

## Evotional

**Sermon title: ““Suffering: The final frontier? Part 1.”**

**Speaker: Neil Durling.**

**Bible passage: Jonah 1:1-17.**

**Date: 28.9.14.**

### **Message:**

**Jonah (1):** *The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:* This passage starts with the Hebrew word *vayliya* which means “Now it once happened” or bluntly “And...” The writer is making the point that Jonah’s life and work are already in progress. He is well into his calling as a prophet; he is a “mature Christian”. And this is not a good assignment for a prophet with good references.

**Nineveh (2):** *“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”* It was the principle city and last capital of Assyria (Northern Iraq), occupied since 4,500BC. It was inhabited by 120,000 who did not know right from wrong at the time of Jonah. I imagine Jonah thinking: “At last! You’ve seen their wickedness! Now destroy them!” But then Jonah knows God, and that this isn’t how he operates... Maybe that’s why he runs away?...

**Tarshish (3):** *But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.* Three things:

1. We can interpret “paying the fare” as “bought the boat”. Jonah could have hired the whole boat. It’s costing a lot of money to flee to Tarshish.
2. When it says Jonah ran away he is fleeing God’s presence, literally fleeing his face. I’m told that a baby locates their place from their parents face. The parent’s face is the source from which the baby locates everything else and finds trust and affection. This is what Jonah is fleeing from – his source for life.
3. Tarshish is Gibraltar – the dream place, the gateway to the world! It is called “the pleasant place” in Isaiah 2:16. It came to be known as a distant paradise. We all want to go there when the going gets tough don’t we?

**Storm (4):** *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.* Two quotes:

1. “Storms are the triumph of his art,” George Herbert – *The Bag*.
2. “Storm is the environment in which we either lose our lives or are saved; there is no cool, safe ledge on which to perch as spectators.” Eugene Peterson – *Under the unpredictable plant*.

**Sailors (5-8):** *All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.” Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”* Jonah was physically asleep, but also internally/spiritually. Isn’t it true that we often endanger other people’s lives when we flee from God (the captain asks Jonah to pray to his God and he refuses). However, in his disobedience, at least he shows compassion to the sailors – who interrogate him!

**God (9-16):** *He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.* Brian McLaren writes: “Hot-headed religious extremists, lukewarm religious bureaucrats and cold-hearted religious critics alike have turned the word *God* into a name for something ugly, small, boring, elitist, wacky, corrupt or violent – the very opposite of what it should mean. Maybe God is more turned off to the word *God* than anyone else!” The sailors have a warped view of God, which hasn’t been helped by the way Jonah has acted! Eugene Peterson writes: “Trouble, at least extreme trouble, *storm*-trouble, strips us to the essentials and reveals the basic reality of our lives... In the storm we are reduced to what is elemental, and the ultimate elemental is God.”

So what God do we believe in? However uncomfortable it is, I think we have a God who sometimes throws storms into our lives when we have fled from him. Why does he do this? Because God knows what we are created for and takes pleasure in seeing that happen. When we throw it all away sometimes (not always) God steps in and uses suffering to bring us back.

Interestingly, in Jewish tradition it is taught that representatives of all seventy nations were on board the ship, therefore, the world is saved by throwing Jonah overboard.

**The belly of the fish (17):** *Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* “I have done many things in my life that conflicted with the great aims I had set myself – and something has always set me on the true path again.” Alexander Solzhenitsyn – *The oak and the calf*.

**Jonah goes down:** This is self-inflicted suffering; sometimes this is why we suffer. Dostoevsky wrote: “Man is not an arithmetical expression; he is a mysterious and puzzling being, and his nature is extreme and contradictory all through.” Human-beings are complex. In his complexity Jonah flees from God, and the only way from there is down. For Jonah it’s a gradual descent: Down to Joppa (3), down below deck (5), lay down (5), into the sea (12), in the belly of the fish (17). Isn’t that the way it often is? If we knew that running away would land us up in the gut of a fish we’d be mad to buy a ticket for Tarshish, but it seems God allows us these little steps hoping we’ll turn back to him.

**Resurrection:**

Interestingly, this lowest, darkest place is also a place where salvation begins to dawn. “Resurrection” comes after three days.

**Questions:**

1. Has God ever called me to “Nineveh”? Did I go? What was it like?
2. Has God ever called me to “Nineveh”? Did I flee to Tarshish? What was Tarshish like?
3. Have you ever experienced a storm of the type mentioned by Eugene Peterson? “*Storm* is the environment in which we either lose our lives or are saved; there is no cool, safe ledge on which to perch as spectators.”
4. If “the ultimate elemental is God”, what is God like in your experience?
5. Does Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s sentence ring true for you? “I have done many things in my life that conflicted with the great aims I had set myself – and something has always set me on the true path again.”
6. Do you think God sometimes causes us suffering? If “yes”, have you ever experienced this?

**Prayer:**

Father God, Thank you for loving us so much that even when we “flee your face” you never leave us. Amen.