

**Terrified by Love**  
A sermon for VST Sunday 2021  
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Friends, the first lectionary reading today comes from the book of Jonah. The book of Jonah is one of the most fascinating stories of the Bible. The book itself is very short compare to others and you can basically read the whole book of Jonah in one short 5-10 minutes sitting. I encourage you to read it and see for yourself why this story has captivated so many people, from theologians, painters, and story tellers alike.

But let me tell you two important things when you read this story....

First, don't read or listen to this story and allow yourself to be preoccupied with things that don't matter..... yes, things like, "What kind of fish swallowed Jonah? Was it a whale?"; "What's the scientific proof that it's a whale?"; "How could Jonah survive being in the fish belly for three days and three nights? Is it scientifically possible?" .... Read it that way and you'll miss the point.... It's like a photographer who's going for whale watching but could not stop admiring the beauty of his camera and his camera lens, hence failed to notice the glorious and beautiful whale appearing in front of him or her.....

Second, don't read it with a kind of moralism.... Moralism is when you read it and think that the point is simply **NOT TO BE** someone.... "Well, don't be a coward like Moses..... Don't be a screwup prophet like Jonah that ran away from God's calling..... Don't be like the unbelieving Thomas.... Don't be like Judas.... Don't be like Peter..... No, the bible wants you to see yourself **as the character**....often times, **as the villain** in the story....Because **only** that way, we could truly see who God really is....

Ok enough throat-clearing ..... Now,... let me refresh you a bit of Jonah's story. The book of Jonah begins by God's calling to a prophet by the name of Jonah. In English language, Jonah's name means Dove.... So, God called Jonah to do a mission. And the mission was this: "Go to Niniveh" and "Preach against it" because of their wickedness! Niniveh was the capital

city of the kingdom of Assyria, which was the ruthless long-time enemy of Israel. The one that brought about a massive destruction to Israel...

If you think about it, this was really a great mission for an Israelite like Jonah! I mean what a great mission to be able to preach against those evil people of Assyria! These were the guys who have persecuted, and killed, and destroyed Israel...

(Imagine if God gives you a mission and the mission is to announce God's rage against that person! What a wonderful feeling! You must be excited about it!)

Yet, for some reason, Jonah knew God would forgive the people he thought should get what they deserve! So, he disobeyed God. Instead of going to Niniveh, he sailed away—as far as he could—from Niniveh.... He sailed on a ship to Tarshish (today's southern Spain)... For the ancient Mediterranean people, Spain was considered as the end of the world.... It's as far as it gets for someone to run away from everything!

During the journey on the boat to Tarshish, there was a violent storm. This violent storm threatened to kill the people in the boat.... But fast forward on the story.... the people on the boat finally got it that the violent storm was caused by Jonah's disobedience... They knew that the storm happened because Jonah ran away from God... Out of desperation, Jonah chose to sacrifice himself, knowing that they would all die if he stayed on the boat anyway..... So he says, *"Pick me up and throw me into the sea... and it will become calm... I know that it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you."* Finally, they threw the prophet out from the boat to the sea..... and the raging storm grew calm..... The people on the boat were saved.....

But Jonah went down to the heart of the sea.... While facing his death, the Bible says that God 'provided' a huge fish to swallow Jonah.... Like a baby in the mother's womb, Jonah was in the belly of fish for three days and three nights.... until God finally commanded the fish to spew him out to the dry land.... Perhaps exactly on the shore of where he started .

Now, God called Jonah again for the second time, And this time, Jonah knew that he could not escape from this Great Insistent God! So, he went to Niniveh... perhaps with a very heavy steps--to preach the message from God....

By the way, the sermon turned out to be the shortest sermon but also the most powerful sermon ever preached. Here's the whole sermon: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be **overthrown!**"

You know what happened then? Suddenly, the whole city repented. The king, the people, the slaves, even the animals decided not to eat and not to drink as they wanted to show God that they have truly repented.... They cried mightily to God... They turned away from their evil ways... All because of a very short and lame sermon from a screwup prophet.....

But this prophet ..... Jonah was not surprised... and not only that he was not surprised, he was also furious.....because he knew it... He knew that God would be gracious to the Ninevites anyway... He knew that God would forgive even the evil Ninevites.... He knew that God loves, even the Assyrians..... And he knew that God wanted to use him to be the conduit of God's love.....In fact, that's precisely the reason why he fled to Tarshish in the first place..... because he knew his God so well....! And he hated that God's standards were lower than his!

Jonah chose to run away from the mission **not because** he was afraid of the fierce Assyrians..... **No, it was not** because he was afraid of experiencing persecution like many prophets before him..... **No, it was not** because he was afraid of physical death! To the contrary, he was the one that volunteer to be thrown out from the boat!

Poor Jonah! He ran away from God's calling **not because he failed to understand who God is**..... but it's that **He didn't like how God operates** in grace..... and in love..... and in embrace.....

Jonah was angry... perhaps he said, “How could the evil, cruel Ninivites get the same love and forgiveness and embrace with what I—the holy prophet— and with what Israel—the chosen people—got?” ... For Jonah, God shouldn’t work like that.... Only good people like him supposed to be loved.,... That’s why he was so angry!

Yet, friends.... If we look deeper.... If we look beyond Jonah’s anger..... then we’ll see that something else is going on in here..... beyond his fiery anger, the poor Jonah was actually afraid..... Yes, he was afraid of something that’s **more frightening than the sting of death itself..... He was afraid of love... *Jonah was terrified by love*.....** Love terrifies him....

If only he was vulnerable enough to let himself first be loved by God.... Perhaps...(just perhaps),... he wouldn’t be so afraid to love—even the Assyrians....

If only he realized how much God would embrace him even in his bad days..... Perhaps... just perhaps.... He too wouldn’t be afraid to embrace the Ninivites...

But **that** kind of love.... That Divine love.... Terrifies him...

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Now, what about you and me? What’s the Niniveh that God is calling you to?  
Is it in the marketplace? To be a business person that liberates and loves.... To work as hard as you can for the sake of others and not for financial gains... Perhaps, that’s your Niniveh....  
Is God calling you to dedicate your life to fight for justice and reconciliation..... To bring justice to those who are oppressed? .... Perhaps, that’s your Niniveh.....

Or perhaps, God is calling you to be a priest, a minister of God’s Word. To prepare and to dedicate your life to bringing God’s message of grace, not condemnation to this lonely world...

Maybe, God is calling you to be a faithful committed intercessor for your church, for your family, for those around you... even while you feel like you're alone....

The truth is, I don't know what's the Niniveh God call you into..... But here's what I know: **God's calling will terrify you.....**

Not only because the mission is so much beyond our capacity, but also because it requires us to love.... **like God.....**

Because it requires us to love like the One on the Cross who died for you and me!

Because It requires us to love like the One who embraces those who spit on his face!

Because It requires us to love like the One who prayed "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" even for those soldiers who pierced his hands, and feet, and the side of the body till' his blood is no more....

God's calling will terrify us.... **Because it requires us to love like Jesus Christ....**

And no doubt..... Like Jonah, we too will try our best—again and again—to run away from this terrifying call.... ..Because like Jonah, we are bunch of screwups, quitters, resisters, runners.. when it comes to obeying God's calling...

Yes, like Jonah—and many others in the Bible—we snooze when there are violent storms around us (Jn. 1:5-6).... Like Jonah, we too are bunch of screwups who so easily checkout of our calling and don't realize that our running away from God will equally affect all other people's lives (Jn. 1:12)....

After all, we too are bunch of screwups... bunch of score-keepers who think people should only get what they deserve.... After all, we too are terrified by love....

Yet, the unfortunate—but nevertheless good news is this: God will never give up in pursuing you to fulfill this call....God will never give up to have faith in you.... And God will never give up in rooting for you .....

And sometimes, perhaps, it's okay to be **terrified by love-and-to love.....**  
 Because, remember that I told you that Jonah's name means "Dove"?..... Well, in the Bible, dove usually is used as a sign for something lovely.... something beautiful..... the Beloved in the Song of Songs is called as "My dove" .....The beloved is also said to have lovely eyes like "dove's eyes."

Now listen to this carefully: The writer—perhaps purposefully—named the screwup prophet as Jonah—dove—to make a point..... It is as if the writer tried her best to make sure that we understand one important truth..... the truth is that even through all his troubles, flight, disobedience,—despite of his paralyzing fear—the screwup prophet, Jonah, is still God's dove—God's beloved.....

And here's what's more mind-blowing,... I'm sure you remember this.... few hundred years after the book of Jonah was written, our blessed King, Jesus Christ chose to identify himself with Jonah...

Well, like Jonah, Jesus too was asleep on a boat during a violent storm... But Jonah slept because of his carelessness, Jesus slept because He's the creator of all.

Jonah caused the storm.... Jesus calmed the storm... Well to be fair, Jonah calmed the storm too by being thrown out from the boat.

Jonah sacrificed himself to be thrown out from the boat to save the others because there was no other way...., Jesus self-willingly sacrificed himself to be thrown out to death to save this world only because of love.

Jonah three days in the belly of the fish to be saved from death... Jesus three days in the belly of hell to conquer death....

Look, at the end of the day.... it's truly a divine mystery why Christ, the Most Beautiful and Glorious God of All would choose to identify himself as this screwup prophet.... But he does.....

Here's my hunch: Jesus tries his best to make us understand that LIKE JONAH, even through all of our troubles, flight, disobedience --despite of our paralyzing fear—we the screwup prophet... the screwup businesswoman and businessman.... The screwup pastor....., are still, still God's dove—God's beloved.....

Therefore, this afternoon, as you sit down in anger and perhaps making a sophisticated plan to run away from God's call (like Jonah), may you be reminded of the terrifying love of God that will always pursue His beloved to fulfill the calling.... For the sake of the world.....

Amen.