those expressive words of Jonah? While none of us will, I pray, ever know what it is to be swallowed by a whale, I wonder if we don't find here at least the metaphorical echoes of an experience that at one time or another visits us all, or someone we know. I'm speaking of the drowning darkness of *depression*.

Some years ago, I read William Styron's book, Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness.<sup>1</sup> There the Pulitzer prize-winning author chronicles his own experience of severe depression in terms that evoke striking comparisons with the description of Jonah's journey into the depths. Styron writes that depression ranges from a sense of "wan cheer" to "fits of black despondency" to "a veritable howling tempest in the brain," out of which we can see little light and hope. In the midst of this "storm of murk," says Styron, a person may be buffeted about by "violent fluctuations of mood," be unable to sleep, or -- like Jonah -- be overwhelmed with a desire to escape from all feelings by going to sleep, as "psychic energy throttles back to zero."

In its most extreme forms, depression is known by the sort of "drowning" feeling of worthlessness and futility described in this morning's text. Sufferers will feel the almost palpable pull of a thousand pressures and demands, wrapping around their minds like seaweed and dragging them down to the depths. They may be unable to talk to others, continue working, or carry on with any vitality the former routines of life, all the while feeling -- as Jonah did -- "an acute abandonment" by God and others. Sometimes, says Styron, the pain becomes so "devastating that [the sufferer can] no longer endure the agony of it," and surrenders to the cold sea of oblivion.

One variety of this malady is termed by psychiatrists: "endogenous depression." It is regarded primarily as having its roots in an internal biochemical imbalance that is best treated by medication. Clinicians are increasingly coming to believe, however, that even endogenous depression can sometimes be triggered by a second kind of condition called "exogenous depression" because it is stimulated by external factors that end up lodging in the interior world. Some of these factors might well be termed "spiritual." Here again we can learn from Jonah's experience.

### **The Hound of Heaven**

You see, it was not without good reason that Jonah felt the inner anguish he did from the moment he left home to catch that distant boat to Tarshish. As we explored last week, the word of the Lord had come to Jonah, and told him to go preach to Ninevah -- the capital city of Israel's most hated enemy, Assyria. If the physical danger posed by going among some of the most barbarous people on earth didn't turn Jonah's stomach, then the thought of giving such people a chance to repent and escape the punishment they deserved certainly did. **NOT THEM!** Jonah thought. And so rather than traveling 500 miles northeast to Ninevah, Jonah ventured 1000 miles southwest to Tarshish **"to flee from the LORD"** (Jonah 1:3)

Have you ever tried to do that yourself? English poet Francis Thompson, once a homeless alcoholic, tells his own story of a lifetime spent trying to flee from God's presence in a host of despairing pursuits. The words of his poem, "*The Hound of Heaven*" express something of that which Jonah learned the hard way too:

*"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 mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated,  
adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat -- and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet -- [saying]  
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."*

And so all things betrayed Jonah too. The wind and the sea, the ship's crew, the great fish, all prevented Jonah from running any further. But in the end it was Jonah's own nature which most betrayed his need to respond to the call of God. There in the belly of that fish, when life it seemed had swallowed him whole, Jonah finally woke up to the fact that it was what *HE himself had swallowed* that was the cause of his drowning despair.

### **Facing Our Ninevahs**

While I want to emphasize again that some forms of depression have their roots in legitimate medical issues, psychologists often confirm what the Bible has pointed to for three millennia -- namely, that sometimes the sadness and disorientation some of us feel come from our attempts to run from the Ninevahs of life. Ninevah may be that hard challenge, or broken relationship, or crucial calling from which you understandably want to flee, yet which God is determined to help you face no matter where you run or sail.

Perhaps *your* Ninevah is a loss you've suffered recently of a particular person, privilege, or capacity you've refused to process fully. It's time now to embrace the reality of that loss and work toward establishing new relationships and goals for your life. Maybe *your* Ninevah is some grief or anger you've held inside for too long -- but now God is calling you to put away that false face of poise and control, and grieve or rage for that which hurts.

Perhaps Ninevah for you is a difficult encounter or a dreaded responsibility that you've been putting off, again and again -- when the only thing which will give you peace is to step up and do what needs to be done. Maybe *your* Ninevah is guilt over some past action which haunts you somewhere deep inside. But God is calling you to confess that sin to Him and dare to believe that His readiness to forgive a repentant heart is a whole lot larger than any failing of yours.

Or perhaps your Ninevah is something else entirely -- something which you cannot put your finger on, but suspect may be at the root of the sadness or storm enveloping you now. If so, come talk with one of our Prayer Ministers after the service today. Call the church this week and talk with someone in our Pastoral Care department. Have a word with me in the line this morning. It is not God's desire that we ever wallow in the belly of darkness and sadness alone. Let someone help you discern what it is that's consuming you or that you've swallowed that's bringing you down.

### **Going to Ninevah**

The Bible consistently teaches that there is hope for those in the depths. Deep in the belly of that fish, Jonah came to his senses. He recognized the Ninevah within him from which there was no flight. He knew the task before him and he vowed to take it up with trembling will. And for the first time in a long time there is a glimmer of light in his words. Listen again to the scriptures:

**I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever, [it seemed]. But you [God] brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you... What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD (Jonah 2:6-9),** maybe even for the Assyrians confessed Jonah. And the Bible says that **The Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah 2:10) Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Ninevah and proclaim to it the message I give you." (Jonah 3:2) Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Ninevah. (Jonah 3:3)**

In closing, I went to underline that the story did not end there. Jonah didn't simply ride off into the sunset in perfect peace. As we'll see next week, Jonah went on to an angry dispute with God in which the reluctant prophet was called painfully to a larger vision of God, himself, and life than he'd ever entertained. Yet the good news is that Jonah had moved beyond his flight and the worst of his darkness. At least now he was heading in the right direction, toward a creative struggle out of which a genuinely new spirit could be born.

For those of us who still wallow in the belly of some whale, a struggle may await us too. The testimony of this story, and of all who have taken seriously Jesus' command to take up a cross, is that new life often comes at a price, but it's worth paying. Honest

struggles are often the only road to lasting hope beyond the shores of depression, or any other difficulties that come our way.

So, what have you been saying "NOT THIS!" to? What's the Ninevah from which you've been fleeing, and how big a storm or fish is God going to have to send to swallow you till you figure out that its time to answer his call? Make the decision today: "I'm going to walk that road to Ninevah. I'm going to find out if maybe it leads not to death but to a larger kind of life." This I promise you: You're not going to walk that road alone. You've got companions here to journey with you – and an even greater Someone who will walk with you; even Jesus, our Lord.

*Let us pray...*

*Lord God of life, you who abides with us through every joy and every sadness: move by your Spirit today to awaken us to those issues and struggles you want us to face. Give us courage to face the challenges of life with hope. Grant us vision to see in every moment of stress and pain an opportunity for growth and renewal. And instill in us a love that lifts up those who feel down in the depths; through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup>William Styron, [Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness](#). New York: Random House. Highly recommended reading for those who wish to understand better the condition of depression.