

Third Weekend After Epiphany (B/RCL): “We Can’t Flee Far or Fast Enough to Elude the Lord”
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
January 20-21, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

41 years ago this Sunday, Jan. 21, 1977, President Jimmy Carter on his first day in office pardoned hundreds of thousands of draft dodgers. I was in grammar school during the 1960’s, when the Vietnam War was raging and so were anti-war protests. For those of you weren’t born yet or were too young to remember, this “police action” in Southeast Asia (never formally declared a war) was widely unpopular. Young men were being drafted to serve. Tens of thousands fled to Canada; many, many more simply failed to register; and some burnt their draft cards at demonstrations, chanting something along the lines of “Heck, no, we won’t go!” Many ended up being arrested. To facilitate national healing, Jimmy Carter pardoned all.

The men who fled, who voted with their feet and headed north to Canada, had something in common with the prophet Jonah in today’s first lesson. Like the federal government, God had earlier commanded Jonah, “**Go** at once....” (Jonah 1:2), and instead of obeying “Jonah **set out to flee...** from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3). Good luck with that. It’s a lot easier to evade the Selective Service System than to slip through the net God throws over us, as the story of Jonah shows!

The psalmist realized that. In last week’s Celebrate we found one of the most beautiful of all psalms, Psalm 139.

*⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence.
⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

*¹⁰ Even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

I had just gotten out of college when the talk about drafting women ramped up; I was afraid. I remember calling my big sister who served in the Air Force, in tears. She exerted tough love and told me to suck it up and step up to the plate, if the time came. I didn't want to go because I was frightened. That wasn't Jonah's reason.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jews **hated** Assyrians. Assyria had invaded the northern part of Israel and hauled away **many** of the people into captivity, never to return. There were originally 12 tribes of Israel. There ended up being two. Ten tribes were "lost," thanks to the Assyrians. Jonah didn't **want** to go to Nineveh, name its wickedness and threaten its destruction if the Ninevites didn't shape up. He didn't want to because it might actually work. They might listen and repent; God might relent. And darn it, they didn't **deserve** God's mercy! At least, as far as Jonah was concerned.

So Jonah voted with his feet, kinda like those folks who went to Canada. He didn't go immediately to Nineveh, as God commanded. He headed in the opposite direction. But he couldn't go far enough or fast enough to elude the Lord. (We can't, either.)

Here's the story in shorthand: Jonah gets on a ship to sail far, far away. But God sends a storm. The other sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard. God sends a very large fish that swallows him. It's like a mini-submersible, saving Jonah from drowning. Biding his time in the fish's belly, Jonah **pleads** for the mercy he's so convinced the Ninevites don't deserve. God hears. After three days the big fish coughs up Jonah like a fur ball onto the beach. God tells him **again** to go to Nineveh. **This** time he obeys.

Sort of. Jonah is the least motivated of any prophet I can think of. He puts forth a minimum of effort. The city is a three day walk across. Jonah walks as far as he can go in **one** day

and says what amount to **five** words in Hebrew. Then he heads for the hills to wait and see what'll happen.

Jonah is **not** a nice man. I described him in my Bible study notes as an “unlikable, judgmental, holier-than-thou son-of-a-seacook” (as my Uncle Hal would say). Which just goes to show how judgmental **I** am! I'm thinking, “Do you know, Jonah, how fortunate you are that you got a **direct** message from God what to do? Why didn't you just **do** it?? The **first** time?? Here we are, trying to sort out what God's will is, wishing we could be sure we knew....” And then I realize: okay, we **do** have ten commandments. They tell us pretty clearly what God's will is. And I **still** have a hard time toeing the line. And there are times I've consciously headed in the opposite direction of where God wanted me to go. Because I was so sure **I** knew better. Because I was **afraid** doing God's will would make me miserable. Instead of realizing that doing God's will is the only path to happiness, not to mention holiness.

There are times in all our lives when we've been hell-bent on **having** it our own way, **doing** it our way. We think that at some point we'll join Frank Sinatra center stage and proudly belt out, “I did it my way!” How'd that work out for you?? Not so well for me. Thank heaven, I've always ended up being redirected. But like Jonah, thrown overboard and then swallowed and vomited up by a fish, it hasn't been easy or pretty in the 'tween times between my attempt to elude the Lord and the Lord's catching up with me again.

We can't flee far or fast enough to elude the Lord. But we can waste a lot of precious time, and have a hard time of it, running away from our deepest, healthiest self, as well as from the Lord.

Do you know the poem “The Hound of Heaven” by Francis Thompson? It begins:

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... 5
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
 But with unhurrying chase, 10
 And unperturbèd pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat—and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet—
 ‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.’

The poem ends:

How little worthy of any love thou art!
 Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
 Save Me, save only Me? 170
 All which I took from thee I did but take,
 Not for thy harms,
 But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
 All which thy child's mistake
 Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home: 175
 Rise, clasp My hand, and come!
 Halts by me that footfall:
 Is my gloom, after all,
 Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

We can run, but we can't hide. And why **would** we? If we could but trust that ours is: "*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*" (Jonah 4:2), we would "flee" **toward** rather than **away** from Him. That's where **we** find abundant life, full pardon, the mercy we deserve no more than the Ninevites, the mercy we sometimes begrudge others.... Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham