

Fleeing the Presence of the Lord

The Book of Jonah Chapter 1

Opening Prayer

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139-7-10)



Settle Down

Take some time to settle yourself and calm your mind. Breathe deeply and invite the Lord into your awareness. Review where you have been and what you have been doing for the past 24 hours. When did you experience God with you during that time? When did you feel absent from Him? Thank Him.

Scripture Reading

We will reflect on the book of Jonah during this retreat. Read the entire book once then reread chapter 1 slowly. Pay attention to your heart as you read.

Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of Yahweh
And he went down to Joppa
And he found a ship
Going to Tarshish
And he paid his fare
And he went down into it
To go with them to Tarshish from the presence of Yahweh.

1. We all have ingenious ways of fleeing the presence of the Lord. What are yours? When are you most susceptible to flight? What is it about your job that makes you want to run? How does modern culture help or hinder the flight tendency?
2. What are the traditional ways you have experienced the presence of the Lord in your life? Describe what you experience.

Flight

Where should I go to flee your presence? You who dwell in the heavens above and the earth below. You who are in every cell, molecule, atom, and electron? You who walk beside me, wrap your arms around me, and dwell within me.

Should I hide in busyness with a calendar so full I have no time to think, much less feel? Should I run to my checklist focused on what I can accomplish and turn a blind eye to your supporting hand in all that I do? Should I escape to distraction—movies, sports, hobbies, entertainment—to stave off sadness, boredom, and fatigue?

To flee you is to flee me—the authentic me. It is to run from wholeness and pursue fragmentation. It is to be swallowed by social expectations from without and miss the still small voice from within. It is to succumb to hidden fears that rumble in the depths and sidestep the hope that comes from your Word.

I see your face in the stranger. I hear your voice in the wind. I feel your touch in a handshake and smell your fragrance in the rose. You who are everywhere to my imagination and nowhere to my senses, where should I run?¹

Readings for Reflection

Being estranged from God means being unaware of and out of touch with the heights and depths of our personality; it means being estranged from our center and unable to live our own truth. The sickness and lostness of humanity which the Gospels describe is a condition in which we are carried away by unconscious fears and desires, are deaf to the promptings of an intuitive wisdom, reject forces within ourselves making for health and healing, and find the spring of life poisoned. Out of touch with our true center, “the heart’s heart,” we are driven by an innate need to find another center, an absolute to give order and direction to our life; we are liable to find ourselves compulsively attached to some cause or object which takes the place of our true center. *Christopher Bryant, The River Within, page 30*

In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get to make is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough... Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you... Worship power-- you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart-- you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. *David Foster Wallace*

More people are exploited by and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money, and power all take a back seat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes. The history, worldwide of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are in the front line of those doing something about it. None of us can be trusted in this business. If we pray and worship God and associate with others who likewise pray and worship God, we absolutely must keep company with these biblical prophets. We are required to submit all of our words and acts to their passionate scrutiny to prevent the perversion of our religion into something self serving. A spiritual life that doesn't give a large place to the prophet-articulated justice will end up making us worse instead of better, separating us from God's ways instead of drawing us into them.

Eugene Peterson in Introduction to Amos

Benediction

Too late I have loved you, O my Beautiful God, ancient yet ever new! Too late have I loved you! And behold, you were already inside me but I was out and about searching for you elsewhere. I was looking for you amid the lovely things you have made. You were with me the whole time but I was not with you. From Augustine's Confessions (Paraphrase)

¹ Artwork (Acrylic Collage on Paper, 9 x 12, 2019) and Reflection by Steven Stuckey