

The Jonah In Us All
First in a Series
Jonah ran from the Lord...1:3
July 21, 2019
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Prayer - Dear God, may all of us use this time to hear you with not only our ears, but with our hearts and minds as well. Remind us whether we say yes or we say no, there you are.

Message - I was a sophomore in high school. The bus was leaving for the Winter Choir Festival from the highschool parking lot at 5:30 a.m., to make the 2.5 hr drive. We had to be dressed and ready upon arrival, which meant I had to wake up with enough time to put on my concert attire, fix my hair and do what little make up I wore at the time. Did I say fix my hair? This was the 80's people - aquanet and big bangs was an art form! (picture)

I would continue with my story, but until you know which one is me, you won't listen anyway. Front row, left.

We arrived in time for our 9:00 performance slot at that year's music festival. The driver parked the bus, and we made our way off the bus and to the performance hall. The problem was we had a 5 minute walk to the building where we were performing. It was February, and in any other town this would not have been a big deal, but did I tell you where we were? Casper! The Chicago of Wyoming. A gas and oil town almost smack dab in the middle of the state where

the prairie winds constantly blew. Not a breeze, not a flutter - a wind. A constant, more than a draft but not quite gale force wind! And in the winter, it is often an up your dress, not enough aquanet, ruin your bangs kind of wind! It was always windy. It wasn't a pretty town either, at least I didn't think so then. It was all spread out and kind of barren. It was dusty and dry, no lush green parks, golf courses or anything.

The only saving grace to our now disheveled appearance was that everyone else had the same hair! The show must go on. We took the stage, sang and smiled and received a gold and a gold with distinction. As we gathered our belongings and made our 5 minute trek back across the wind blown tundra like campus, I turned to my good friend Beth and very clearly and with great passion declared, "There is no way I will ever go to college here."

What is they say? Never say never! Two years later I was enrolled and four years after that I was graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from, you got it, Casper College. Beth still reminds me what I said getting on the bus that day. And the wind is still blowing in Casper.

Over the years I have often thought of my statement to never attend college in Casper, Wy. With those thoughts I am constantly reminded how different my life would be had God not pursued and persuaded me to that place.

It was in Casper that I found a church and these people called American Baptists that welcomed me as a fairly new believer in Jesus and developed and

nurtured my understanding of scripture, community, service, spiritual growth, and vocational call. It was in Casper that I met a clergy couple, who showed me God is bigger than gender and relationships are bigger than expected traditional roles. It was in Casper I met Bob and Lois, who taught me faith is an adventure and life is a long lesson in loving, losing, seeking and finding God in our midst. I met Catie, who taught me not to be afraid of what was outside the box, and coloring outside the lines now and again was good for you. I met Helen who showed me there was joy to be found in ALL things and that included illness, tragedy, dysfunction, crisis and death. It was in Casper I was given a chance to test and explore my gifts and skills for pastoral ministry, and it was in Casper that I heard God's voice speaking through that never ending wind.

I have come to believe that had I stuck to my guns, dug my heels into the ground of my "no," I would have missed all the richness, growth, laughter, tears, healing, connections and community God knew was there for me. I would have missed two summers at Green Lake, WI (an American Baptist Conference Center), discerning God's vocational call on my life; meeting key denominational leaders, hearing incredible speakers, and meeting life long friends who influenced my decision to attend seminary. I might have missed seminary all together, which would have meant no first church in Terre Haute, Indiana. That would have meant no meeting Doug Rather, or taking him back to Wyoming with me, which is where we brought Isaac and Brayden into the world. There would have been no moving back to Indiana. which would have meant no interview with some Church called Grace looking for a children's director, no meeting with two men named Bob

Coleman and Andy Kinsey, leading of course to no offer to serve at a place called Grace United Methodist Church.

I didn't know it then but had I stuck to my no to Casper College, I would have said no to so many good and beautiful moments, people and experiences in my life. Had I stuck to my no to Casper College, I would have said no to what I have come to believe is God's road for my life. I would have been saying no to God.

It is a story we have all been a part of. We have all said no, not yet, or "I will never" and whether we knew it at the time or not, it was something God was working into the story of our lives and in turn the story of God's restoring love for humanity.

The next few weeks we will explore the life and lessons of one like us. One who said no to God - not with words but with his action. His name was Jonah and you may know his story, and yet over this series, we invite you to allow God's Spirit to teach something new. Something different. We invite you to look at the story piece by piece and see what God puts together.

Jonah was unlike any other prophet and his story is told unlike any other story. One of the twelve prophets, Jonah is atypical in the book of prophets. More reluctant than Amos, more fearful than Jeremiah, less confident than Hosea or Isaiah, Jonah was a prophet all to himself.

While others tell history and contain much biographical material, and stand firmly on Israelite soil proclaiming God's Word to God's chosen people, God had to chase Jonah a bit first. Then God told Jonah to speak God's Word in a foreign land to sworn enemies of God. It is a wild tale, with only a small portion being prophetic word and a large portion being a lesson in how God both pursues and persuades; never giving up and always using opportunities, moments and experiences in our lives to reveal God's presence and purpose...to reveal that place where worth and purpose reside. Our worth - God's purpose.

Let's begin then with the first piece - only three verses long. Chapter 1:1-3 Read text.

If you knew anything about Nineveh, you would run too. Nineveh was a long-time capital of the Assyrian empire - the largest empire ever to rule the Middle East in ancient times. At its largest, it stretched from Iran to Egypt and as far north as the Caucasus Mountains. It took three days just to walk across this massive powerhouse city.

Nineveh and its king were the most powerful political and military force in the known world of the time. As such it represented to Jews the cruelty of Assyrian warfare and iron rule. They were an evil, ruthless people. If you are Jonah - you might be thinking it's one thing to give my own people bad news of their behavior and God's expectations, but it's another to speak such truth to the enemy. Not the first place I would want to go.

Jonah gets a bad rap but if we are honest, I am certain, not many of us would have done any different than he did. That is why I think there is a Jonah in all of us, and we too run in the opposite direction sometimes.

Why do we say no to God? Perhaps we are afraid of what God is asking us to do or be? Maybe we fear failure, judgement, or criticism? We tell ourselves we don't have time, we aren't trained enough, we don't know enough. We tell others we are busy, it someone else's job, or its just not our thing. We may not run away to timbuktu Tarshish like Jonah and we may not physically run, but we run in other ways - emotionally, spiritually and even mentally turning our mental focus and energy elsewhere.

We say no for all kinds of reasons but mostly I think we say no because we are afraid to say yes. We are afraid to do what we know is good, true and beautiful in the eyes of God. We have been conditioned by culture, social norms, governments, institutions or even long standing good intentioned traditions - if they say no, we say no. We are afraid of how we might be perceived, treated, left out or labeled. We are afraid we might have it all wrong. We are afraid of being vulnerable with others and with ourselves. We are afraid of pressure and expectations. And so we say no.

No is easier. Yes is hard. No is safe. Yes is risky. No puts us in control. Yes puts God in control. No is small and manageable. Yes is big and colors outside the lines.

I invite you to think about what you are saying no to and by saying no what are you actually saying yes to. When we say no to God are we not saying yes to our selfishness, our limited understanding, and our narrow sighted perceptions? When we say no to the ways we are to treat others, those the bible calls our “neighbors;” the least, the last, the lost; the widows, orphans and children. When we say no to them, are we not saying yes to fear? Our fear of the other? Of what is different or unknown? When we say no to peace, forgiveness, and unity, are we not saying yes to division, hate, and shame? When we say no to surrendering all that we are to God, are we not saying yes to that which takes us farther and farther away from God?

I don't know **what** God is asking you to do with what you have, who you are, or where you are in your life. I don't know **where** God is asking you to go with your relationships, your vocation, your decisions, retirement, future, investments of time, money, and skills. I don't know **where** God is asking you to go with your heart, mind and soul. I don't know **how** God is calling for your attention, or asking for you to say yes, but I do know God **did not give up** on the prophet Jonah, nor does God give up on the Jonah residing in each one of us.

Wherever you are beloved, working on your yes or searching through your no, God will chase you - pursue and persuade you. Not as a threat or punishment, but because you have something valuable to offer. God has something to say through you and your life. God has a promise that is bigger than you but that needs you in order to be told.

It's time the Jonah in us stops running.

Oh, and in case you're wondering, the wind is still blowing in Casper Wyoming.

Amen

Resources Consulted:

Homeleticsonline.com

Sermoncentral.com