

Monologue – I Ran

Jonah's Perspective

I ran. I can't deny it.

My fateful excursion to Tarshish – the fish and all – is well documented in religious studies classes, illustrated Bibles and animated videos. But I don't think it's out of the ordinary, even for an Old Testament prophet, to want to avoid conflict.

What would you have done?

We live beside Assyria, that monster to the north.
And it's not been easy.
First we lose land through a post-war annexation process.
Then we lose Samaria. I mean, really, what's next – Jerusalem?

Oh, don't get me wrong, I'd gladly listen to God and go to their capital city – if I was backed by 10,000 men!
March with an army to Nineveh and break their colonial grip!
Who wouldn't want that?
But to go with empty words? Why?
To proselytize or evangelize?

What could I possibly say to our oppressor?
Why would another government listen to me?
It's not like you have your ticket booked for Washington, DC* either, right?
I mean, what possible precedent is there for such foolish action?

**Substitute other relevant capitol locations as needed*

Oh, sure bring up Moses.
You think I haven't heard that before?
Yes, I know he spoke truth to power, confronted Pharaoh.
And, well, sure, he showed inspired leadership, but look, I'm not Moses – I'm Jonah.
I don't have a burning bush, a back pocket full of plagues or pestilence, or some dramatic salvation story "through the waters."

Well, I guess I have my own water story. But that came later.

At the time, it felt like I was staring down the enemy alone.
And I did what anyone would do –
took my homeland security minister’s advice and skipped the country.

I was due a holiday, anyway.
A buddy of mine has a time-share, so I left and did what was best for me.
Call it “personal time.”

But believe me, I’m not a coward.
It’s not like my plan was risk-free.
You have to take a wooden boat to Tarshish, circa 800 BC.
Not the most reliable vessel.
Not the most hospitable means of travel.

In other words, it’s no surprise that the evils of the sea –
so merciless and unpredictable –
might stir up a great storm that trip.
No surprise that our boat was vulnerable.

And when the first rogue wave crashed over the bow, reality hit.
I could die.
Isn’t it others who get sick? Go missing?
You hear about these things in the news.
But not me. Not here.
Swallowed by the sea? Is there a worse way to ...?

Well, you can imagine the panic.
The captain turning the vessel against the wind as it took on water.
The first mate, from the crow’s nest above, yelling “Starboard! Turn it the other way!”
The deck crew rowing frantically to bring the ship back to land.
One man was nearly thrown over.

I caught him.
His eyes and mine met, in shared terror.
“What have you done, Jonah, to cause God’s anger?”

It’s true, at such a moment, images of your past flash through your mind instantaneously.
It’s true that as the world strangely stands still, the adrenaline in your veins does not.
And it’s true you can have a faith crisis in one second.

I knew suddenly that I was running from something much larger than me.
I knew for certain I was at fault, and I knew others might die accordingly.

“Throw me over! Do it!”
The most difficult words I have ever said.

I don't know what happened next.
I wasn't conscious long.
Spilling and diving.
Tumbling and sucking in water.
I must have been moments from drowning.

I came to – miraculously – inside a moist, fleshy, feculent cavern.
A dark womb.
Tucked closely in a fetal position.
Thank God my limbs were still warm.
I was breathing. But I was trapped.
Literally entombed in the belly of hell.
In the heart of the sea.
Alone with my fears, my cries, my screaming.

People talk about the “dark night of the soul,”
a gripping spiritual crisis of confusion and anguish.
Of God's apparent disappearance.

Had I actually managed to escape God?
A painful, purgatorial three days!

Sudden, patterned movements, contractions, convulsions, upheaval woke me.
Deliverance.
As if I was being...well, like I was being birthed again.
Driven from the depths of a fish's belly and spewed upon a beach, naked.
Entering the world another time.
Alone.

I only had God for my mother. And I clung to her every word:
“Get up, go to Nineveh, and for 40 days proclaim the message I will tell you.”

I didn't care for the Assyrian food or their social mores,

but I learned to relish speaking judgment to empire,
doing outrageous public actions to get the king's attention and to publicly chastise him.
I felt somehow spiritually empowered to preach destruction.
Invigorated to contemplate their doom.

From my soapbox I preached fire and brimstone from Psalm 58:
"You shall all be like the snails that dissolve into slime."
And for 40 days I dreamt about that apocalyptic end,
when God would give the Ninevites what they deserved.

Yes, if my enemy will suffer, I'm willing to preach.
If the God who saves me will destroy them, I'll preach long, dramatic sermons.
If God will finally act justly, I'll preach loud and clear!

And boy, did they hear me well!
Days of fasting.
Weeks of embellished lament.
An entire city in sackcloth and ashes.

"Good try," I thought. "Good try."

I couldn't sleep that 40th night, hours before the day of reckoning - I was that excited.
I took my perch on a hill outside the city wall.
With binoculars in hand, I waited for the inferno.
One hundred years of political corruption, immoral behavior,
violent assault, colonial rule and economic injustice.
All to finally come to an end!
My camera and tripod were ready.

But God did nothing. Not one thing.
No lightning bolt.
No explosion.
No pestilence or plague.
No fire.
Nothing.

You can believe I waited to see.

By evening the first voices emerged from the urban core.
Joined by other voices from the suburbs. And instruments.

They were singing. Imagine!
Louder and louder.
Soon I saw the banners and streamers and balloons.
The ticker tape. A parade of revelers and celebrants awash in confetti.
Like the whole community was alive again,
swept up from the deep and put back on shore.
Reborn, as it were!

The very reason I didn't go to Nineveh in the first place.
Why God can't be trusted!
I didn't come here to witness the salvation of a damned people!

That night, when the final fireworks had ended, I grabbed God by the collar.
"What are you doing?"
I pinned God to the ground.
"Where is justice?"
I gave God a left hook.
"This isn't fair!"
Like Jacob of old, I wrestled all night.

I awoke late, at noon the next day, to incredible heat.
Heat like only a ball of fire could make.
So, before opening my eyes, I managed a tempered smile.
Maybe I had miscalculated God's calendar?
Maybe today was the day.
For a moment I lavished licking the sweat from my face,
my building excitement competing with my labored breathing.
With my inner eye I imagined the firestorm, the city below in ruins.

Imagination can be such a curse.
The sun such a fooler.
The city stood as before – their air conditioning units humming annoyingly.

I cursed the metropolis.
I cursed the heat.
I cursed God.
Why are you so gracious?

After exhausting all my profanity, I sat down,
uncomfortably at first, but then with my back against a tree.

A bush I hadn't even noticed before.
How serendipitous, I thought, to have shade on a day like today.
But the heat was unrelenting.

I awoke the next day to a sultry east wind and a stifling sun.
And my tree was dead.
How dare God remove my one saving grace!

But, in that aphotic space, it was God who spoke to me,
calling for another birth, this one perhaps more painful than any one before.
"Is it right to be angry about a single tree?"
God was now wrestling with me.
"A tree that you did not even grow?"

Oh, I knew this pattern of questioning –
like I was again being undressed, exposed before God.

"Should I not be concerned about Nineveh,
one hundred and twenty thousand people I made in my image, their cattle and livestock?"

Yeah, I had that feeling of nakedness again. How could I argue?

"Is it ever unfair to be gracious?"

I felt myself sinking again into the womb –
that fleshy, moist, feculent cavern, where I wait.
Perhaps for three days again, or maybe three months or three years .
I wait on God's grace, God's mercy,
to be born again.

Arlyn Friesen Epp (Canada), 2011. Home Street Mennonite Church
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