

Sermon for Sunday, August 10, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"GOODBYE, GOD, I'M GOING TO COLLEGE"

Jonah 1: 1-16

Text: "But Jonah rose 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 the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord."
--Jonah 1:3

An anxious mother was hovering outside her son's door on his last night at home. The next day he was leaving for college, and naturally she had certain anxieties about him. Finally, the crack of light under his door went out as he turned off his lamp. The mother, with her ear against the door now, could hear him saying his prayers, "Goodbye, God," he said, "I'm going to college."

In our scripture for this morning we read part of the story of a man who thought he could say goodbye to God, too. The Bible puts it this way, "But Jonah rose to flee from the presence of the Lord..." Jonah had a mighty small concept of God. Back in those days every nation--or even most large cities--had their own local deity. And when you left that city or nation, you left the jurisdiction of that god and you came under the authority of the new god into whose area you went. So when Jonah's God whom he had worshipped all his life put certain obligations and requirements on him that he didn't like, Jonah simply left home. He was leaving God's jurisdiction. He was putting behind him the authority of a God with whom he didn't agree. He was putting himself under some new gods.

One way or another a college student going away from home inevitably feels that he is under the jurisdiction of a new God. He has left his old God behind. Often he is eager to discover who his new gods will be. His new God may be the god of popularity, or the god of new moral codes, or the god of new freedoms. But whatever that new god is like, he will certainly be different from the old God he left behind with mother and dad and the preacher and Sunday School. As a matter of fact, the student going away from home may not always be aware that he has found new gods or new loyalties or a new center for life. Sometimes we are so relieved to get out from under the oppression of our old God that we are not always aware that we have put new gods in His place. Often, it is not until much later--looking back--that we discover we do, after all, have new gods.

I think we need to go on to say that it is often quite true that our old God of youth and childhood, our old God of Sunday School, does not seem very adequate any longer. Our situation is now different, we are different, life is different. Somehow the old God we have fixed in our minds doesn't seem to fit any longer or measure up. And when the subject of religion comes up in the dorm, or the class, or the bull session, we are embarrassed to admit to our old God. Somehow He seems so inadequate and doesn't fit any more. We are now far too sophisticated for Him, and we hate to admit we know Him.

So the Bible says that Jonah rose up to flee from the presence of the Lord. Jonah did it. College students do it. ...and so do most of us. Sunday morning's God doesn't seem to fit in with the big business deal--or the corporation image--or the country club--or the bridge game--or the cocktail party. He simply isn't wise enough or sophisticated enough for those things and we cut Him out. He doesn't belong. We are ashamed to admit we know Him. So, "Goodbye, God," said Jonah, "I'm leaving for Tarshish." "Goodbye, God," says the businessman, "it's Monday morning and I'm off to the office." "Goodbye, God," says the housewife, "I'm off to the bridge party and the cocktail party." Is it any wonder the student says "Goodbye, God, I'm going to college"?

The first thing Jonah did was flee from God. The second thing he did was to go to sleep. A storm came up and the Bible says, "The mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god; and they threw the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep." Isn't that amazing? Jonah was asleep! And being asleep, he missed two important things. First, he missed the fact that his little world--his ship and his fellow sailors--were in desperate straits. The Bible says the little ship was threatening to break up. Here his very world was coming apart at the seams, tragedy was upon them, and Jonah was asleep, oblivious to the danger. Second, being asleep to the problem, Jonah missed another important thing. Whatever the situation, God was somehow involved in the solution. The captain of the ship came and awakened Jonah and said, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish." And whatever else we might say about the pagan captain, at least he had the spiritual perception to know that in their desperate plight, the solution lay in God.

Isn't it pretty obvious that the world today is in desperate straits? We talk about detente and then discover the Russians are overtaking us in nuclear capability. We saw Viet Nam go down the tubes along with Cambodia. We see tensions and war in the Middle East, floods in India, famine in great parts of the world, and the list goes on and on. And it disturbs me deeply that many who have gone off to college are asleep to the threat of these massive nations and international problems. But what disturbs me even more deeply is that many of us do not yet fully understand that all of the questions that face us today are ultimately religious questions, moral questions. And that means that any answer to the threat to the little earth ship we sail on is ultimately rooted and grounded in God.

So, first we note that Jonah thought he had left God behind, and second that he went to sleep. Being asleep, he was unaware of the plight of his little world and he never dreamed the solution somehow lay with God. Now, notice in the third place that when Jonah was confronted with the realities of life, he discovered that his concept of God was too small. Notice carefully! I didn't say Jonah's God was too small. I said his idea of God was too small. Jonah had some pretty provincial ideas about God. It would be the equivalent of our thinking that God could be at Hanley and Davis Drive, but not at Columbia--or UMSL--or Wash U--or wherever. It would be thinking that God could be here in this sanctuary, but in the home or in the bank, or the factory or the office, God simply was not qualified to be there. It is outside His province--outside His scope, His field of activity. But Jonah made an amazing discovery. He found out he couldn't escape God--he couldn't get away from God's presence, not even (or especially!) on a ship in the middle of the sea caught in a storm. So something had to change. And the thing that had to change was Jonah's ideas about God. God wasn't as he had thought at all. God was bigger than he thought! Do you remember what the Psalmist wrote? He said, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." Jonah could have written that. When he set sail he never dreamed it was so, but out there in the storm, he suddenly knew his idea of God was too small. He could have written it then. Now he knew that his ideas and concepts of God were no longer adequate. They had to be expanded and enlarged.

Thomas Wolfe has entitled one of his books, You Can't Go Home Again. He doesn't mean parents won't let their young people in the house again once they leave (although sometimes they might think seriously about it!), nor does he mean the kids won't go home one weekend when there is no football game or they don't have the cash for a date. He means that when one leaves home, he can never return the same. While he is gone, certain changes occur not only in him, but in the home, so that when you go back, things can never be the same again. A wise man once said that you can't put your foot in the same river twice. By that he meant that the river doesn't stay the same. It moves and changes and from moment to moment as the current flows, it is a different river. So, in this sense, none of us can ever go home again. A freshman going off to college can never go back to the home he left and find things just the same. He will have changed physically and will probably have more hair on his head and chin and more flesh on his bones. He will change emotionally for he will have learned to cope with new situations and to make decisions on his own. He will change intellectually, for he will know new things and be able to think in new terms. And he will also change religiously. Any student who is half awake will have his faith challenged and changed at college. If it isn't changed by some course or professor, it will be changed and reshaped by argument with the atheist down the hall or the agnostic on the next floor. He will have a growing suspicion about the pat old answers he had and he will raise questions he had never really thought of before.

So it was that Jonah tried to run away from God. However, he discovered in the end that he couldn't run away from God but he had indeed left behind some of his old ideas about God. He didn't need a new god, but he did need a better and broader and deeper understanding of the old one. He thought he had left God behind, but it didn't work out that way. When the sailors brought Jonah up on deck to question him and to find out if he was the source of their trouble, Jonah's ideas about himself and his ideas about God were already changing. He had planned to leave God behind, but now he confessed, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." He already saw God in a new dimension, a God of the whole world who was ruler and creator of everything.

In the same sense the student who finishes college will be quite different religiously, for his ideas about God will change. To that extent, when the freshman prayed, "Goodbye, God, I'm going to college," he was quite right. He was saying "Goodbye, God of the long white beard. Goodbye, childhood religion with the neat answers. Goodbye, Jesus of the pretty pictures with sheep and the little children. Goodbye, religion with the pat answers and the ready-made solutions. Yes, goodbye, God, I'm going to college."

In that sense, the God of this morning needs to be said goodbye to by each of us as we leave here this morning. We will meet Him out in the world tomorrow in the office, the bank, the kitchen; at the golf game, the bridge table, and all the other places we try to go without Him. We will discover Him in new situations and He will come to us in new dimensions, in new ways, in broader and more universal terms. We will discover that our small, limited view of Him was inadequate and we must keep rethinking who He is and who we are. God kept breaking into Jonah's world. He will keep saying to us, "You did not really leave me behind. I am still here. I am still relevant to where you are right now. I am not an old-fashioned relic you left at church, but I am here and you must deal with me." So it turns out that we discover God to be a growing part of all of our thinking and learning and growing. And the person who isn't discovering that is like Jonah, asleep to what is really going on.

Let me make one last observation. When it became apparent that Jonah was the problem, he persuaded the sailors to throw him overboard into the sea. When they did, we read, "The sea ceased from its raging." You see, when Jonah surrendered himself to his growing understanding of God, when he was obedient to his enlarged vision of the Lord, he was able to save his fellow travelers on the threatened ship. I think there is an important analogy here. The little ship earth sails through some terribly troubled waters today. In many ways we are threatened by storm and tempest and the blowing winds of trouble. What our world today needs most of all are brave young men and women who are discovering God in new dimensions and growing, deeper terms, and who are willing to be cast for His sake into the storms of life. In the process, the troubled seas of our time will cease from their raging and so many of the problems of the little ship earth will be solved. It will be a far better world when men and women, when young boys and girls--with deeper insight and broader vision of God, can say with Jonah, "I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the dry land...for your sake, take me up and throw me into the sea."