

## SERMON

I find the story of Jonah a fascinating one. The writer was a talented craftsman who wrote the story with care, intention and wit, especially the escape from God.

In the story of Jonah there are two descriptive words that play a very important part such as "down" and "up". Up was the sky where God lived and down under the sea was the "sheoel" or the place of deepest darkness.

We also use these two words to describe our intentions. We say we are going up to London, going up to Morningside especially if we are minded to think this IS the place to be or going up to the Mound in Edinburgh, coming up to Crieff and down to Leith. In biblical times they also spoke like this, they would say they are going up to Jerusalem, up to Mount Zion where they believed God was. Moses also went up to the Mountain to hear the will of God. But equally they spoke of going down to Egypt, Jericho and the Sheoel which was the place of the deepest darkness. They also regarded the sea as the place of chaos and darkness because **"To them water symbolised everything that was wicked."** They would speak of going down into the sea.

So there is a clear distinction between going up and going down, going up to be near to God and going down away from God.

It is then behind this background that the story of Jonah unfolds.

Jonah was a prophet of God. A prophet's job was to go tell people what God told him to tell them. So God sent Jonah off on a mission to Nineveh – the capital of the kingdom of Assyria, but he didn't want to do it or agreed with God's plans.

Why? Because he, like all of his Jewish fellow citizens, believed that the people God wanted him to go to, were heathens, gentiles or dogs. As a Jew he was not allowed to even speak to people

who did not believe in God. If he did, he would make himself unpure in the eyes of God.

So instead of believing in God's will, he tries to run away from God. Jonah tried to run away from God as far as possible.

- Instead of going to Nineveh, where he was sent, Jonah went in the *opposite direction*, to Tarshis.
- Then we read that he went *down* to Joppa, where he boarded a ship.
- He went down from the land to sea.
- Once on the ship, Jonah went *down* again, below deck, where he fell into a "*deep sleep*". The storm that broke loose on the sea must have been *some* storm, because the sailors were used to storms at sea, but this time they were panicking. So they did what was their custom – they prayed to their gods to rescue them. But when that didn't seem to help they started praying to foreign gods beside their national ones – *anything* to save themselves. And then it became clear that it was Jonah's God who caused the storm, who in the end turned out to be the only real God, the God who made the sea and the land. So they threw Jonah *down* into the sea. So Jonah went down, down, down, as far away from God as he thought he possibly could. But there, in the deep dark ocean, Jonah cried out to God. God sent a fish to rescue Jonah. In the place where no one expected God to listen, God did. Jonah had to realise that it is impossible to run away from God, because He is everywhere - even in the place of darkness, and chaos....In this place God was close to Jonah and He rescued him.

God forgave him and gave him a second chance. And in the end the people of Nineveh, who were gentiles, repented straight away when Jonah brought the word of the Lord to them, which was a huge big lesson to Israel, who were God's own people, but who didn't want to listen to him. So there are really very important lessons for us to learn. If we think that God only belongs to us, we make a big mistake. If

we think that we can flee from God, again a big mistake. If we think we can hide from God, again a big mistake. The story of Jonah tells us in a very poetic way that no one can escape God. No one is exempt from His loving care. Although Jonah was the sinner, when he cried out to God, God reacted in a loving way by rescuing him. God did not let him suffer one second too long. God has something in mind for each one of us to do – that's why he made us, because he wants to use us. And it would be better for us to just listen to God and do what he says, than to try and run away from him. Because if he wants us to do something, even if we don't *want* to, even if we think that we *can't*, he'll equip us to be able to do it... So why put up a fight and waste your own time? If God wants you to do something just go do it straight away, because one way or another, you will have to do it anyway. No matter where you go or try to hide, no matter how much you pretend that you couldn't be bothered, God knows what is going on in your head and in your heart. You can't hide from him... And if you think that you are alone in your situation of darkness and chaos, think again. God is there with you. And He will not let go of your hand, but then again that is when you hold on to HIM. When I was 16 I felt called to go and study to be a minister. But then later I changed my mind several times. So when I was in my final year, on the second last day of submissions I had to take my application form to the teacher that was charged with university applications. He knew me well. He also knew of all the times that I changed my mind. So on this day, I thought I had made up my mind. I am not going to study to be a minister. I am not worthy enough. And I was convinced that I will not be able to manage with Hebrew, Greek and Latin. It will be too difficult for me. I will just fail. When I entered the teachers office, he gave me one look and then he studied my form. I said to him ok that is it. I will see him later. Then he stood up from behind his desk, and walked to the door which he closed. He then ordered me to sit down. He said to me if I am sure about my

decision not to study for the ministry. I said YES. He then asked me if I prayed about it. I then said NO. I did not want to pray. I did not feel like praying. He then said something I will never forget. He said I must remember what happened to Jonah. If I was really called by God, there will be no escaping from it. Whatever I do, God will call me again and again. He will remind me and direct the cause of whatever way I go. He then said he wants me to go away and think again. I then said but what about this and about that....He said God will help me to overcome all my doubts and fears because He is everywhere. I went away praying and the next morning when I told him I finally decided to go and study to be a minister – he informed me that he did not hand in my form. So yes I can surely attest that in all the times that I doubted, God showed me the way. I hope that God will also show you that He is everywhere!

Amen