

One day long ago, God's Word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer." But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish - as far away from God as he could get.

But God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering. The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, "What's this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we're in trouble and rescue us." Then the sailors said to one another, "Let's get to the bottom of this. Let's draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who's responsible for this disaster." So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

Then they grilled him: "Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?" He told them, "I'm a Hebrew. I worship God, the God of heaven who made sea and land." At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, "What on earth have you done!" As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from God. They said to him, "What are we going to do with you - to get rid of this storm?" By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control.

Jonah said, "Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It's all my fault. I'm the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you'll get rid of the storm." But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging. Then they prayed to God, "O God! Don't let us drown because of this man's life, and don't blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best." They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down. The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows. Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish's belly three days and nights. Jonah 1

We just heard the shofar, which is heard at synagogue celebrations and on high holy days...as a call to be mindful of God's presence. We don't know what the call sounded like that Jonah received from God, but that Jonah heard it, and ignored it. This short and improbable story from the Hebrew Scriptures should not be ignored by us because of those things - that it's short and improbable - or because it's been relegated to a children's story of a man who lived in the belly of a big fish for three days. Jonah's story is relevance to us as God's people, and as followers of Jesus Christ. This faith-story was known to Jesus, who compared Himself to Jonah, when speaking of His own three days in the belly of death. Our Jewish brothers and sisters hear the shofar, and the story of Jonah, on Rosh Hashanah which is the Jewish New Year and the birthday of the universe; and on Yom Kippur which is the Day of Atonement, the day of repentance. We heard the shofar and the first chapter of Jonah's story today as a call to be mindful of God at work in our lives. Christian spirituality is more than a set of beliefs.... It's how we live in the world and how we practice our faith. The call to follow Jesus is hard, and we need all the help we can get. Help comes to us today from a prophet named Jonah. That help comes from three lessons from the first chapter of Jonah's story.

You might want to write these lessons down. They're short. **The first is: God provides. The second is: God loves all. The third is: God persists.**

Next week we'll have a fabulous visual in the form of a giant whale that's now in the church office, and the reason that it's not in here today is because Jonah's story in the belly of the fish is not today, but next Sunday. Today is about the call Jonah received from God to go to Ninevah, "To that great city, and cry out against it" the Lord said to Jonah, "for their wickedness has come up before Me." Ninevah was the capitol of Assyria, who was known for their brutality, and was responsible for the annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel. Ninevah was mentioned by the prophet Nahum as a place of wickedness and godlessness. Jonah had no desire to go to this sinful city, about 60 miles away and a three-day walk, and tell them to repent.

A call from God can take different forms. Sometimes God's call is referred to as "nudges and warnings of the Holy Spirit." Coincidence, and conscience, and gut-feelings are also used to describe God's call. Because God's call to us is rarely auditory it can be tempting to ignore... or easy to ignore. Paying attention to the "nudges and warnings" and obeying them is

a means of sharpening your sensitivity to God's call... and you're more likely to hear God's voice if you're being mindful.

The first lesson for us from Jonah is that God provides. God saw a place of violence and evil and it broke God's heart. All through the Hebrew Scriptures God used prophets to call people to faithfulness, to obedience, and to experience God's love and mercy. God called Jonah to provide a message to the Ninevites to repent, to turn around and follow the Lord. Jonah disobeyed God's call and boarded a ship headed for Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction of Ninevah. But God called Jonah to go to Ninevah, and so God "provided" a violent storm which threatened the boat and the lives of the crew. (And while it isn't part of my theology that God sends storms and heartache and tragedy... in a humorous way God did provide this storm, because God wasn't going to let Jonah get away. And no one was hurt in this storm; when it suddenly ended the crew were amazed and praised God.)

While Jonah was sleeping through the storm, the crew "cast lots" which was like throwing dice or flipping a coin to make a decision, in order to find out who on board was responsible for the wrath of a god. When he was awakened, Jonah admitted that he was running away the God of Heaven who made both the sea and land. The crew were terrified when Jonah

admitted responsibility for the storm. He suggested to them that they throw him overboard to quiet the storm. First the sailors tried to row back to shore, and only after the storm worsened did they throw Jonah overboard, with a prayer for him. Jonah ignored God's call but these pagan sailors recognized God in the calming of the storm. And then God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah to keep him from drowning in the sea.

The first lesson from Jonah is: **God provides.** [Even if you didn't write it down say it with me, to help you remember: **God provides.**] Often when the path ahead or the decision to be made is too difficult or too painful it's easy to feel alone and abandoned, or overwhelmed, or frozen with dread and fear. These are the times it's good to know this story of Jonah, and to know that God provides. God provides friends. God provides counselors. God provides a community of love and support. God provides a place for you to belong, and meaningful service for you to do. We'll see in Jonah's story that God has a sense of humor... and it might not be that everything that God provides is what you'd ask for, but the fact is: God provides for you.

Christmas is in the rearview mirror but the Baby who was born to Mary and Joseph and laid in a manger was called Emmanuel, and it means God-with-us. God has provided us a Savior, a Friend, and a Presence, who is

always with us. Someone gave me a plaque for Christmas that says, “Count your blessings, count them one by one.” God provides more blessings than you can count. Counting your blessings might be a way to remember that God provides.

The second lesson from Jonah’s story is: **God loves all.** [Even if you didn’t write this down, say it with me to help you remember: **God loves all.**] One year for Christmas I gave Mimi and David and Nikita matching shirts that said, “Mom loves me best.” I thought it was a great, funny gift but none of them got the joke. Deep in the human psyche, I think, is our desire to be the one who is most loved, the most special. Do you know that saying, “God loves you but I’m His favorite”? Because we work at being good, at being holy and right with God, I think we naturally want to believe that we are God’s favorite. We want to believe that God plays favorites. It’s what Jonah wanted to believe. God loved the Israelites, and not the Assyrians. We’ll hear, next week, Jonah justifying himself to God about why he ignored God’s call and boarded a boat to Tarshish. Jonah did not want to deliver the message to that city - to those people, those enemies - that if they repented and changed their ways God would pour God’s love and mercy on them. Jonah didn’t want them to experience (because they didn’t deserve) God’s love and mercy.

Who's on your list of enemies? If no one comes to mind... think about America's enemies. (Or who are perceived as America's enemies. When I was growing up it was Russia and Red China and East Germany.) Or think about people who are looked down on or despised for how they live, or where they live, how and what they believe, or the things they've done. You don't have to think too hard to build a list of people who are awful... and undeserving... of God's love and mercy. Jonah's story teaches us that our list of enemies is not God's list. God doesn't have such a list. God's heart for all creation is open and vulnerable and it breaks for love of us. For all of us. God loves all. The Ninevites. The Liberals. The Conservatives. The Christians. The Africans. The Tahitians. The good and the bad and the enemy. God loves all.

Grace, which is God's favor, God's undeserved kindness to us and love for us, that God freely gives to all. It does come with conditions, however; it's not cheap. What God wants in return is for us to love God back with every part of us, everything we are, and to love others, all others, the way we love ourselves. God called Jonah to go to Ninevah to shout out to the Ninevites that they needed to repent - that is to turn around - from violence and evil-doing because God loved them, and wanted to save them. No matter who identifies other people as our enemies, as less deserving of

God's blessings, we must remember this lesson from Jonah's story: God loves all. All. And how we're known as God's people, as followers of Jesus Christ, is by how we love all. This is excruciatingly difficult to do - to love all - and so I recommend that you have a prayer partner or a soul-friend to remind you and help and support you and pray for you and expect you to... love. And ask Jesus to help you with it. Ask Him to love people you can't manage to love. Because God loves all.

The third lesson from Jonah's story is: **God persists.** [Even if you didn't write this down say it with me to help you remember: **God persists.**] This is a predominate theme in scripture. God loves humanity and we turn away. God calls us to repent from lives of self-centeredness and heartlessness and we ignore the call. God sends prophets to speak in plain language that we can understand and we ignore them. God comes to live with us, as one of us, and we can't tolerate it, and we nail Him to a cross. Jesus rises from three days in the belly of death to eternal life. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to continue to be with us. Because God persists.

The life of faith is hard. Following Jesus is hard, and it goes against our human nature, and frankly, it goes against what most people are doing. Let it be a comfort to you then, that God persists in your life. God persists in loving you, in forgiving you, in calling you to meaningful relationships and

meaningful work. God persists in being known to you, in revealing God's Self to you.

God called Jonah and Jonah ignored God and ran away on a boat going in another direction. But God persisted and caused a storm. The sailors threw Jonah overboard (at his own suggestion) and God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah so he wouldn't drown in the sea. Now that part of Jonah's story has been relegated to a children's tale because it's so improbable. Next Sunday we'll hear the earliest Jewish interpretations of this story, and why it's important and what it means, that Jonah lived in the belly of a fish for three days. The lesson for today is that God persists. Because God loves all, God wants all of humanity to experience God's love and mercy, and God wants (God demands) that we share God's love and mercy with all others.

I said earlier that the Christian life is difficult and it's different than our human desires and how most people are living. We have to persist. We come to worship week after week after week because we persist together... to practice our faith together; to remember and tell about God's incredible and undeserved love for us and God's unending forgiveness. We persist together at being the Body of Christ. We persist at experiencing and expressing Christ's love.

We persist because God persists at work in us... shaping and changing us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. And so we persist in believing that God calls us to change the world with love, to build God's kingdom with mercy and justice and peace. We persist in believing that God has given each one of us kingdom-building gifts that are necessary and unique and that reveal who God is. We persist because God never gives up on us. God persists. We persist because some days our worst fears that the world really is going to hell in a handbasket looks likely. And we need the world to know there's another way, a better way, the way of Jesus Christ.

In today's story - this first chapter of Jonah - we see three lessons that can help us hear and obey the call to follow Jesus. They are [say it with me] God provides. God loves all. God persists. This week meditate on these three lessons and how they can help and strengthen you as a follower of Jesus. Amen.