

"RUNNING FROM GOD"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Every once in a while you come across a story in the papers that makes you wonder where we're going. Here's one from a paper down in Kentucky. It seems that a youth pastor was charged with calling in a bomb threat to a Kentucky church where he was scheduled to preach one Sunday evening. The young pastor said that he made the call in the early evening of that Sunday because he wasn't prepared for the eight o'clock service. He told the police that he had called 911 from the church about six thirty that night and told the dispatcher there was a bomb in the church.

"When questioned, he was cooperative and told us he had made the call", replied a State Trooper.

The church was quickly evacuated and a police search revealed no bomb. However the eight o'clock service was canceled. This young man had been serving as the youth pastor for over two years, according to a statement made by the Senior Pastor. He had delivered sermons before, but this time he was not prepared.

When I read the article my reaction was..."He did what? He called in a bomb threat because he wasn't prepared to preach?" Now, if I had been the Senior Pastor I think I would have told him it was time to start revising his resume... but then again I suppose every pastor has been tempted to do something drastic like that. My guess is that many a teacher and many a lawyer and many a sales person when he or she has a presentation to make for which he or she is not fully prepared has been tempted. Sometimes when we're not really prepared, when we're not on top of something or feeling comfortable about it...we'll go to some pretty desperate extremes. Perhaps even fake an illness....call in sick,....

JONAH'S PROBLEM

I wonder if the Old Testament prophet, Jonah, thought of calling in a bomb threat? I doubt it....first of all, of course, there were no telephones and for that matter no bombs, too, in his day. Timers were simpler then, but the problems were the same as today...but they all had their roots in human nature.

Jonah's problem was that he didn't want to do what God was asking him to do. God, you may recall from your Sunday School lessons, wanted him to go and to preach to the people of Nineveh and Jonah didn't want to go. I understand that and the chances are that you do, too. There are things God wants us to do and sometimes we have difficulty motivating ourselves to do them.

Some are tempted to say, "Oh...if only I knew what God's will is for my life"....sorry, but I doubt if that's the real problem. The real problem has to do with motivating ourselves to do the things we already know God wants us to do.

I think you'll appreciate this story. Judge Woodrow Seal, a United States District Court Judge, founded what is known as "The Society of St. Stephen" in our Methodist Church. Some of you are familiar with it. It has become a national program with the sole purpose of helping people in need. One day a church invited the Judge to come and explain to the congregation how they might start such a program in their church....a Society of St. Stephen. He accepted the invitation. The plan was for him to speak on the various ministries the Society was engaging in and then following his presentation, there would be time for questions....and discussion....and comments...and shared experiences...stuff like that. Lots of talk.

While the people were gathering, taking their seats...the minister began to introduce Judge Seal and the work of the Society...he took his time as the usual latecomers came in...meanwhile the Judge took some cookies and poured himself a cup of coffee. When the introduction was completed, Judge Seal walked over to the piano, put his coffee cup on top of it, and began to fumble in his coat pockets. Finally, he pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper and from it he read the name of a mother and her four children, including their ages and clothing sizes and location.

He noted several other needs that this particular family had and said that the address was on the paper and he laid it on top of the piano. The Judge then quietly said,

"If you want to start a Society of St. Stephen, then you should contact this woman by eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. If you are not able to help her, don't worry.....I'll be in contact with her tomorrow, and get help for her by mid-afternoon."

And with that - believe it or not - the Judge remarked in a soft voice,

"Now, forgive me.....but I really must be going.
Thank you for inviting me....and for the coffee".

And with that he walked out the door. It all took place in less than five minutes. You see Judge Seal wasn't content to just sit around helplessly waiting for God to give him some direction. He knew what God wanted him to do. He knew what God wanted that church to do. In other words, the problem is not the lack of knowledge....but it is lack of action. There have been those times when I have seen and have sensed that this is a problem with some of you. We can spend a lot of time talking...making plans and strategizing...getting it all down on paper...getting people involved and "in the loop"....spending money and calling meetings. Oh, for a bit of personal responsibility and a bit of action.

I can tell you right now if you are a married person that God wants you to be a better husband or wife. If you have children, God wants you to be a better father or mother. I can tell you without much agonizing on my part that God wants you to improve your witness in the community and to share your abundance with others. God wants you to be a vital and responsible part of the life of this church. Most of us already know what God's will for us is. The problem is surrendering ourselves to what God wants us to do.

Jonah knew what God wanted him to do. God wanted Jonah to conduct some revival services in Nineveh, but he really didn't want to. He wanted Jonah to go and tell the people of Ninevah to "shape up or ship out". It's the kind of message I need to preach to some of you. It's true. There are messages I probably ought to preach...messages about how we are treating the poor, messages about spouse abuse, messages on the dangers of materialism or alcohol. These are just a few of the sermon topics I should touch on from time to time, but frankly, I hesitate to do so....for I don't want to sound accusatory. I want to emphasize the positive...."accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative" as the song use to go.

Growing churches today are consumer oriented. That is, they focus on meeting the needs of people and not challenging them to mission and ministry and to high level responsibility and stewardship.

So, put this down first then...that Jonah knew what God wanted him to do. Knowing God's will was not the problem. It never is. Doing God's will is the problem.

JONAH DECIDES TO RUN

And Jonah decides to run. Maybe today Jonah would be tempted to call in a bomb threat, but back then... lacking both a telephone and a bomb, he decides to escape...to get on a ship headed in the opposite direction from Ninevah, a ship bound for Tarshish. The author of this little book tells us that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord - and he was not the first, nor the last to do this.

Back in my college days, as a philosophy major, I was introduced to the lives and the writing of many great philosophers from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle and Heraclitus and others) right down to some of the great German thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries (Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and others). The life of Friedrich Nietzsche fascinated me. I remember once reading that Nietzsche was a talented man, a brilliant man whose writings would come to influence many people, including Adolph Hitler. He was born in 1844, about seven years after this church was founded. He was a man who also ran from God.

It's been said that as a boy, Nietzsche could read aloud from his Bible with such solemnity that listeners were brought to tears. But at the age of 18, he rejected the faith of his deeply religious mother. His imagination was captured by troops of cavalry passing through town on the way to war. Life should not be merely a struggle for existence, he concluded. It must be:

"A WILL to WAR. A WILL to POWER. A WILL to OVERPOWER."

And Nietzsche tried to compensate for a tender, overly sensitive nature by idealizing the values of honor, bravery, manhood, pride and power. He slowly began to despise Christianity as a religion of pity and weakness. It was he who concocted the philosophy of the "Superman". According to Nietzsche, the strong not only have a right but they have a duty to trample the weak. This new kind of man was to thrive as a powerful elite, a master race living "beyond good and evil". And in his more exalted moments, Nietzsche predicted that, in the future, history would one day be divided into "Before Nietzsche" and "After Nietzsche".

Things, of course, didn't quite work out that way. The philosopher's mind began to break down. His health slowly deteriorated. He began losing his sight. Paranoid delusions of grandeur and persecution haunted him. And finally friends had to commit Nietzsche to an insane asylum.

At this the darkest hour of the philosopher's life, his mother re-entered his life once again. She had heard about her son's desperate straits and came to the asylum to claim him. For decades she had patiently borne the strain of his apostasy. Her son had rejected everything she had held dear. His voice, which once read the Scriptures so movingly, now ranted incoherent Dionysian poetry. But she received him into her arms and devoted the rest of her life to the care of this broken, helpless superman who had run not only away from her, but from his faith...from God as well.

Jonah was not the first to run from God, nor will he be the last. And neither was Nietzsche. There are people who run from God. Some run to a bottle of booze, some to drugs. Francis Thompson, one hundred years ago, ran from God...into opium.

Some of you are familiar with his autobiographical poem, The Hound of Heaven. Remember those opening lines....penned about a hundred years ago....

"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 -

'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

Some run to lives of tedious mediocrity with no great purpose driving their gifted lives. Some run to politics or to even self-satisfied religions and maybe to churches that do not require them to heed the problems of the world around them.

And some may run to the lakes and the mountains and the ski slopes at different times of the year, but the result is always the same. There is little or not permanent satisfaction away from God and the things of God. We are spiritual beings making a pilgrimage through a non-spiritual world. Jonah found that he could run to the ends of the earth or even to the bottom of the ocean in the belly of a great fish, but without God....without God he would never find what he needed the most - and neither will we.

NO SATISFACTION AWAY FROM GOD

This leads us then to the final thought of another three-pointer "from downtown". And it is simple this, there is no satisfaction away from God. Back there in the 4th century, Augustine put it this way, "Our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee". "Thou hast formed us for Thyself....and our hearts...."

The Rolls Royce came to a screeching stop on a "skid-row" street. A well-dressed woman got out and rushed into a dilapidated hotel nearby. Pausing for a moment at the desk, she asked out a certain man who was staying there. Given his room number, she hurriedly made her way to the door...impervious to the stares of the other residents of this run-down establishment. She courageously opened the door where she found a dissipated man lying on a ripped mattress on a rusty iron bed. The man was her husband.

He had been born into an iron worker's family. Totally undistinguished as a young person, somehow he had squaked into the State College where he had met this coed from a very well-to-do family. Despite their differences, they had become close friends and the friendship led to being more than just friends. Finally he was emboldened to seek her hand in marriage and she accepted...with ecstasy!

But there's more...

He proved to be acceptable to her family and he joined the family business where he did well, but despite the ensuing success, he began to have doubts about himself...and to whether he really belonged in such a world and whether he really deserved the success that was coming his way. His lack of self-worth was complicated by a growing attachment to alcohol and thus began a slow but steady and tragic slide that caused him to conclude that everyone would be much better off without him. Eventually he ended up...diseased and pretty much all alone.

Word of his problems had somehow gotten to his wife and she made this trip to find him dying. And hugging the fallen man to her breast, she wept...and kept repeating over and over,

"Ronnie...Ronnie....I've always loved you!
Why....why couldn't you believe me?"

Why couldn't he believe her? What was he running from? And why are we running? Is it because we feel unworthy of God's great love? Or is it that we are afraid that God is going to ask us to do something we do not want to do? Do we not know that we cannot run from God? That is one of the lessons we learn from Jonah's life story. There is no running from God. God is our natural home. We are spiritual beings making our way through a non-spiritual world. Remember how a few years ago the Archdiocese of this city went to great expense around Christmas to have several posters placed in subway entrances inviting people to "Come Home" at Christmas. Remember some of the others...."Feeling Lost? Follow ThreeWise Men". And always try to remember that "U-Turns" are permitted on God's Highway. Do not wait for God to come looking for you....

On December 25th we celebrated the birth of a child. Yesterday, on January 25th, the Christian Church paused to remember and to celebrate the life of St. Paul. "The Re-birth of a Man". Yes, Paul found God on the Damascus Road and he made that U-Turn. You can't run from God. Sooner or later, He catches up with you. God is the source of joy, love and peace and without Him, there is no happiness.

The prophet Jeremiah lived in a time much like our own, a time when people had lost their hold and their grasp on God. Jeremiah wrote,

"A voice on the bare heights is heard....the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons...because they have perverted their way...they have forgotten the Lord, their God. 'Return, O faithless sons and I will heal your faithlessness.....'"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, once again, O God. Wrestle with us in overcoming the darker impulses of our souls and bring us home to You, the source of all joy, peace and love. Heal our faithlessness and restore unto us the joy of Your touch of salvation. In the name and spirit of the "life-bringer", Jesus Christ, we now pray. Amen.