



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Who Will You Trust – Part 2”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Jonah 4

October 22, 2017

So, as many of you know, we spent last week on the first three of the four chapters of Jonah. We read each chapter, and then had a brief reflection on that section of the story.

We started with chapter one that tells us the story of Jonah being called, by God, to deliver that message of condemnation to the people of Ninevah – and his decision to run off to Tarshish instead of following God’s call. His ship is caught in a storm, the crew throws him overboard in order to save themselves, and Jonah ends up in the belly of that great fish. And we acknowledged, as we heard this story, how easy it is to run from God and the calls that God frequently places before us.

Then we moved on to chapter 2, that portion of the story in which Jonah was in the belly of the fish and suddenly ‘remembers’ God and God’s presence in his life. We were reminded, as Jonah was in that moment, that God never leaves us – we leave God. We were reminded that, in those moments in which it seems we are far apart from God, it is not because God has left, it is because we are living, in some way or another, as though God is not there. So, the questioned re-emerged, for Jonah and for us, whether or not we would follow God, or forget his presence once again.

In the third chapter we read of Jonah’s submission to God’s will, and his decision to go on to Ninevah and proclaim the judgment God had instructed. We also learned, however, that despite Jonah’s expectations, this message of damnation did not lead to the destruction of the city, but to its renewal and revival. And, with that, we closed our reflections last week, in this way:

“That’s why it is so hard to trust in God – because all too often our trust in God is contingent on our own understanding of where that will lead. But, what we fail to realize, is that what we really have, then, is not a trust in God at all, but a trust in ourselves. Think about it – if we trust in God only when it leads where we want it to lead (when we trust in God only when the decisions are ones that make sense to us) we’re not trusting in God at all, we’re trusting in ourselves. And, more often than not, that is

exactly it works. We'll gladly follow God, if we can understand and agree with where that path is taking us.

But, when we can move past that, when we can trust in God and God alone, we will find that it never quite works out the way we thought it would, and the challenges we expected won't be nearly what we had foreseen. God can work wonderful and unimaginable things through us when we trust. Jonah fought for understandable reasons, but when he trusted he learned that everything he expected was mistaken and that God was working for the good all along. That's the trust to which we're called – not to follow when we know it will be OK, but to trust even when it makes no sense, and to follow into the deepest challenges with a faith that God will reveal a greater end than we'd ever imagined or understood.

So, with that context in place, I move on to the fourth and final chapter of the book of Jonah.

Jonah 4

Jonah's Anger at the Lord 's Compassion

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for 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 And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10 Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Reflection: Who Will You Trust

And we thought we were done. I decided to hold off on this final reflection, last week, not only for the sake of time, but because I wanted us to be able to resonate, for a week, with the story as it stood. The story would wrap up so beautifully with a wonderfully happy ending if it would just end in that third chapter. Jonah fought God, he ran from God, he remembered God, he followed God, and God, through Jonah's eventual faithfulness, saved a city. What a wonderful scene – the flowers are blooming, the birds are singing, the children are dancing in the street and songs of merriment seem to be ringing magically from the air as the curtains draw slowly to close over the inspirational story of the human tendency to run from God and the Divine ability to make miracles of our trust and faith. I stopped at this point, last week, because I think that's often how the story is portrayed. It is certainly the nature of the Sunday school version of the tale. But, in truth, it doesn't end that way. In truth, there's a whole additional chapter here that takes us right back to what this whole thing has been about the entire time – trust and control.

You'd think, as we concluded the third chapter and the city had been saved, that Jonah would be relieved. You'd think he'd be praising God for the manner in which God turned a faithless city to devotion. You'd think he'd be happy that the end result from which he'd run – the thing he never wanted to be a part of in the first place – didn't come to fruition. You'd think Jonah would be doing cartwheels in the grassy meadows as he celebrates the fact that his condemnation of the city led to reformation and not destruction. But, he's not. In fact, Jonah's not only upset, he's ticked. He's angry! Jonah's not happy, or relieved, or thankful, or anything of a thousand other positive and joyous emotions you would anticipate. Jonah's mad that God didn't do what Jonah thought was going to be done. Jonah ran from God because he didn't want to be part of God destroying the city, and now Jonah is angry at God for not destroying the city! And, right there (in this sneaky sly little way), we're back where this began.

It turns out, in this fourth chapter, that Jonah didn't trust in God with the open and willing faith God wants from us. It turns out that, despite how the story is so often portrayed, Jonah didn't follow God with a trust in the fundamental truth that God was working a greater and more powerful purpose. It turns out that Jonah didn't trust in God at all. Jonah trusted in himself.

Think about it! This all started because Jonah had formalized an expectation of how things would go, and decided that he didn't want to be a part of it – so he ran off to Tarshish. It then led to a point (as he took up residence in the belly of a great fish) in which he realized that he had no choice but to follow God and so he did – he prayed to God and made his way to Ninevah. But, even as he followed, he still remained in the grasp of his understanding of what was happening and his expectation of what the end result was going to be. And, then, when his faith did not lead to his expected result, he got mad at God. Try to grasp the hypocrisy in that! Jonah ran at first because he didn't want to be a part of this city being destroyed, and now he's mad in the end because the city was saved.

So, think about it. What is it that Jonah is really upset about? What is it, truly, that has Jonah so angry at the God who just saved this city he never wanted destroyed in the first place? The answer? Jonah finally realizes that he wasn't in control all along – and that ticks him off.

This whole story is about trust and control. We can't have one without letting go of the other. We can't truly place our trust in God if we don't let go of our control (or, in other words, our trust in ourselves). This entire story, Jonah has been fighting to keep control. And, what we learn in this fourth chapter is that, even when he appeared to trust, he was still attempting to maintain control.

- He ran from God in an attempt to control what would happen to that city.
- When he learned that he could not control what would happen to the city, he followed God in an effort to control what would happen in his own life.
- In submitting, however, he now believed he once again had control over what would happen to the city and his own life. His words would bring wrath upon the people, and his obeying God would bring blessings to his life.
- Then, when God saved the people of Ninevah, Jonah realized he never had any control at all, and in the face of that truth he decided he'd rather die than live.

That, my friends, is one of the core battles of faithful living – a constant discord between our desire to maintain our control over life, and the call to place our utmost trust in God. No matter how it may appear along the way, a moment will come in which we simply cannot have both. And, that is the fundamental truth that I think Jonah's story displays.

Earlier this week I was on a conference call for the Board of Directors of our National Association, and someone alluded to a picture of Roy Rogers standing up as he rode two horses – one foot firmly planted on each, living in constant hope and prayer that those two horses continue down the same path! I was taken by that image, because I think that is how we live so much of our lives. We firmly plant our feet on the two horses – one grounded in God's will and longing for our lives and the other fully entrenched in the control and direction we set for ourselves – living in constant hope and prayer that those two horses continue to run in stride. There's a moment that comes, however, in which they simply won't run in unison anymore, and we will have to make that leap to either one or the other.

I would suggest that Jonah is not necessarily the heroic exemplar of faithfulness he is often made out to be. I would contend that he never does quite let go of the control he sought to have in his life. But, I would also suggest that we can learn a lot from this man who battled the same human tendencies we all face every day. If we hold on to control, we trust in ourselves. When we trust in God, we let go and allow God to work in ways we cannot foresee and cannot understand. And, while the choice in our lives may not save a city or land us in the belly of a fish, the decision is equally profound.

It will not always be easy, and we will not always succeed, but take a page from a lesson learned the hard way by a man named Jonah, and ask yourself a question. You can't forever put your trust in both yourself and in God – Jonah makes that clear. There will come a time in which the horses will split and you will have to make a choice! So, if you have to choose, which one will it be?