

Wade in the Water 7: Across the Sea  
July 27, 2008  
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Jonah 1:1-15  
Acts 16:4-14

We are spending the summer considering the many and sundry ways God invites us to Wade in the Water, to take a chance, to sink or swim, in the service of God and God's people. Today we encounter one of the great "sinkers" of all time – Jonah. And I am not even going to mention the whale!

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it;  
. . . But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD."  
-from Jonah 1:2,3

Can it be the last Sunday in July?

Where has the summer gone?

What about those projects I was going to do?

Can I finish **all** of them in August?

I have always found August an awkward month.

The calendar and the weather tell us it is still summer.

Displays in the stores suggest that fall and school are almost here.

An awkward time of the year, with its rush to pack in last minute seasonal relaxation and recreation, before the school year and the church program year begin.

The time is ripe for reassessing.

Do we want this year to be like last?

Are we going to do the same old things?

Be just as busy?

Find life just as overwhelming?

Where does the time go?

It seems to me that August might be a better time to make New Year's Resolutions than January, because for so many of us our real year runs from the end of August into June!

So, during these last few free weeks of summer will you have time to spend some time at least thinking about where your life is going?

To consider how God might be calling you to wade in the water of life this year? Wade in the water of challenges and commitments? Wade in the water of relationships and discipleship?

Which brings me to Jonah, and the Apostle Paul.

It was time for both of them to wade in the water! Across the sea.

Jonah knows that God wants him to wade in deep and challenging water: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it."

In other words, Jonah is to wade in the water, face the challenge God has set before him, by going to the capital city of the Assyrian Empire (his enemies' capital city) to prophesy – telling its inhabitants that God is unhappy with them: that God condemns their behavior, their waging war without provocation, their oppression of the innocent, their general corruption and dissipation.

Jonah is to tell them to stop it now, shape up, change their ways, or God will destroy them!

Can you understand why this is something Jonah does not want to do.

No way. No how. No wading in the water for our boy Jonah!

Jonah knows where he is supposed to go, Nineveh, so he goes down to the harbor and boards a ship -- not for Nineveh, but for Tarshish -- exactly in the opposite direction.

It would be like knowing that we should go to New York City and then getting on a plane for San Francisco.

The Apostle Paul's situation is just the opposite.

He wants to wade in the water! He wants to take the word of Christ the Lord to a new nation and a new people, across the sea.

But to Paul God says no, it is not the time yet for you to wade in the water. This is the way the book of the Acts of the Apostles puts it:

“And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia,  
having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia  
. . . they attempted to go into Bythinia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”

The spirit of Jesus told them: no way, no how, no wading in the water for Paul and his buddies – at least, not yet.

Paul was on what we have come to call the second of his “missionary journeys;” though I doubt he ever used that term.

Paul was a driven man.

A fervent persecutor of the followers of Christ, Paul saw a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and became an even more fervent apostle of Christ.

He was driven to bring the word of Jesus to his whole wide world, particularly the parts of the world which had never heard of Jesus.

For the rest of his life, after the Damascus Road, Paul could not hold still. He was always on the road, preaching, teaching, arguing, debating, bringing Jesus to the world and the world to Jesus.

Paul did not just heed God’s command to wade the in the water – he jumped in, body and spirit!

Until God said, “stop,” “slow down,” “wait a minute.”

Having come for the second time to Galatia, Paul wanted to continue to the rich and prosperous Roman provinces of Asia Minor. And the spirit of God said, “no.”

“What about if I just pass through Asia, and go to Bythinia?”

One of the great provinces of the empire, in what is now northern Turkey.

“But the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”

Paul needed to stop. To breathe deeply. To put off wading in the water, until he could discover what God wanted him to do, and where God wanted him to go.

God said to Jonah go, and Jonah wanted to stay.

God said to Paul stay, and Paul wanted to go.

It seems to me that what they both have in common is the need to take time to listen to what God wants, rather than what they want.

Sometimes God wants us to wade in the water – to jump into the problems and the challenges of discipleship.

Sometimes God wants us to stay on dry land for a while – until we are sure we are wading in the water for God, rather than for ourselves.

Doing what God wants us to do, rather than what we want to do.

I always wonder when someone tells me what they are doing is God's will – I always wonder how they know.

For Jonah and Paul it is clear.

God tells them what God wants them to do.

Though in both cases they want to do something else.

Have you ever wondered about how the prophets of old knew where to go?

How is it that the prophets always hear these voices?

Everything would be so much easier if all of us heard voices that told us what we were supposed to do and where we were supposed to go.

Or would it?

How many of us have visions and dreams from God to tell us where to go?

Even if you heard voices, would you tell anybody?

People have been put away for less than that.

As a result, we leave the calls from God to those people recorded in the Bible and try to make out as best we can.

Even back then, our two stories today should convince us that it was not as simple as all that.

The problem is that both the writers of Jonah and of Acts used a short hand for a long list of decisions which were made, but not recorded because they were not germane to the story.

Instead of talking about all the reasons why the spirit of Jesus did not allow Paul to go to Bithynia, they just put that the spirit did not allow him to go.

Instead of making clear all the reasons why Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah, and how he struggled with those reasons, they just say he jumped a boat to Tarshish, in the opposite direction.

So we usually turn away empty handed because we can't think of any ways the spirit tells us to do anything or go anywhere.

But I would contend that there are indications of the Spirit working among us.

One way the Spirit of Jesus impels us to wade in the water is through need.

Pretend a building is burning, you see it, and rush in.

Then you would be a hero, just because you were needed. To be sure, very few of us have a chance to run into a burning building; we are not even sure it would be a very smart thing to do.

But there is not one of us who has not had the experience of being needed by other people.

Sometimes we respond to the need we see, and sometimes, for one reason or another, we do not respond to the need we see.

The key to God's spirit calling us in the need is that uncomfortable feeling we all get, that we should do something, even when we don't.

Maybe we don't think we can deliver what is needed.

Or we think what we could offer is too puny even to talk about.

Or we are too busy to help just now.

Or maybe, admit it, we just don't like needy people!

But the feeling still remains, the uncomfortable feeling haunts us that we should be doing something.

Listen carefully to that uncomfortableness.

For I would contend that very **uncomfortableness** is one way we today experience the call of God to wade in the water!

A second way of spotting that the Spirit is near is especially appropriate for these late days of summer, when we have some time left to think before we leap into all the activities of fall.

Here is the question which leads you to God's Spirit: Are you entirely content with your life right now?

If the spirit calls us to wade in the water through the external experience of being uncomfortable seeing another's need, the spirit calls us in a different way through the internal experience of discontent.

Are you all you want to be? Or is it time to make some changes? Is it time to do some growing.

So often we project our discontent outward: I am not content with my life, so I will get a new job, move to a new place, trade in the old spouse for a new one.

But that does not work if the discontent is the call from the spirit of God for you to change yourself. Not to change job, town or spouse, but to change your self. To grow. In some cases to finally grow up.

Most of the time we would prefer to stop growing, yet right before our eyes, God challenges us to think in new ways and look on a different world.

To be sure, the change will cause some growth pains, and we're not too sure that we're up to it. Like Jonah and Paul, wading in the water may challenge us to go where we do not want to go. Or to prevent us from doing what we want to do.

The change could be from Tarshish to Nineveh or from Galatia to Macedonia.

That is, by the way, what finally happened to Paul: Sitting around, noting to do, his patience exhausted, Paul is told in a dream where he is to go.

“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

Not rich, prosperous, civilized Bythinia, but across the sea to poor, primitive Macedonia, where the barbarians dwell.

The funny thing about Ninevah's and Macedonia's is that the geography doesn't have too much to do with it.

Ninevehs may be across the sea. The barbarians of Macedonia may be on the other side of the world.

But more than likely they are very close to home – because it is close to home that your growing takes place.

God calls us to stretch and grow within our own minds, beliefs, convictions as much as we would if God called us to a foreign land or a barbarian people.

These hills around happy valley protect us from urban blight, but they also hem in much self-righteousness, and provincialism which stunts growth.

Called to wade in the water to Nineveh can push us to a lot of growth.

Uncomfortableness at human need and discontent when we stop growing should be listened to, because they can both be signs of the call of God's spirit to us, as much as dreams and visions were for Jonah and Paul.

How do we know that it is the Spirit of God?

The same way it people have always known.

The same way Jesus told his disciples again and again -- by its fruit.

If it helps growth, if it helps people, if it heals relationships, if, in short, it makes us more human – that is a fruit of the spirit.

Before the summer ends, and the craziness of the fall begins it might be well to look around at our Ninevehs and Macedonias.

It might be well to listen to those feelings of discontent and uncomfortableness which could impel us to grow as Christians.

Then we might also hear, as clear as Jonah and Paul did: arise, go, wade in the water. And like them, even if it takes considerable struggle, as it did for them (there was, after all the whole episode with the whale I didn't mention) -- even if it takes considerable struggle, we might just do it. Wade in the water.

Amen.