

It's a scenario straight out of a horror movie. You have been kidnapped and blindfolded. After being jostled about, 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 a 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 together to solve puzzles and decipher clues to its whereabouts. Oh, and every five minutes the zombie's chains will be released another foot and within an hour, the zombie will be able to reach you and your new friends. You have only that amount of time to find the key and avoid becoming dinner.

Sounds like a nightmare? Actually, for an increasing number of people it sounds like a lot of fun! This is just one of many different game scenarios, from the thousands of "Escape Rooms" that are popping up all over the world. The idea is to get a group of people together for an evening of teamwork, brain-busting, and nerve-wracking fun --while also avoiding danger which can range from: a simulated ticking bomb in a room, to being trapped in a prison cell, or thrown into a sewer to avoid a killer clown with a red balloon. It's all about solving the puzzle before time expires.

The Escape Room phenomenon has been a boon to leaders trying to build teamwork, and families and groups of friends building stronger bonds of fun and fellowship. It's a chance to suspend the ordinary for a while and enter into a world where the danger might not be real, but the excitement certainly is! There's something fun about solving a problem and escaping together!

The prophet Jonah, in our first lesson this evening, could have used a little help in his own escape scenario! Being famously trapped in the belly of a fish may have been the ultimate and most awesome Escape Room scenario in history, but the real escape that Jonah tried to pull off was actually an exercise in total futility.

He tried to escape the call of God! Fortunately, God intervened before his time ran out!

Jonah, son of Amittai, was most likely the prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel to whom reference is made in 2 Kings 14:25. And as a prophet he predicted the prosperity of the kingdom under Jeroboam II, but that the prosperity would be short-lived, because the Assyrians would invade just a few decades later in 722 B.C. and essentially wipe the northern kingdom of Israel off the map. Assyria was the dominant empire of that period and its' aggressive and relentless thirst for conquest would have felt to the Israelites like a ravenous horde of zombies whose chains were getting longer by the minute. The archives of the Assyrian kings reveal their bloodthirsty approach -- the piling up of the heads of their enemies, and skinning of people while they were still alive! Assyria was a bitter, hated enemy to whom smaller nations, including Israel, owed tribute.

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." 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 tomorrow to tell ISIS I'm not happy with them." Talk about a scenario that you'd want to escape!

But here's the interesting twist to the scenario that, like an Escape Room clue, is revealed in more detail later. 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 would be put on a pike. 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. His fit about God's grace in chapter 4 is indicative of his real fear. He's afraid that his message of warning might actually be heeded, that Nineveh might

actually repent and be spared. It is, after all, a lot easier to preach condemnation to one's enemies than it is to preach grace.

And this is a problem why? Because if God spares Assyria, they may live to see another day when, renouncing their devotion to Yahweh, they will again become Israel's enemy. This is, in fact, precisely what happened. Jonah wants no part of this. So, Jonah, (whose name in Hebrew means "son of faithfulness" and "dove" doesn't soar in peace and faithfulness to Nineveh, but goes down to Joppa, where he scurries into the hold of a ship -- precisely the opposite direction of God's command. But notice what he is fleeing from. It's not the Assyrians. Instead, Jonah is fleeing from "the presence of the Lord" (a phrase the author uses twice for emphasis in verse 3)! Jonah is attempting to escape from the God who has come to dwell with his people.

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 surrounding culture, to condemn and complain about it, and huddle with their own people. 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 music, our own schools, and our own way of living.

Like Jonah, we pray for God's condemnation of a culture that has become a cesspool of evil, and we await God's wrath upon it. We figure, like Jonah, that God's presence has been withdrawn from the rest of the world, and that we're the last ones left. Plenty of Christian movements have adopted this tactic, 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 actually a myth, a false exit.

Pastor and Author Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, puts it like this: "We respond to the divine initiative, but we

humbly request to choose the destination. We are going to be [disciples], but not in Nineveh for heaven's sake. Let's try Tarshish. In Tarshish we can have a religious career without having to deal with God."

The "divine initiative" is God's redemptive plan for the world -- a plan that began with Israel and continues with His church. It's a plan to take the redemptive love of God into the world and not retreat from it. The gospel of Matthew ends with a reiteration of this divine initiative. Jesus tells his disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations [note *all nations*, including the ones who are 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."

Will Willimon, a religious professor at Duke Divinity School, once speculated as to whether this last statement was a promise or a threat. "I will be with you always!" You can't escape from this mission. God is putting the world right, and God has set us right so that we might be right-putting people. Jonah is to go and be God's agent to put things right in Nineveh. Israel was to be God's family who would be a light to the world, revealing God's plan to put things right. It's important for us to take note however, that God's divine mission was and is a group project!

Jesus was the embodiment of Israel who came to fulfill God's redemptive plan in his own life, death and resurrection. The church is still called to go into a godless world and culture, and announce the good news that God is offering redemptive love and grace to any and all who will receive it, including Ninevites with all kinds of stripes! If we are really God's people, then we can never escape this call. We're in it together. There is no way to avoid it!

Jonah, as most of us know from our time in Sunday school or Bible study, are aware that he actually tried to escape. He got on a ship, got in a storm, and got thrown in the sea! He couldn't escape God and couldn't escape his mission. He gets

dumped in the water and from there he gets on with heeding God's call. Dripping wet, "Jonah set out and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord!" And, with God's help (and in spite of Jonah's half-hearted preaching), his mission is successful!

Come to think of it, Jonah's journey from the water to the gates of Nineveh is actually a paradigm of what happens to us in baptism. Jonah will undergo what looks like certain death. He will be buried in the belly of a great fish, and then be deposited from the water onto the shore to engage the mission to which God has called him. Sounds a lot like the journey of a Christian (except maybe the fish part). We are baptized, put into the water, die with Christ and are buried with him under the waves, and then we are commissioned for the mission he has for us -- a mission that will take us to the Nineveh's of the world. It's a mission that requires that we become part of a team called the church because we can't do it alone. Together we are reminded that we can never escape from the presence of the Lord. All the clues we receive point to God's mission.

We have to wonder, though, if things would have gone differently for Jonah if he had had a partner or two in his escape scenario. Rarely does the Lone Ranger approach work in Scripture. Moses had Aaron, Elijah had Elisha, Paul had Barnabas, and even Jesus had 12 disciples. Partnering with others helps us discern the clues that point to where God is leading us and gives us the courage to move forward together.

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 have witnessed a Savior dying on a cross at the hands of his enemies but, even more importantly, dying for them. And because we know how much grace God is capable of, we must not attempt to escape from offering it to others -- even if they might be like those zombies in Nineveh! So, let's share the Good News of God's mercy,

forgiveness, love and grace, let's share the Gospel story with everyone we meet!
Our neighbors, our families, our friends, our colleagues, our acquaintances, and
even our enemies! Thanks be to God. Amen.