

How would *you* fill in the blank? No matter what happens in the world, how will you stay alive to God's grace and mercy? No matter what happens in the world, how will you witness to God's love? No matter what happens in the world, how will you stay in it and answer God's call?

In just a moment after the sermon, we're going to take a few minutes of silence. During that time, you're invited to find the blank tags on the ends of your pews, as well as something to write with. Write the sentence that is the same as the sermon title, "No matter what,..." and then fill in the blank with your commitment to living goodness and love in the world. There's no need to write your name on it. During the offertory, the ushers will move through the sanctuary, passing baskets to collect the tags in the way we used to collect the offering. Next week we plan to put the tags on a bulletin board at the church as a witness to the ways we will be living and serving God in the days to come.

Now the ending of Jonah's story remains open. In fact, the book ends with God asking Jonah a question. We don't hear the prophet's answer. It's not clear whether Jonah was ever satisfied with his own ministry or even convinced that God's mercy for wayward people was a good thing. And still, God was determined to use Jonah to share that grace with the world anyway. God is determined to use us for that same purpose.

So, no matter what, how will you live into the grace and mercy of God in this world we live in?

Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

November 10, 2024

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

"No matter what,..."

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5; 3:10-4:5

It's been an emotional week, friends. As a body, our community has many parts. Different parts of us are feeling different things. Among us, we are reeling, we are healing, we are hoping, we are grieving. I trust we are praying. Because we use a lectionary to guide our scriptures for worship, these passages from Jonah were planned for us to use on this Sunday many months ago. I believe in the providence of God. So I believe that the Spirit has something specific for us to hear in this strange and wonderful story on this particular day in this particular week.

I bet the part that most of us know from Jonah's story is the part where he gets eaten by the big fish or the whale. It's the most cinematic, exciting part, for sure. We didn't read that part today. Though Jonah's time in the belly of the fish does encapsulate some of the important points that we did hear: Jonah ran away from God. And God would not let him escape from the ministry Jonah was called to do. The calling was too important. And it was Jonah, specifically, whom God needed to do it.

The scripture tells us that God spoke clearly to Jonah. Jonah heard and understood. God was sending him to the city of Ninevah. Things there were broken. The people were acting wickedly; they were not living in God's way. Jonah was supposed to go there and call the people to account for their waywardness. But instead of heading to Ninevah, Jonah went in the exact opposite direction. Ninevah was east; Jonah went west. Twice, the story repeats that Jonah went away from God's presence. God was calling him to serve. Jonah tried to bow out.

He made a serious attempt at it, too. When Jonah found a ship heading in the opposite direction, our scripture says he paid his fare to go on the boat. But the original Hebrew text says he paid "*her* fare" which probably refers to the vessel itself. So, as scholar Phyllis Tribble writes, "ancient rabbis proposed that Jonah paid for the *entire* voyage, so eager was he to flee."¹ All because he didn't want to do what God had called him to do.

1 Phyllis Tribble, "Jonah," *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 494.

2 "One Question, 109 Response—No matter who wins,..." RTBC staff, November 5, 2024, Reasons to Be Cheerful, <https://tinyurl.com/295nt6fp>

Sometimes we wish we could flee, too. We might wish we could close our eyes and wake up in a different reality. We might want to run in the other direction. We have reasons, often good ones. Our reluctance may stem from fear for our safety or being tired at our core or from an inability to see any path forward. When things are hard and the challenges feel insurmountable, those reactions are understandable. Sometimes we have to recognize those feelings. And let ourselves just feel the weight of them for a time. But after that, we must recognize that this is our reality. God calls us to be present here. God has work for us to do, now.

As soon as God spoke though, Jonah split. That's how he ended up on the boat, in the storm, inside the belly of the fish, and eventually spit back up on the shore. His reason for running? Because he was angry at God's mercy. What a concept, right?! He was mad that God is gracious. He resented God's compassion.

Have you and I been there? Angry that there was grace for someone who didn't deserve it. Resentful that some people didn't get what they had coming to them. Put out that people making bad choices got rewarded anyway. Maybe it's not such a stretch for us to understand Jonah's feelings. Maybe we feel them, too.

Jonah didn't want to go because he said he knew that God would have compassion on the people in Ninevah anyway. Jonah was right about that. We can give him credit for that. But it didn't seem like compassion would win the day at first. It sounded like God was going to punish the city for their wicked ways. Seemingly, Jonah was more confident in God's mercy than even God was. But of course, God's mercy won out. Because God's mercy, love, and grace always win out.

God was persistent in calling Jonah to his task. So eventually, Jonah did make it to Ninevah. He told the people there to shape up and they did. Right away, the people repented. And God indeed forgave them. Jonah knew why: because our God is a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

God embodies those qualities in the deepest, fullest way we could possibly imagine. God was so committed to showing grace and mercy to the city that God would stop at nothing to get Jonah to go there; to lead the people into forgiveness and love. God does not give up. God does not give up on us. Even when we try to run the other way. God does not give up on those who are wayward. Even when things are really bad. God does not stray from calling all of us into graciousness, mercy, and steadfast love.

Jonah thought he could sidestep the compassionate ministry that God had for him to do. But the God of love was calling him in. Even when we are

down and out, we cannot run and hide from this faith of ours. Even when we'd like to batten down the hatches and seal ourselves off from anything that seeks to harm, God urges us to stay in it. We are being called in. God is calling us off the sidelines and out of our reluctance to be witnesses to the amazing grace of God. God is urging us to name, out loud, what is hurting and broken and unjust in the world, just like God wanted Jonah to do in Ninevah. God is calling us to be disciples who work toward reconciliation and peace, not only in our individual lives but in our cities and communities. God is inviting us to be bold in loving our neighbors, not just the ones we like but even and especially the ones we do not like. God is urging, inviting, prompting us to be faithful, daring witnesses to a gracious God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Reasons to be Cheerful is a nonprofit online magazine that tells encouraging stories of about solutions to the world's problems. A few weeks ago the magazine asked its readers to send in their responses to a prompt. They acknowledged that the upcoming election was consequential. And at the same time, they wrote, "maybe what matters even more is how millions of people, on any given day, choose to live, work, fight and advocate for positive change."² The prompt said, "No matter who wins, [fill in the blank]." Readers were to fill in the blank with their commitments—with the good, important, meaningful things they are going to do in the world, no matter what. Some of them said:

No matter who wins, "I will continue to fight for open space and parks in the urban landscape.

No matter what, I will never stop working for a barrier-free world for all, including those with disabilities.

I'll keep leading hikes in the woods to introduce folks to the serenity of nature.

I will continue teaching adult learners to read.

I'll keep helping my friend through cancer treatment.

I will continue to deliver food to under-served communities; cultivate native plants where I live; and engage in conversations with young people to encourage them and give them hope.

I will continue to restore wildlife habitat where I live.

I will practice kindness and focus on the things we can change, on listening and on continuous learning and unlearning.

I will still love my wife.

I'll keep playing music to sustain my soul and for others to enjoy."