

It's a scene straight out of a horror movie. You have been kidnapped and blindfolded. After some jostling and being moved from place to place, you finally rip off the blindfold and discover that you have been locked in a room with 10 other people. No, wait, there's an 11th "person" -- a zombie chained to the wall!

A voice over an intercom tells you that there is a key hidden in the room that will enable you to escape to freedom, but to find the key you must work with other people in the room to solve puzzles and put together clues to find the elusive key.

Oh, yes, and every 5 minutes the zombie's chain will be released another foot. Within an hour, the zombie will be able to reach you and begin feasting on you and your new friends. You have only that amount of time to find the key and avoid becoming dinner.

Just so you know, Assyria had a huge empire. It stretched from Iran to Egypt and went as far north as the edge of the Black Sea (where Russia's border is today.) Not only was the empire large, it was powerful. In fact, Nineveh and its king were the most powerful political and military force in the known world of the time. Some historians tell us that they were able to accomplish this because they had a state-of-the-art military machine—chariots with iron wheels! To show the world how powerful and ruthless they were, the Assyrians had mounds of enemy heads piled up outside the gates of their capital city of Nineveh. They were known to skin their enemies alive and then use the skins to cover their monuments. A bunch of nasty, ruthless people.

Unfortunately, these fierce fighters were one of the great enemies of Israel.

The Israelites probably felt like the Assyrians were like a ravenous horde of zombies whose chains were getting longer by the minute.

And yet, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, telling him to go to Assyria, to its capital city of Nineveh, "and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me" (1:2). In other words, their wickedness has come to my attention!

Now, we can't blame Jonah for being terrified at this prospect and wanting to escape such a call. It's like if God came to you one night and said, "I need you to pack up and head to Syria (or Iran or Afghanistan) tomorrow to tell ISIS I'm not happy with them." That's a scenario you'd want to escape!

But here's the interesting twist to the scenario that we don't really hear about until later in the story. We might think Jonah is running because he's afraid of what the Assyrians might do to him—that his mission will be a disastrous failure and his head added to the pile outside the capital city gates. But what we come to realize, however, is that Jonah's fear is not so much about his potential failure but about his potential success!

When he hears that God wants to give the Ninevites a chance to repent of their evil ways, Jonah has a fit. Jonah knows God. Jonah is afraid that he'll be a success, and that the Assyrians might actually listen to him. Oh, no! Nineveh might repent and be spared.

And why is this a problem?

Well, you see, if God spares Assyria, they may live to see another day when they will go back to their evil ways and again become Israel's enemy.

This is, in fact, what happened.

Jonah wants no part of this. He'd rather let them alone and NOT change their behavior. This way God will have to nuke them and get rid of them once and for all.

Think about this: Jonah is single-handedly going to change God's plan! Yeah, right!

So Jonah figures out his own plan. Jonah heads for the seacoast town of Joppa and gets a ticket on a boat that's going in the opposite direction of God's command. (1:3). He books a passage for Tarshish, which many scholars think could be the modern-day island of Sardinia, which is now a beach resort.

Notice what he's fleeing from. He's not fleeing from the Zombie Assyrians. Instead, Jonah is fleeing from "the presence of the Lord" (a phrase the writer uses twice for emphasis in chapter 1). Jonah is attempting to escape from the God who has come to dwell with his people—not just the “chosen people,” because, remember, all people are God's children.

The first reader of this story were the exiles in Babylon. That's when most of the Hebrew Bible was finally written down. The temptation of Jonah to flee was also a temptation for the people in exile who read the scroll of Jonah. It was tempting for people in exile to escape from the culture where they didn't want to be—to condemn and complain about it—to just huddle with their own people.

If you think about it, it's the same temptation Jesus' disciples felt after his crucifixion and then again after the Ascension. They huddled together in the Upper Room until the Holy Spirit came upon them with power.

I believe it's the same temptation we face today—the temptation to retreat and set up our own little Christian panic rooms, with our own culture, our own secret words, our own music, our own schools and our own way of living. Sometimes I think we might be a lot like Jonah, praying for God's condemnation of a culture that has become evil, rude, violent and vulgar. We wait for God's wrath upon it to make some changes. It's tempting to think that God's presence has been withdrawn from the rest of the world, and that we're the last good ones left. Some Christian movements have adopted this tactic over the years, setting up their own version of the island of Tarshish—a utopian place where we don't have to deal with that culture and "those people."

But Tarshish is a false exit. Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, puts it like this: "We respond to the divine command, but we humbly request to choose the destination. We'll be disciples, but not in Nineveh for heaven's sake. Let's try Tarshish. In Tarshish we can have be religious without having to deal with God."

Tony Campolo tells about a father who dragged his 20-something son into his office. The dad was angry about how his son was turning out. He said, "I sent my son to college to get a good education, to make something of himself. But you church people have turned his head around. Look at him now. He's doing mission work. He's out on the streets with pimps and drug pushers. He's giving away his money to poor old ladies. He's living like a pauper, and all he cares about is reaching out to the losers of the world. Don't get me wrong, Campolo, I don't mind being a Christian—up to a point!"

I hate to say this—but there is no such thing. You can't be a Christian up to a point. You're in it—or you're not!

God didn't let Jonah run away, and God doesn't want us to do that either. You see, God has always had a plan in mind—God's redemptive plan for the world. God started it with the Hebrew people to be a light to the world, and God continues that plan today with us, the church. It's a plan to take the wonderful, redemptive love of God into the world and not retreat from it.

If you remember, the gospel of Matthew ends with a reiteration of our divine mission. Jesus tells his followers to "Go and make disciples of all nations (note: *all nations*, that even includes the ones we consider our enemies), baptizing and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Theologian Will Willimon once wondered if that last statement was a promise or a threat. "I will be with you always." I've always looked at it as a comforting promise. But if you think about it, it might just be a good reminder—we can't escape from God's mission.

God is putting the world right, and God has set us right so that we might be *right-putting people* in our world. Jonah was to go and be God's agent to put things right in Nineveh. We, the church, are still called to go

into our world and announce the good news that God is offering redemptive love and grace to any who will receive it—including Zombie Ninevites of all shapes, sizes, creeds, and colors!

When we come to the table this morning, we get our marching orders again. The Bible tells us that people from north, south, east and west are called to the table of grace—and we're supposed to bring them that message. When we partake of the elements, I think of it as getting our vitamins that strengthen us for our tasks.

Jonah knew how much grace God was capable of offering—even to his bitter enemy. We know how much grace God is capable of, because we know Christ died for us and died for the world.

We can never escape this call. We can never escape from the presence of the Lord—any more than Jonah could! God is leading us and giving us the courage to move forward. Praise God, we are in this together.

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Jennifer, Fred, Barbara, Judy, Donna, Renee, Marie, Maria, Alfie, Diana, Clair, Scott, Coreen, Doug, Dorrie, Monica, Larry, Charlene, Chris, Nancy, Shannon, Mike, David, Charley, John, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Bart and Donna.