

Can You Hear Me Now?
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The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it, – Jonah 3:1-10, NRSV

Have you ever had problems with your cell phone? If I could, I would go around either Online or in the Drive-In Worship Service and ask people not only to raise their hand if they've had a problem with the cell phone, but to share with me what kind of problems they had -- but that is a little impractical today. So, think about your one or two top cell phone gripes.

This week I found an article in which someone came up with his "Top 10 Cell Phone Problems." See if yours is on the list. You will see the author gets a little creative in his description of the problems.

10. Is That A Scratch? - This usually happens to our new cellphone before we have put that protective shield on the screen.
9. Why Were You Texting In The Tub? -- Anyone ever dropped their cell phone in water? Some say throwing your cell phone in a bag of rice may save it -- though it did not mine.
8. Zombie Phone -- This refers to what the author calls a "dead phone."
7. You're Breaking Up -- This one is pretty clear it is a real nuisance unless you really don't want to talk to the person.
6. Sticky Keys -- This is usually the result of debris that is found its way into the keys of your cellphone.
5. I Didn't Hang Up On You! -- This is probably the most common for me when both parties claim that they didn't hang up.
4. Where Is It? -- If you have ever lost a cell phone, you probably know about the panic you feel -- and the frustration, wishing you had set up the automated location function.
3. My Address Book Is Gone! -- Sometimes something changes on your phone and all your contacts are gone -- which means that when somebody texts you and you don't know

who it is, but they seem to know you -- you have to text, "Sorry I lost my contact list. Who is this?"

2. I Can't Hear You -- This is probably the most common one for me, along with inadvertently hanging up on someone, and it has inspired many commercials.

1. I'm Drawing A Blank Screen -- While this is number one on his list, I've rarely experienced this, but who knows?

The author of this piece added this:

"If we didn't have cell phone problems, we'd never have the ubiquitous "Can you hear me now?" commercials. This sounds like a good reason to get rid of them – the cell phone problems, I mean. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done. I said, EASIER SAID THAN DONE. Can you hear me now? Good. (June 14, 2012 -- Contributed by Info Guru Paul Seaburn)

So, have you ever sensed a "call" from God to do something that you really did not want to do -- not a phone call, but the strong sense that God wanted you to do something specific? Maybe you wanted to end that "call" as fast as you could? And maybe, like the guy on the TV commercial how is left hanging on the phone with no one there, God is left out there hanging while still saying to us, "Can you hear me now?" I wonder if something like that is going on in the story of Jonah. Maybe that question, "Can you hear me now?" is one that could be asked all throughout this story – and even to us today.

Our story begins with God calling Jonah to go to a large city and to tell the people that they need to change their way of living or it will lead to their destruction – literally. If God said to Jonah, "Can you hear me now?" Jonah's response may have been either, "I can't hear you" (which really meant he didn't want to hear God), or that he heard God loud and clear and decided to go in the opposite direction. God wants him to go to these people and Jonah heads the other way – out to sea – to try and run away from God. He would not be the first, or the last person to try to run from a situation by heading out to sea. Why he did not want to go is not all that clear. The music we are about to hear suggests that Jonah did not want to go because it demanded too much from him. He didn't want to give up his "comfort." *Let someone else do it.* Maybe that is why he didn't want to go.

Or perhaps Jonah did not want to go because he did not really care for the people God wanted him to go help save. There are other individuals in the Bible like Moses and Jeremiah, who did not feel *qualified* to go – but that does not seem to be the case with Jonah. Jonah doesn't *want* these people to be saved. Jonah wanted justice and judgment – for God to wipe them out. But God wanted to warn the people in order for them to change the way they were living. God wants to show them mercy. But Jonah has different plans.

Jonah heads out to sea and, once he is out at sea, a great storm comes up and the ship and its crew are at risk. They cast lots to find out who is to blame. Jonah says that it is probably him, so why don't they throw him overboard and perhaps save themselves. This seems like a good plan, so they do it. And, as we all know, a big fish comes and swallows up Jonah.

While he is in the belly of that fish for three days, Jonah has a change of heart. If he had a cell phone, he would be the one hoping that he had good coverage and that God would respond when he cried out, “God, can you hear me now?” And God does hear Jonah and rescues him. The fish spits him out on the beach and once again God calls to Jonah. This time, when God asks, “Can you hear me now?” Jonah says, “Yes, you’re coming in perfectly clear and I will go and tell these people what you want me to tell them.” So, he does.

He goes and preaches what is a five-word sermon in the Hebrew. Five words! (I bet some of you would like me to preach a five-word sermon some day.) What happened in response to this five-word sermon? When God spoke to the people, did they hear God now?

Well, when God sent Jonah, the unwilling prophet, the people heard God’s words and they responded! They *repented*, which is a Bible word that means more than just to feel bad about something or to say we are sorry. It literally means to change your mind and to change the direction you are going in life as evidenced by your actions. Whatever we are doing wrong, it means that we stop doing it. And for the people of Nineveh, this was the pathway to life. God says to them through Jonah, “Can you hear me now?” and they respond, “Loud and clear.” And, instead of judgment, they receive God’s mercy.

My guess is that we can relate to a number of the characters in this story. We can relate to Jonah and his desire to run the other way when God asks him to do something that will help others. We’ve all done that. It doesn’t make it good; it just means that we’ve all been there. Notice how God’s pursuit and love is relentless. Last Sunday we talked this pursuit as “the hound of heaven” as described in the poem by Francis Thompson. God really wants us to reach out to others with God’s mercy and grace and God will go to great lengths to get us onboard. Maybe we have been trying to head away from God and we need to get going back in the right direction.

Or maybe we are at a very low time in our lives when we feel like we are at the bottom of the sea in the belly of a great fish – about ready to give up. If that is where we are, know that if we call out to God and say, “Can you hear me now?” God’s answer is always, “Yes!” God hears us, particularly in our times of need, and God wants to help us get back to where we need to be. If you are at that place, God hears you and wants to help you find your way in life.

But maybe today God is calling all of us to consider what it is we need to do in each one of our lives to reach out to those in our world who are struggling in a variety of ways. Some folks around us may have made bad choices in life and find themselves leading a lifestyle that is not life-giving, but rather a slow death that is killing their souls. That doesn’t necessarily mean someone who is down on his or her luck. It could be someone who is highly successful in the professional world, but who is falling apart on the inside. Or maybe it is simply someone who needs a helping hand, and we have the resources to help them get back on their feet. Can we hear God’s call to go and find ways to care for those in need?

Or will we say that we want to maintain our comfort level and say that someone else should go instead? We’ve got better things to do. Or maybe our hearts are closed off to the needs of others. So, we try to find some reason not to reach out to others with the love of Christ. We say that it’s their fault and they should get what they deserve. In doing so, we may forget the grace and

mercy that God showed to each one of us. If we all got what we always deserved, then we would all be in trouble – wouldn't we? The purpose of justice is never just to punish someone – it is always to try to bring about restoration. I guess it all depends on which part of this Jonah story you focus on.

A hospital chaplain tells the story of going into the hospital lobby one day and seeing a man with his cheeks cradled in his palms as he stared at the carpet between his toes. The chaplain introduced himself and asked him what was going on. The man said that his fiancée was in the ER. She had rear-ended a 10-ton street sweeper with her VW Beetle and the doctor said she probably wouldn't make it. The man was covered with blood, so the chaplain asked if he had been in the accident as well. The man said, "no," but he was following her in his car, and had tried to do CPR to save her. They talked and it turned out the man was a former pastor. He had just gone through a divorce, which was often the end of ministry in his church. The chaplain saw something in his eyes and asked him if he thought God was punishing him for something. The man said, "I know he is." The chaplain asked, "For what?" The man went on to tell him that his fiancée had been the church secretary with whom he had become involved. The accident happened as she was moving her stuff to his house. (Just then the nurse said that if the woman survived the next 24 hours, she might have a chance.)

The chaplain asked if he would like him to say a prayer. The man said, "Go ahead, but I doubt if God's listening anymore." The former pastor went on to remind the chaplain of the story of Jonah and how when Jonah shirked his duties, God sent a big fish to swallow him up. The chaplain later said he thought to himself about another part of the story of Jonah, when Jonah was in the dark belly of the fish and Jonah's prayer sounded like the cell phone commercial, "Hey, God, can you hear me now?" But, out of the belly of the fish Jonah cried out to God and God brought him up out of the depths. Like Jonah, the former pastor doubted God could hear him now, but God heard that prayer. The fiancée recovered and the former pastor stopped seeing God as someone who was out to get him. (From Chaplain Norris.com – 4/29/2003)

You see, it all depends on which part of the story we focus on. The good news is that God is always there to "take our call" when we reach out for help. No matter where we are, *God can hear us now*. So, whether we are calling out to God, or God is calling to us to go and help others, God is at work in our lives and in our world. And friends, that is the good news!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.