

**Laggan and Newtonmore  
Parish Church of Scotland**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**30th June 2019**

**Running Away**

Jonah 1:1-17

John 1:35-46

One of the goals for congregations treading a path of renewal (that's us) is that we should grow deeper in our faith, through discipleship, and we have been looking at some of what that means for the past few months. We have looked at how Jesus called, challenged, trained and sent out his disciples, and then at how his leadership continued after his ascension in the earliest days of the Church. We should never stop working on our discipleship, trying to come ever closer to God through Jesus, and listening to his leading. Following Jesus is a lifetime of learning and of trying new things, a lifetime of discovering that one thing leads to another, so that you suddenly wonder how you, or we, could have reached this place.

However, another stream of walking the path of renewal is that in practising our discipleship, we should become an invitational church, and this is what we are going to about for at least the month of July, as we look at the story of Jonah. Being invitational is different from being welcoming. I mean, you never want to stop being a welcoming church, and many, many visitors have borne witness to how welcoming this church is, which is great. But in terms of church growth, I have heard welcome described as being a strategy for the 1950s and 60s. It was a strategy for the decades when church-going and church-belonging was a more mainstream activity. Today's people need to know more than that they are welcomed. They need to know that they are wanted, and so they need to be invited.

Jonah is one of the funny stories in the Bible. People tend to think of the Bible as being a really serious book, and overall it is, because it contains the word of God and teaches us about life and death. But humour has always been a great way to get a point across, and the ancients who put our scriptures together knew this. And so they included the story of Balaam and his ass, and the story of hilarious misunderstandings that is the tale of Naaman (which we will be looking at in Messy Church today) and they

included the story of Jonah. Its lessons are serious, but they are humorously made. In fact it is a kind of literary slapstick, especially in the first chapter that we read today. Sometimes people get hung up about the improbable historicity of the story, but the Bible never says that this is history. The book of Jonah is not included in the "history" section of the Old Testament, but in the prophecy section. This means that the point of the story is what it teaches, not whether the details of the story are accurate.

The word of God comes to Jonah, son of Amittai, to go and denounce the great power, Nineveh. And Jonah goes in exactly the opposite direction. Nineveh, the oldest and most populous city of the ancient Assyrian empire was in what we now think of as Iraq. It was on the banks of the Tigris river and its site is now surrounded by the modern city of Mosul. To get there from Israel you would not need to take a boat, but Jonah goes down to the harbour and takes a boat going clear across the Mediterranean, to Tarshish, which was in Spain.

Jonah was just like us. He wanted to serve God, but when God asked him to do something specific, he froze inside and ran away. He is no hero, but he is very human. As are we. Research into Church-attending Christians suggests that if I were to ask you who you think God would like you to invite to church or to somewhere that they would hear about Jesus, at least 70 per cent of you would have a name. Probably, since I have brought the matter up, you are thinking of that name right now. Like Jonah, our problem is not knowing what God would like us to do, who he would like us to speak to, it is doing it. You may not have taken a ship for Tarshish, but maybe you wish you could!

We know that one of our callings as Christians is to be inviters, because the early disciples, especially Andrew and Philip are so clearly approved for their easy, immediate invitations to family and friends. I say easy, but we have no evidence that it was any easier for them than it is for us. Sharing what is important to you is always a challenge and a risk, because what if what you cherish and believe is ridiculed and mocked? As indeed Nathaniel did with Philip. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" How wise Philip was not to try to answer that for himself, but simply to say, "Come and see." Come and make your own judgement first-hand. Don't take my word for it, come and see for yourself.

Jonah was told what to do, who he was to go to and what he was to say, but his reaction was to do the exact opposite. He would rather leave his whole life and go to what was then thought of as the ends of the earth than do what God asked him. And probably there are times when you feel that way as well.

The same research that says that 70 per cent of you already have in mind the name of someone who you believe God would like you to invite to hear about Jesus also reveals that 90% of you will do nothing about it. OK, doing nothing is not the same as running as far away as possible, but the effect on the person you might speak to is the same, in that whether you run or whether you stay put but keep your mouth shut, they are not given the message. There are all kinds of reasons why 90% will do nothing, and we will look at some of them in next few weeks, but the most basic one is that we are afraid of failure. What if they say no? What if you invite and they say that they would rather not come with you? None of us likes to feel like a failure.

Thing is, what 70% of you have in mind is a person who you think you might invite. It's not the name of a person who you feel you personally are asked to convert. If you think there is someone you might invite, failure is not if that person says no to your invitation, failure is not giving the invitation in the first place. Which means that the 90% (on average) who will not invite, are already failing, and, probably, feeling guilty.

Look at how guilty Jonah felt! He has gone on board the ship, but although he is leaving his whole life behind, he doesn't stay on deck to see the last of old Israel. No, he hides away in the hold and takes refuge in a nap. When a storm blows up, bad enough to scare the experienced sailors, and when they call on their gods and wake him to call on his, when they ask what they can do to appease his God, he then decides he would rather be dead. That his reaction is extreme we can see from the reluctance of the sailors to do what he says and heave him overboard. When they asked what they should do to him, they were not thinking of drowning him! Drowning any of them was what they were trying to avoid. Maybe they thought that if they bound him or told his God that they would put him off at the first opportunity that would appease the irate deity. But Jonah, in his guilt, realising that when you serve the God of heaven and earth (not some small local God, such as the foreign sailors knew) you cannot run away, with a dramatic flair, born of that guilt, said "Throw me overboard!"

Guilt is a terrible thing, and I do hope that this sermon is not igniting yours. If it does, don't run to the ends of the earth and don't have anyone try to drown you! The simple solution to guilt about not inviting anyone to church, or to some other place where they might learn about God is to give the invitation. Giving the invitation is success. The success is not in the response you receive, but in the simple inviting in the first place. The fear of failure needs to be displaced in our minds from failure to get a positive repose, to failure to be faithful in doing what God lays on our hearts to do or say.

We don't know how many other people Andrew or Philip might have invited to come and meet with Jesus. If there were others and they said no, then they did not make it into the gospel story. It may be that Andrew went around telling his whole community. It may be that he had other brothers and sisters who dismissed him as strange. The story is taken forward by those who said yes, by Philip and Peter and Nathanael, but the impetus to invite first needs to be obeyed, or they can never have the chance to say yes at all.

Who was it who invited you? If it was your parents, you maybe had no chance to say no, not then, if you were taken to church as a child whether you wanted to or not. I remember that if any of my siblings said that we didn't want to go to Church, our mother would say "It's when you don't feel like it that you need church most of all!" But if you had parents like that, you have had your chance to say no since, and you wouldn't be here if you had said that no. But maybe you were invited to something, a service, a meeting, a meal, a discussion group, by a friend. If that invitation led to you discovering the love of God for yourself, how much you owe that friend! Think how you could be that friend to someone else.

So far, we have seen Jonah know what God wants him to do, try to get as far as possible from doing it, then make a guilt-filled gesture and seek suicide. I do hope that as we think about being a church which does more than welcome, but actively invites, you won't follow the Jonah path.

But we left Jonah in the fish - unlikely as that seems - and so the story is not over and nor is what we can learn from it!