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IN HIS STEPS

They hud-dled to-geth-er, the mine-field a-round. A fam-ly too fright-ened to move. The Sur-round-ed by sin and so fright-ened to move, I did not know which way to go. Then man and his dog came, tes-ting the ground. A clear path to safe-ty to prove. Je-sus ap-peared and stood at my side, The path-way to hea-ven to show. Tak-ing a child up in his arms He told them, "Fol-low me. Just fol-low in my foot-steps And Tak-ing this child up by the hand, The Lord said, "Fol-low me. Just fol-low in my foot-steps And soon you will be free." In His foot-steps I am walk-ing. In His foot-steps I am safe. He goes be-fore. He watch-es o'er. In his foo-tsteps I have life.

This song was written for, but as far as I know not used at, the Albuquerque Women's Retreat in August of 2013, arranged that year by the women of the Riverside congregation. The theme for the retreat was, as you should have figured out by now, "Walking In His Footsteps." I wrote the song in time for the retreat, but it did not get arranged until recently. So, for you ladies that went to the retreat but missed the song, maybe this will remind you of something you learned there.

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THE JONAH SYNDROME

Have you ever tried to hide from God? You know, it just can't happen, but some people try. Either they think, "Oh, God doesn't see me because nobody else sees me," or they think, "God is in the church building so I can sin anywhere else." One might call this the "Jonah Syndrome."

God called to Jonah. He told him, "I want you to go preach repentance to your mortal enemies." (Jon 1:2, paraphrased) Jonah knew the Ninevites/Assyrians. He was from Gath-hepher, in Galilee. The Ninevites had been raiding that area. Jonah even prophesied against the Ninevites (2 Kings 14:25) It is possible, living on the border between Israel and Assyria, that Jonah knew people who had been carried captive by soldiers from Nineveh. He may have been eyewitness to the carnage dealt by this cruelest of all nations. When the Assyrians took people captive, they did not just put manacles on their wrists or ankles and chain them together. When you worked on an Assyrian chain gang it was much more painful. Their chains were attached instead to hooks placed in the captives' noses. Imagine, if someone fell from exhaustion, what that would do to the rest of the line.

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Jonah had seen all of this, and here was God telling him to preach forgiveness to these brutal enemies.

Fleeing to Tarshish

So Jonah said, "God is the God of Israel. Maybe if I go to Tarshish he won't find me." "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." (Jon 1:3) He thought he could hide from God. So he went to Joppa, the only decent seaport in all of Israel, to catch a ship.

Jonah was familiar with the psalms. We know that because in chapter 2 he composes a prayer made up in the form of, and using words from, some of the psalms. Surely he had heard Psalm 139.

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy

right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Ps 139:7-12)

Nobody is exactly sure where Tarshish was. The majority of scholars have settled on three possibilities: Tarsus in Asia Minor, Crete, or a city on the Iberian Peninsula (what is now Spain). Based on Jonah's desires, the least likely is Tarsus, because that would have him going in the direction of Nineveh, rather than away from that city. Wherever Tarshish was, it involved a sea voyage. When the psalmist referred to the "uttermost parts of the sea" he probably meant the Mediterranean Sea. If Tarshish were on the Spanish coast, that would put it about as "uttermost" as possible from Israel. So Jonah should have known he was not escaping God.

Jonah may have caught a ship to flee from God, but it would not have taken him long to realize it was a futile flight. Just being on the ocean is evidence of God. Jonah only knew the Mediterranean, but the middle of the Pacific Ocean is, it turns out, as close as one can come to literally being in the uttermost parts of the sea. It may be that if you are drowning it doesn't matter if you are one mile or one-thousand miles from shore. But just for traveling purposes, crossing the Pacific gets you as far away from land as is possible on this globe. If one were to try to flee from a god of the land, this is where he would flee to. Yet, when one is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, one can still find God. Like the psalmist said, "even there shall thy hand lead me." I loved going out on deck, especially at sunrise or sunset, and watching the ocean. Sometimes it was as flat and clear as glass; other times it was rough. In at least one storm I was in the tips of the waves were breaking on windows seventy feet above the water line. It could get very lonely out there, before the advent of e-mail. But looking at the sunrise on a glassy sea or feeling the power of a typhoon far from land, I never felt that God was not there. These things only enhanced my awareness of him. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." (Rom 1:20)

Wherever Tarshish was, Jonah could not flee from God by going there, and God let him know it. He caused a storm. One thing the Israelites were known for was their fear of water. No Israelite ever liked being on the sea. (A sweeping generalization, perhaps, but historically fairly accurate.) Jonah did not even live near the sea. He might have visited the Sea of Galilee, but this was a bigger body of water. Nevertheless, he did what the sailors could not;

he slept. He must have slept in a hammock, or else he was able to sleep through anything. Just sailing on the Persian Gulf without a storm is enough to keep anyone awake. A storm on the Mediterranean, especially a storm created by God, must have been much worse. And yet Jonah slept. So, since God could not get his attention with a storm, he had another plan in mind.

The sailors decided to draw lots to see who was the cause of this seemingly supernatural storm. Jonah knew God, and tried to flee from him. The sailors did not know God, yet sought divine aid in dealing with the storm. The lot fell to Jonah. So they threw him overboard. Immediately he was swallowed by a great fish, sea creature, or whatever you want to call it. (The Hebrew word means fish.) Jonah 1:17 says God “had prepared” this creature to swallow Jonah. Some rabbis contend, with good reason, that God had prepared this animal at the creation, just so that it could be in the right place at the right time for the express purpose of swallowing Jonah. If God rested from creation after the sixth day, then it is possible this fish, or his ancestors, had been around since the beginning. Once it had fulfilled that purpose it may have gone extinct. But all of that is side issue. The main point is that even in the middle of the sea, God was there. God protected Jonah. He saved him from certain drowning. “Even there shall thy right hand hold me.”

Sometimes we miss that point. The fish was there to save Jonah. Spending time in the belly of a fish may not sound much like being saved, but it sure beats drowning. Jonah recognized this fact.

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God. (Jon 2:5-6)

Our Flight

Do any of us suffer from the Jonah syndrome? Do we all respond as did Isaiah, “Here am I, Lord, send me?” (Isa 6:8) Or are we more like Jonah? Perhaps many of us are somewhere in the middle, willing to go for the Lord as long as we don’t have to go very far or talk to too many people.

Many are perfectly comfortable attending a worship once, or even thrice, a week. They will listen to a sermon and to somebody singing a few songs. They might even enjoy the singing. If they are in a church where the full congregation, only, sings, they might even join in on a hymn or two. As soon as the preacher starts talking about teaching others, or the elders plan a day of service, they can be found on a boat to Tarshish. God wants our worship, they argue (without being able to prove it from scripture); but they don’t believe that God also wants our service. They have never listened to James.

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (Jas 2:15-17)

Some others may be willing to go out and do good, but only to those with whom they agree or who do not appear to be threats. There are those that say that our giving (monetary or otherwise) should mainly go to those who are in the church. Our first responsibility, they say, is to the “household of faith.” While the needs of our own brothers and sisters in the faith certainly do need to be met, we must also consider the words of Jesus.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to

Even in the middle of the sea, God was there to protect Jonah and save him from drowning.

rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? (Matt 5:44-47)

When we choose to whom we do good, are we not taking the next ship to Tarshish? When we choose to judge what others will do with what we give them, have we not bought a ticket to a meeting with a great fish?

There is a lot more to the story of Jonah. The bit with the fish is almost a red herring. It distracts from the other important messages of Jonah. Nevertheless, chapter one does make its point. The Jonah Syndrome is based on a false conclusion. We cannot escape God. We cannot hide from God. To those who know of God but do not choose to follow him that can be a scary thought. For those who know God and choose to follow him that is a comfort. There is no place we can go that God cannot accompany us. There is no time that God is not there to protect his people. There is no situation that we can get ourselves into that God cannot get us out of. And there is no temptation in which God abandons us.

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Cor 10:13)

A MISSING PIECE

One of the things that Chris and I enjoy doing is to put jig saw puzzles together. We have a computer program that allows us to take any picture and turn it into a puzzle. This program lets you know when the pieces come together with an audible click and where they fit into place on the puzzle.

Chris also likes to put “real” puzzles together. She is very good at it. There is a young man at Riverside that is much better. Sean is a special-needs individual, but he has a gift that allows him to put jig saw puzzles together. He was once employed to put puzzles together that have been donated to make sure that all the pieces are in the box before they are sold. Can you understand the frustration of buying a puzzle with a piece missing?

It isn't all that earth shattering to have a missing puzzle piece now is it? In life we sometimes have to endure missing pieces of our lives. A missing mate, either through death or divorce can be painful. The void left can cause much heartache. Not having someone around, someone on whom we had leaned on for comfort and support, leaves a big gap in our hearts. The empty nest syndrome affects many parents when a child leaves to go to school or marry. This can also be difficult for many. All of a sudden parents are faced with each other!!

Sometimes we can fill the voids that leave us hurting. A new relationship can help. Parents can now grow closer together with new “mature” activities. Yet, there is a void that is often missed. We have heard of those who own the world's riches who proclaim that no matter how rich they may be, they feel that something is missing in their lives!

Even the faithful sometimes have expressed the feeling that God had abandoned them. Consider King David in Ps 21:1 “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of

my groaning.” (NASB). We are not sure of the circumstances surrounding this particular Psalm. It could be that David felt that he had been left to fight his battles without the comfort or aid of God. Jesus uttered these words on the cross at a time when God had turned His back on Him because of what He represented at that time, the sins of the world.

God has promised us that He will never leave us alone. Twice he promised Joshua that He would be with Him and never forsake him (Deut 31:6-8; Josh 1:5). He promised the nation of Israel much the same thing (Isa 41:10-14; 43:2-5). The conditions for this promise hinged on the peoples' obedience not to forsake God. Well, as it has been said you know the rest of the story. A deliverer was needed. One who would and could reconcile the people to God.

One who had been promised. (Mt 1:23) “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And they shall call his name Immanuel; which is, being interpreted, God with us.”

One who would always remain with us. (Jn 14:18) “I will not leave you desolate: I come unto you.”

One who through seeming defeat would overcome and remain available to all who would come to Him for comfort. (Mt 28:20) “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

A missing piece of a picture puzzle is really of no consequence. A person missing from our lives can be dealt with. However, if Jesus is missing from your life can lead to a permanent separation from God. (Mk 8:36) “For what doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?” The only way for us to survive this world is to fill the void that exists with Jesus.

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