

Exit Plan

First Reading: Psalm 139:7-12

Second Reading: Jonah 1:1-17

A recurring headline this week has been the drama surrounding the search for an escaped murderer in Pennsylvania. Danelo Souza Cavalcante had just begun serving a life sentence at the Chester County Prison following his conviction last month for the brutal murder of his girlfriend. A video was released this week that revealed a few of the details of his escape. In the security footage, Cavalcante surveys an outdoor hallway, checking to see if anyone is watching. Another prisoner standing in view of the camera appears unaware of Danelo's move into the shadow of the hallway where, without hesitation and obviously pre-planned, Cavalcante stretches out and begins crab-walking up the hallway walls.

As horrible as the fear of this frightful fugitive on the loose is, the video of the prisoner's acrobatic maneuver remains quite impressive, like something out of a James Bond flick or an episode of *American Ninja*, a move that would leave most of us with flattened faces and a few broken bones (just another reason for me to never commit a major crime). A CNN report added that Cavalcante, upon reaching the top of the walls, proceeded to push his way through razor wire, run across a roof, scale another fence,

and push through more razor wire. That's a lot of intention and determination, maybe not as dramatic as Andy Dufresne's crawl through the sewage system of Shawshank State Penitentiary, but tenacious nonetheless.

Such scenes provide a metaphor for the human urge, compulsion, need, desperation to escape. It could arise from one of those embarrassing moments satirized in those Southwest Airlines *Wanna Get Away* commercials — The visitor is snooping in the host's medicine cabinet when all the glass shelves come crashing down, and the announcer's voice intones, "Wanna get away?"

Certainly, embarrassment, humiliation, and awkwardness inspire the desire for escape, but escape also becomes the goal for those who feel figuratively or literally trapped. The abuse victim despairs in continued torment, seeing no avenue of escape. The child of dysfunction dreams, plots, and envisions escape throughout childhood as the only hope for a life with at least a hint of normalcy.

North Carolina's literary legend Thomas Wolfe is celebrated in Asheville, though as a youth he could not wait to escape the city because of the oppressive and challenging environment of his home life there. In

Wolfe's semi-autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*, the protagonist says to his alcoholic father, "By God, I shall spend the rest of my life getting my heart back, healing and forgetting every scar you put upon me when I was a child. The first move I ever made, after the cradle, was to crawl for the door, and every move I have made since has been an effort to escape." Many a troubled child's answer to the question of what they want to be when they grow up is — *Anything that would take me away from here.*

However, the motivation for escape can also be as simple as the common illusion that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, as if mere location is the source of their angst. Many a high school parent has bemoaned their child's expectation — *You want to go to college, where?* Each spring, you'll see a photo of one school's seniors in the paper, everyone wearing the hoodies and t-shirts of the college they'll attend, and it looks like a patchwork quilt with a rainbow of colors representing all the far-flung colleges and universities across the globe to which they'll travel for a degree. I once knew an old-school family physician who told me, "Everybody thinks I went to Davidson because it was such a good school, but actually, it was just the closest school to the farm." In my hometown, it was rare for a kid to ever pay out-of-state tuition. Yet, wanderlust has long

been a powerful force. Frank Capra's George Bailey was obsessed with escape — "I'm shakin' the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world."

Whether embarrassed, physically trapped, emotionally imprisoned, stuck in a dead end life, or just infected with wanderlust, the urge to run away can be consuming. Yet, sometimes it is not a destination that lures you, so much as it is an encounter, a responsibility, a duty, a calling you'd do anything to avoid.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord."

The motivation for escape here is neither imprisonment, confinement, wanderlust, nor abuse. No, what fuels Jonah's escape is avoidance, which is among the most powerful of motivators.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th Century BCE. In those days, Israel, already a divided kingdom, was further diminished by being in the shadow of the alpha dog in the neighborhood, Assyria. At that time, Assyria's relationship with Israel could be compared to the former Soviet Union's relationship to the Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War, the dominant and the dominated. Similarly, Israel retained a culture and a national identity, but everyone knew they were subject to the power of Assyria. When Assyria sneezed, Israel got a cold. And power in Assyria was increasingly being concentrated in the city of Nineveh. So, in the minds of the Israelites, Nineveh was both intimidating and evil, and therefore was the perfect symbol of all that opposed the Lord and the Lord's people.

It is no surprise, then, that the assignment to go and speak hard truths to the powers and people of Nineveh would sow dread in the heart of an Israelite prophet. I remember standing at the door to the fellowship hall of a United Methodist Church as parents were dropping off their fourth graders for the small town's traditional Cotillion session; blue blazers and Laura Ashley print dresses and waves of pre-pubescent anxiety filling the space. A harried couple approached the room with their son in tow, but just as they

crossed the threshold, the boy broke free and ran back toward the exit, and before you could say American Bronze Foxtrot, he could be seen sprinting across the parking lot, a foxtrot fugitive.

In a similar vein, Jonah heard the call of the Lord to go to Nineveh, and he ran as hard and as fast and as he could in the opposite direction. Nineveh was NE and Jonah bolted SW to Joppa (on the Israeli Mediterranean coast near present-day Tel Aviv). There, he bought a ticket to perhaps what one day would be called Spain. So, if geography is a clue, Jonah is obviously running away from God.

He found passage on a ship, but had neglected to check the weather forecast. Satellite imagery would have revealed a Category 3 storm. I've mentioned before the experiences of church member and Coast Guard vet Nelson Godbey aboard the rapid response boats that charge into stormy seas toward watercraft in distress. These boats don't just churn through sea mist, they push forward over, through, and under the frightening and angry ocean swells to reach those in crisis. It is not a journey for the faint hearted. So, think of a similarly sized but significantly more primitive craft negotiating

the storm-churned waters of the Mediterranean. Forget battening down the hatches, Jonah opts for a fetal position and a valium in the boat's hull.

The storm is big enough to freak out the professional seamen scrambling around up on the deck, pumping the bilges, tying down the essentials, throwing everything else overboard, switching to storm sail and jig ... oh, and praying. It is interesting that at this point in the story, it is the supposed pagans who are praying while there's no evidence that this reluctant, tranquilized, snoring prophet of the Lord is doing anything of the sort. *"The captain came and said to [Jonah], 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'"* The representative of the people who would carry Jonah's saga forward to succeeding generations is not the one praying in the storm. Rather, it is the outsider, the foreigner who demonstrates the piety of the faithful.

Having exhausted the strategies of the sailor's handbook, the sailors, along with Jonah, casts lots in an attempt to understand what is going on and how to cope with it. As with a coin toss or a roll of the dice, casting lots was a way to make an impartial decision, leaving only God, or the gods, to

influence it one way or another. When the lot falls to Jonah, he has to fess up to his status as a fugitive. Yet, even when Jonah reveals that throwing him overboard will release them from this trial by storm, the sailors bravely seek some alternative, any alternative to causing Jonah harm. Ultimately, however, the sailors resign themselves to Jonah's fate, and toss him overboard where Jonah catches an Uber sent to him in the form of a great fish by the Lord. *"So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."* Note, once again, it is the supposedly pagan sailors, and not Jonah, who are praying, only now, they are praying to the God of Israel, and not their own small g gods.

Yet, Jonah has certainly not slipped off the Lord's radar — *"The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."*

It is here where far too many people get lost in the details of Jonah's saga, and thus miss the primary question asked by the text. One group, so tied to a literal interpretation, is scouring their college oceanography notes to come up with an explanation of what kind of fish could swallow a man

whole without killing him, and not just that, but also allow the swallowed man to survive three days in its belly.

At the same time, another group dismisses Jonah's experience as a fanciful tale, a scientific impossibility that bears no relevance to our lives or our community.

Both convictions miss the central question raised in this opening text: Can you escape God? In the book of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord proclaims to Jerusalem's exiles in Babylon, *"Thus says the LORD, who created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through waters, I will be with you; through rivers, you shall not be swept away."* Time and again throughout scripture, the answer to whether we can escape God, or whether God will abandon his claim on us, is a resounding *No!* For those we define as outsiders, God stills the storm, to those adrift amid this world's chaos, the Lord provides a way through. The Psalmist proclaims — *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam..."*

To us, so wise, so erudite, so crafty, so deluded with designs of escaping the God question, the Lord says, *Not happenin'*. As the psalmist confesses — *“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”*

In the biblical narrative, the Lord commands and Abraham goes. The Lord commands and Elijah goes. The Lord commands and Samuel goes. The Lord commands and David goes. The Lord commands and Isaiah goes. The Lord commands and Mary goes, Martha goes, the Magdalene goes. The Lord commands, and Moses resists, whines, and complains ... but he goes. Jonah brakes the pattern, thus asking us the question — From what are you trying to escape?

Like many of you, long ago my doctor put me on a statin to chase down that cholesterol, and knowing I was a runner, he said something that stuck with me. He said you can run away from many things, and you can run as far as you'd like to go, but you can't run away from your genes. Well,

similarly in Jonah we learn that you can run away as fast as you can go and as far as you can get, but you won't run away from God's claim on you.

On the dock in Joppa, in the hull of the boat, in the storm, in the cold churning waters of the Mediterranean, in the belly of the fish, Jonah could not escape God's claim on him, could not escape God's call to him, and could not escape God's embrace of him. Neither can you. Amen.