

# “Here I am Lord, Don’t Send Me”

January 21, 2018  
Jonah 3 & 4

Rev. Kimberly Heath  
Wall Street United Church

The book of Jonah is a curious book. Anybody who thinks that the main characters of the Bible are all good, faithful, godly people, has only to look at Jonah to see how far from those qualities some of them are.

Jonah is a prophet, which simply means he was a person who could hear God’s voice clearly. Now let me stop right there and point out that with any gift comes responsibility. That was true in the Old Testament and it is true today: with any gift comes responsibility. The responsibility of the prophet, who hears God’s voice clearly, is to share God’s message and words with the rest of us, who seem to have our ears stuffed with cotton balls when it comes to hearing the voice of God. Jonah has the gift. He has the gift in spades. He knows exactly what God wants him to do, exactly what God wants him to say. But folks, he has almost zero sense of responsibility. He can hear God’s voice, but he’s not interested in sharing it, especially if he doesn’t agree with what he’s heard.

In this case God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh to speak to the people, warning them of their wicked ways. But Jonah hates the Ninevites, and figures they deserve what’s coming to them. So, instead of going north and east to Nineveh, he goes south and west to Joppa, to catch a boat and sail as far west as he possibly can—even to the ends of the earth.

Jonah should have known that wouldn’t work — you can run, but you can’t hide from God. Psalm 139 says:

*“Where could I go to escape from your Spirit? If I were to climb up to the highest heavens, you would be there. If I were to dig down to the world of the dead you would also be there. Suppose I had wings like the dawning day and flew across the ocean. Even then your powerful arm would guide and protect me.”*

Jonah was clearly not reading his Bible enough, or he would have known that the escape across the ocean technique wouldn’t work. A storm whipped up. When the people on the ship found out that the reason for the storm was Jonah and his attempt to run away from God, they reluctantly threw him overboard, at Jonah’s own insistence. Then God sent a big fish to swallow him. Jonah spends three days in the fish thinking and writing poetry—well, what would you do??

Incidentally, the time that Jonah spends in the belly of the fish is symbolic of those times of waiting, those in-between times that we often

find ourselves in. It is a time that doesn't feel very productive, but it is. It's a time of waiting; it's a time of reflecting; it's a time of imperceptible growth. It's not a comfortable time . . . it's not a time or place where anyone wants to be for long, but it is nevertheless an important time in our lives. If you are in one of those places, trust that you will move through it and that it will bring you deeper and help you to go farther. It probably felt like forever to Jonah. But even though he wasn't at all aware of it, that time was critical in getting him to where he was supposed to be — Nineveh. In this case the fish physically brings him to Nineveh—but it also prepares him to do what he previously was running from.

When the fish projectile-vomits him up on the beach back closer to Nineveh, Jonah decides to go to Nineveh after all.

Once in Nineveh, he walks across town preaching his half-hearted message: “30 Days and Nineveh will be no more”. But God blesses that sermon. That's the cool thing. When God gives you a gift along with the responsibility to use it, God is the one who empowers it. God gives you the car and wants you to drive it, but he's going to fill the tank and pave the road. Although we want to share our gifts to the best of our ability, because we are not perfect and because God has a need, God will bless the gift even if our attempts are more pathetic than polished. So God blesses Jonah's sad little sermon and every person in Nineveh, including the King, repents—they turn away from their wrongdoing, and God spares and blesses Nineveh.

Incidentally, centuries later, Jesus would hold up the people of Nineveh as an example. In Matthew 12:41 he is talking to the Pharisees and scribes and he has some harsh words for them and for “this current generation”. He reminds them that when Jonah preached, the people of Nineveh repented. Then Jesus says in a great understatement: “*Something greater than Jonah is here!*” He says that the people of Nineveh would rise up and judge those who had Jesus in their midst and yet rejected him and did not repent.

After the people of Nineveh repent, our mediocre prophet goes up to a hill and sulks because he knew that this would happen. He knew God was merciful and loving and forgiving and giving... and boy, did that tick Jonah right off!

In the end, I believe that Jonah's problem was that he was selfish. His focus was almost entirely on himself — on what he wanted and on what he believed. He didn't care too much about anyone else. In the end Jonah was more interested in himself than he was in God. As Jonah is sulking, God provides a bush to give him shade. Now that Jonah feels comfortable, he is

reasonably happy, but the next day a worm destroys the bush and Jonah is left hot and uncomfortable and really angry. God calls him on it and says “You’re upset about a plant that grew yesterday and died today, and you don’t think I should care about the lives of 100,000 men, women, children and their animals? Come on buddy, work with me!”

But it’s not just Jonah, is it? If we’re honest we’ll admit that we too can be pretty selfish. We too tend to major in the minors and sweat the small stuff. We get upset when the line isn’t clear at the Tim Horton’s and someone who came in after us is served before us. We get upset when someone is driving too slowly in front of us and we’re in a hurry, and we get upset when someone behind us is driving too fast and we want to take our time. We get upset when the music is too old or too new, when someone calls too late or doesn’t call at all. We complain when it’s too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, too many or too few, too red or too blue. *(I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them Sam-I-am, I will not eat them with a goat, I will not eat them on a boat. I will not eat them here or there, I will not eat them anywhere!)*

It is natural to be selfish because we can only truly feel our own pain, our own joys. We can sympathize but in the end, I am me and you are you and you’ll never truly feel what I feel and I’ll never truly feel what you feel. Part of growing up is learning to care about people and things that are not you. Part of growing in our relationship with God is learning to care about what God cares about.

Do you know what God cares about most? People. Sounds a little simple I know, but it’s not. A lot of the time it’s not what we care most about.

Paul said in his letter to the Philippians: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!”*

Our goal as Christians is to be more and more like Jesus. You know that Wall Street has a special heart for the work of the charity *Our Kenyan Kids*. I remember a while back hearing about a man named Pilot who has a mission to the grandmothers in one of the worst slums in the world. Why grandmothers? In Kenya and other parts of Africa many are

looking after their grandchildren because so many of the parents of the children have died from AIDS. Pilot visits and encourages the grandmothers and tries to arrange for food, and they come together for mutual support. When one of the members of the team asked him why he started this mission, his reply was “Well, my name is Pilot, so I knew I had to lead”. And then he said “And besides, my wife and I were not busy on Sunday afternoons so we thought we should do something to help”. The man works 6 days a week, attends a three-hour church service on Sunday morning, but with the “free” time he has Sunday afternoons he starts a mission that is making a huge difference. Talk about someone who has a high sense of responsibility for the gifts he has been given—he even takes responsibility for the gift of the name he was given. Incredible! Do you have any idea what our world would be like if even a tenth of us took that kind of responsibility for the gifts we’ve been given?

I have been a bit of a reluctant leader myself. Last April when our district, the Bay of Quinte Conference, was meeting here at our church for their annual meeting, I felt the call to put my name forward for President of the Conference. I said at the time that the call was like a dandelion seed. No one had put their name forward for the position, and someone commented on what a gift it would be if I let my name stand. I laughed and didn’t think anything more of it.

I say it was like a dandelion seed, because it floated beautifully and innocently until it landed gently on my shoulder. But then overnight it was like a 5-foot tap root had rooted itself in my heart. I could not deny the call, but as it was a big decision, I had several conversations with saints of the church. One key one was my father, who himself had been President of the Conference while he served as the Senior Pastor of this church. I ended up putting my name forward and I was elected President Designate. This coming April when the Conference meets in Napanee, I will become the President. I don’t fully understand the call, and I have to admit that I questioned it more than once, but each time I questioned it, I have experienced a deep reassurance that I am indeed called.

Our denomination is in a time of massive change and restructuring. And it’s not really happy restructuring either — it comes from not having enough money or people to sustain the system we currently have. This will be hard on the church. I don’t fully understand how I can help, but I know I have the gifts of faith and discernment, and I believe that a big part of my role will be showing people where Jesus is in the middle of the change and stress.

I am aware that my call becomes your call. In the same way that we rose to the challenge to offer our gifts to the wider church by hosting the Conference Meeting, you are going to be sharing me this year with the wider church. You may find yourself reluctantly sharing as well. But I tell you Wall Street — we have gifts to share! I am connected with ministers across this country. I know how churches are struggling. I know how so many have lost their sense of purpose, their faith in following Jesus, and the will to reach out with the love of God. I want to encourage you to pray for the United Church of Canada and just plain for the Canadian Church.

I tell you, the need is great. We know that — we see the need in and around our church all the time. Did you hear that the government of the United Kingdom has appointed a Minister of Loneliness?! It is certainly a sign of how bad things are. I'd be willing to bet the need is just as great here in Canada. The Church is perfectly positioned to do something. Connecting people is our business. We connect people to one another and to God. We sure don't do it perfectly and there is whole lot of room for improvement, but the need and the calling are there.

You know, the cool thing about the story of Jonah is that even though he is reluctant and not the best prophet in the pack, God still uses him. Why? Because he loves Jonah even with all his faults, and because he loves so much the people of Nineveh—the need is so great, that God will use even the least of us.

We are called to love and lead people into a transforming relationship with Jesus. That means the people in our community, who come through our church doors lonely, hurting and seeking; and that also means the people thousands of miles away who we don't know or understand—but God does. And when God says "Go", we need to go! Remember it is God who fills our tank. May we have the courage to say: 'Here I am. Send me!' Thanks be to God.