

# The Second Baptist Pulpit

**“Buying a Ticket to Tarshish”**

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

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The night before the inauguration of our new President, Barack Obama, on Larry King’s talk show on CNN, Larry King had several prominent black men as guests talking about the significance to them of an African-American man taking the oath of office as President of the United States.

Kevin Johnson, former NBA basketball player with the Phoenix Suns and now Mayor of Sacramento, shared how his young nephew, if you asked him what he wanted to be when he

grew up, used to always say he wanted to be Michael Jordan. Now, Johnson said, if you ask young nephew what he wants to be when he grows up, he says he wants to be President, and he wants to go to Harvard.

Along those same lines, the most interesting thing I read after the inauguration was the story in Wednesday’s *Commercial Appeal* of a test given to 120 Americans before and after Obama’s inauguration. It showed that the performance gap between black and white

students on the test that was administered before Obama's nomination to be President virtually disappeared when the test was given again after his election and after the inauguration.

Researchers from Vanderbilt and two other universities gathered 120 white and black Americans to take the test. The test was made up of twenty questions taken from the GRE. The students were asked to begin by filling in a bubble identifying themselves by race.

On the first test, the one given before Obama's nomination, white test takers averaged getting twelve out of twenty questions right, and black test takers averaged 8.5 out of twenty. On the test given after Obama's inauguration, both black and white test takers averaged the same score.

Researchers had previously shown that anxieties about perpetuating racial stereotypes had caused lower test scores, and they are theorizing that Obama's example increased the sense of competence in the black test takers and reduced the anxiety associated with difficult test questions. And so they performed better on the test.

I think that is fascinating. What I think all of this communicates

is the power of what we think is possible for us. It's almost like the power of suggestion that magicians take advantage of.

We are all of us limited by what we think is possible—and by what we think is impossible. We are limited by what we perceive to be our horizons.

We are limited by what we believe is possible.

We have an example today in this familiar Bible story of limiting ourselves from being what God has created us to be, limiting ourselves from doing what God is calling us to do. When we don't fulfill what God is calling us to do with our lives, when we choose to go in another direction instead—I'm calling that buying a ticket to Tarshish.

You know, all over the Bible people are responding to God's call. Abraham is heading out not knowing where he's going. All over the New Testament people are getting up and following Jesus. Fishermen are dropping their nets, tax collectors are forgetting about credit and debit, and others are leaving their parents behind. A man called Paul travels the Mediterranean spreading the Gospel.

But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with tickets for Tarshish.

Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, but that was not at all what Jonah in mind. Going to Nineveh was not a coveted assignment for a young preacher.

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah gets up and heads for Tarshish.

Notice that Jonah doesn't just ignore God. He doesn't stay in Joppa where he was living and working. He doesn't just hunker down into his old job and ignore God's call on his life. God tells him to go and he does go. He goes.

He is obedient—kind of. But he chooses the destination. He chooses where he's going to go. He wants to go, but he doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He wants to go to Tarshish.

Nobody knows exactly where Tarshish is geographically. But I know that Tarshish is that place we go to avoid doing what we are supposed to do. I buy a ticket to Tarshish every time I am supposed to be starting to work on my sermon but instead I decide I need to clean my desk first.

Tarshish is that place we go when we don't believe what we are called to do is possible. Tarshish is that place I go on the internet and buy a ticket for when I don't believe I really can be what God created me to be. So I go in another direction instead.

So Jonah buys a ticket to Tarshish and gets on board a ship. Jonah is cast overboard during a storm and is swallowed by a great fish. After three days and nights of severe indigestion—Jonah did seem to have a sour disposition—the big fish threw up on dry land and out came Jonah on the very shore where he left in the first place. God comes to Jonah again and says, *Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.* Jonah, now lacking the will to resist, begrudgingly does what God commands and goes into preaching.

He goes to the edge of the big city of Nineveh, delivers his one sentence sermon (five words in Hebrew), packs his bags, and prepares to leave for home.

*There, are you satisfied God? I went. I preached. It's done. I'm going home.*

So now, we've seen Jonah be disobedient—he headed for Tarshish when God told him to go to Nineveh.

Now we've seen him be obedient for the wrong reason. He goes to Nineveh and says what he's supposed to say without really caring about what he's doing. He does it just to say he did it. Can you relate to that?

And the response to the shortest and worst sermon I've ever heard is the greatest and most wonderful in the Bible. The people of the city of Nineveh repent. All of them. They start fasting. They put on sackcloth. They roll in ashes.

Even the king repents. Even the cattle repent. Have you ever seen a cow repent? That's some preaching to result in bovine repentance. It says here all the animals wore sackcloth. I wonder how did they get those little sackcloth shirts on the cats? Have you ever tried to dress a cat?

Everyone repents.

And Jonah?

He was mad. It wasn't fair. This wicked city all of a sudden is was in God's favor.

The people who lived there were said to be a very wicked and sinful people. They would skin their enemies alive and wallpaper their living rooms with human hide. They would bury them in sand up to their necks and pour honey on their heads so that insects would come and eat away at their flesh.

The truth is, Jonah didn't want the people of Nineveh to get on God's good side. He wanted to see them get what they deserved.

All through this story, from beginning to end, Jonah was limiting himself from being what God had called him to be and doing what God was calling him to do. Jonah bought a ticket to Tarshish, which is what you and I do every time we make a decision not to act, not to go in the direction God is leading, every time we decide we cannot or will not grasp the opportunity in front of us to do something great, every time we choose running away or inaction.

Because we think we can't. Because we won't.

Because we think it doesn't make any difference.

Because we don't believe it's possible.

One of my favorite shows on TV is "Friday Night Lights,"

which is a show about high school football in West Texas. As a Texan who has been around a lot of high school football, I especially appreciate the show. Before moving here, Heidi and I were season ticket holders for the Rice High School Raiders in Colorado County, Texas. We had to go every year before school started to renew our tickets and possibly upgrade, if someone died or moved.

My favorite character on “Friday Night Lights” is the Coach, Coach Eric Taylor. The guy who plays Coach Taylor, I don’t even know his name, was in another show that used to be on a few years ago called “Early Edition.” Maybe some of you remember that show.

The basic concept of “Early Edition” was that an average guy with a good heart and modest prospects receives an early edition of the *Chicago Sun Times* every morning that is the next day’s paper; it tells him, not the news of yesterday, but what is actually going to happen today, unless he does something to change the future.

So he spends his day trying to avert various disasters, and when he is successful, the news in the paper actually changes. He has two friends that are alter

egos, one who urges him on, and the other is more like Jonah, counseling him to let some things go because, you know, there are some things you just can’t change.

In one episode, the hero reads that an airplane will explode and kill 150 people at O’Hare Airport unless he does something to stop it. He heads out, but the traffic is completely tied up in downtown

Chicago and the subway trains are running late. He has only 30 minutes till take-off.

As he waits for the train he reads the paper and sees a story about a six-year-old girl who was hit by a car. She dies because the hospital thought she had minor injuries and failed to examine her properly. Just then he sees the little girl going by on her bicycle. He has to make a split-second decision. There are 150 people about to die on the airplane, but he may not get there, while the little girl is just down the street.

He runs after the little girl and reaches her moments after she is struck by a car. He scoops her up and races her on foot to the hospital. At the hospital, nobody believes she is badly hurt, and when he insists they examine her, they tell him to wait in line.

All his persistence gets him is an escort from the building by security. So he sneaks in and finally pressures a doctor into examining her. The doctor finds the problem and saves the girls life.

The twist in the plot comes in the end with two notes of providence.

As the hero slumps in the hospital waiting room and rests, the doctor comes in to see him after the girl's surgery. The doctor apologizes and admits that he has been jaded, forgetting the human dimension of his work. He says, *You saved more than that little girl's life today. You may have just saved mine as well.*

Then the little girl's parents rush in to see her, and her father is wearing a pilot's uniform. He turns out to be the pilot of the airplane that would have exploded but was called off the runway because the pilot's daughter was struck by a car and found to be seriously injured. It turned out to be a two-for-one rescue.

*[thanks to the blog blooming-cactus.typepad.com for the description of this episode and connection to God's call]*

What that show was about was wrestling with the dilemma of what our role is in the world.

What will we attempt?

What do we believe is possible? How would we act differently if we knew the potential difference our lives could make to others?

What might happen if we act faithfully?

In our cynicism or pessimism or "afraid to try-ism",

it is easy to forget that God just might work through us, that the primary way God brings about good in the world is by weaving together our daily decisions.

Our non-decisions and non-action may cause the fabric to unravel until God can finally find someone who can still hear and act in faith, hearing the call and following it.

When you hear God's call, you can answer it. Or you can buy a ticket to Tarshish.

I originally intended to end my sermon there. To leave that choice hanging out there—answer God's call or go the other direction. It's all on you. Here's the thing, though. It's not all on you. It's not just your choice, my choice.

What we learn from Jonah is that you can reject God's call,

but God pursues the one he calls.

Think about Francis Thompson. Francis Thompson was educated to be a physician, but instead he lived a destitute, drug-addicted, vagabond existence on the streets of London. Yet he wrote “The Hound of Heaven,” a famous poem describing a person fleeing from the pursuing love of Christ.

*I fled him down the nights and down the days, Thompson wrote. I hid from him, and under running laughter . . . from those strong feet that followed, followed after. Yet he heard Christ say, All which I took from thee, I did but take, not for thy harms. But just that thou might'st seek it in my arms.*

The Hound of Heaven...  
the pursuing love of God...  
You hem me in, O Lord, behind  
me and before me (Psalm 139)

You *can* buy a ticket to  
Tarshish, but you cannot hide  
forever.

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