

(09-08-24) And Are We Yet Alive? (1)

Be Obedient

Jonah 1:1-17

And Are We Yet Alive?

For the month of September, we will have time to think about our call from God. It can be our general call as Christians or specific calls that God has wanted us to address. My hope and prayer is this: our call can be reignited and we can passionately live up to our call together.

The new sermon series is “**And Are We Yet Alive?**” I adopted the title from the book by former Bishop Richard Wilke.

His book starts with the following comments: “Our sickness is more serious than we at first suspected. We are in trouble, you and I, and our United Methodist Church. We thought we were just drifting, like a sailboat on a dreamy day. Instead, we are wasting away ... Once we were a Wesleyan revival, full of enthusiasm, fired by the Spirit, running the race set before us like a sprinter trying to win the prize. The world was our parish; we were determined to “publish the glad tidings in the full light of sun.” Our Wesley-inspired dream and directive was to “spread Scriptural holiness” across the continent. Circuit riders raced over hill and valley. New churches were established in every hamlet. Our missionaries encircled the globe. Now we are tired, listless, fueled only by the nostalgia of former days, walking with a droop, eyes on the ground, discouraged, putting one foot ahead of the other like a tired old man who remembers, but who can no longer perform. We sing “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” as if it were an anthem instead of a testimony. We celebrated bicentennial as if our future were behind us.” (Richard Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?* (1986), 9)

Can you guess when the book was written? 1986. Almost 40 years ago, one of the leaders of our denomination lamented over the stern and dire fact that we as a church are out of focus, losing our call to spread Scriptural holiness in the world. I don't think much has changed since Bishop Wilke's lamentation. Our call for spreading Scriptural holiness has been more blurred, if not completely darkened. It is not difficult to hear the cries of many churches that are concerned about their existence. “And Are We Yet Alive?” How about our church, Carleton UMC? At the bottom of the problems we have faced is the issue of our obedience to God's call.

I strongly believe that we can find God's heart not only for the world but also for our church, our denomination, and our lives as we delve into the messages of the Book of Jonah together.

Then why is our obedience to God's call so imperative?

First of all, our obedience is our true worship.

What is worship? One of the simplest definitions of worship is from Robert Webber. He says, "**Worship is a verb, celebrating God's mighty deeds of salvation.**"

I strongly believe that one of the verbs of worship is "obey." Let us read this Scripture together. "**What is more pleasing to the Lord: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.**" (1 Samuel 15:22 NLT)

In that light, Jonah was not a true worshiper.

"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.*" (Jonah 1:1-3 NRSV)

Jonah received God's call to prophesy for the Northern Kingdom of Israel and bring God's message of judgment to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. However, Jonah didn't want to obey God's call to Nineveh. He tried hard to run away from his call, from God's presence, and from his relationship with God.

Secondly, Our Obedience Is To Ultimately Demonstrate God's Saving Grace.

Whenever you read the Bible and find God's warning of judgment against Israel, Judah, or any other nations, it means God wants them to be saved and to return to Him. Before God's judgment, there is always loving patience and gracious delay. So, God calls Jonah to reveal His saving grace to the people in Assyria through him.

Our call is ultimately to reveal God's saving grace and mercy. Jonah was unfaithful and disobedient to God's call. However, God used Jonah's unfaithfulness and disobedience to shed light upon the lives of the Gentiles on a ship where Jonah was hiding from God.

Here we can find one of the amazing testimonies of God's work of salvation from the unknown Gentiles in the Old Testament. The captain of the ship came and woke up 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.**" (Jonah 1:6 NRSV). Even the Gentile captain worried about Jonah, the man of God and

asked him to pray for the people's salvation. We are living in a world where even non-Christians worry about the churches.

People on the ship cast lots and came to know that Jonah was the reason for the chaotic situation. Then, they asked Jonah, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" (Jonah 1:8 NRSV)

We can sense the urgency and desperation of the Gentiles on board. It seems that people in the world are in urgent and desperate situations, asking us, "Who are you, what are you doing, and why are you here?"

Jonah replied, "I am a Hebrew ... I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:9 NRSV). He recognized himself as a worshiper of God, but he was not a true worshiper due to his disobedience. Sometimes we recognize ourselves as God's worshiping people, acknowledging Him as the Creator of all nations and creatures. However, we hesitate to reveal God's holiness, Kingdom, and will. We disobey God even though we know who He is.

Jonah told them to throw him into the sea. The Gentiles on board prayed to God for God's forgiveness and worshiped Him, calling Jonah's God as their own Lord. "Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." (Jonah 1:16 NRSV)

Even though Jonah was hiding himself from God's presence, God was there with him and also with the Gentiles on the ship. God revealed His saving Grace to the Gentiles. Also, God used this time to prepare Jonah's heart to witness God's saving grace for the people of Nineveh.

Last But Not Least, Our Obedience to God Is For Our Growth.

When can we grow in our love for our God and our neighbor? We can grow when we experience God-moments or "A-ha" moments and when we have a new understanding of God's love and power.

There are things that we finally understand only when we obey. God seemed to give Israel a chance to repent and return to Him to avoid the upcoming judgment through Assyria as the Assyrians temporarily repented of their sins and returned to God. Do you think Jonah knew about it? Maybe not. Our obedience can unfold God's saving grace for people in our generation or the generations to come. Our obedience to God is sometimes like planting a seed for a future harvest of saving souls. That is the joy and charm of our obedience to God.

Let me close my sermon today. Our new sermon series, “[And Are We Yet Alive?](#)”, is one of Charles Wesley’s hymns we have in our hymnal, hymn number 553. This hymn has traditionally been sung during the opening session of the annual conference. We have to honestly ask ourselves if we are yet alive. What about our call from God? Do you have any nudges from God in your life that you haven’t obeyed yet?

Our obedience is our true worship. Our obedience is ultimately to reveal God’s saving grace. And our obedience is for our growth. There are things that we can understand only when we obey. In our obedience, we can find our renewal and revival.