

God doesn't run away from run-aways.

Pray.

Jonah is a deeply comedic story; comedic not in the Seinfeld, Bob's Burger, Big Bang Theory kind of way, stories about nothing, but a story about something; something that points to a God who is absolutely moral yet, oddly, who gives second chances.

God doesn't run away from run-aways.

In a 2018 article called 'How to speak of God? Toward a post-secular Apologetics,' Professor Elaine Graham wrote, "Against most expectations, religion has not vanished from Western culture. If anything, it exercises a greater fascination than ever before." Professor Graham argues that contemporary post-secular society requires a recovery of the ancient practices of Christian apologetics as a form of public, theological witness to the practical value of faith, articulated in both deed and word.

When US President Biden was inaugurated this week, he called on the American people to be known as a nation not just for their example of power but for the power of their example. Biden asked his Roman Catholic priest and a Baptist pastor to pray and a 22yr. old US National Youth Poet Laureate to speak truth to power. Amazing Amanda Gorman.

There are several key branches of apologetics from biblical, to historical, philosophical and moral apologetics. Articulating reasons for God date back to the bible; the great prophet Isaiah wrote, "Come, let us reason together;" there's Paul understanding the people around him and their thinking at Mars Hill, Athens, Greece; the preaching of Peter in Jerusalem. Christians have exercised the mind in defense of our faith throughout Church history: Origen, Tertullian to Thomas Aquinas, St Augustine, Karl Barth, Marion Taylor. Christianity is a reasonable religion.

God doesn't need me to defend him but people need an opportunity to open the door to God. A number of years ago, apologist R. C. Sproul, quoting the First Epistle of Peter, wrote that, "The defense of the faith is not a luxury or intellectual vanity for specialists. It is a task appointed by God that you and I should be able to give a reason for the hope that is in you, as you bear witness before the world." YouTube 1 Peter 3:15 Always be prepared.

That's where we start today: the argument for God from morality and who oddly gives second chances. When you add up all the reasons for God, sometimes it's a story that moves us. God is not limited to reason but also uses imagination to get the message across.

Jonah is a tiny book in the Old Testament, a shade over 1300 words, 40 verses, a couple pages. There's more to Jonah's professional life as a prophet that you can read about in 2 Kings 14:25. Clearly Jonah believes in God and in the God who created nature, the ship, fellow crew members, wind, waves, the whale, sea monster, fish or however it is translated, and it was God who created his conscience. It seems laughable that Jonah knew when the storm came up so strongly that he could run away from God. You can't outrun God and you can't outrun your conscience.

What is revealed about God in Jonah is that God is a God whose ordering of nature ultimately serves God's greater purposes, whether we understand them or not. Jonah stops running away, having been washed up on the shore. God gave Jonah a second chance.

So Jonah preaches for three days. And of course, the Ninevites repent, and worse, God changes his mind and decides not to destroy them. So? So what is this comedy about? In part the comedy is about the absurdity of trying to run away from God's grace, but that is only part of the laughter this story invites. It is also rubs our faces in the ridiculous means of God's grace. If God wanted to forgive the Ninevites, why send this prophet on a fool's errand; why the burlesque of the whale; why this utterly uninspiring "preaching" ("Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"). Later in this story, Jonah is full of that resentment that knows it has been made a fool of, a begrudging of God's generosity equal to anything the laborers in the vineyard are capable of. And of course, he is right. God does not play fair. Never has.

Which is why Jesus offers Jonah's sign to the Pharisees in Matthew 12, and finally offers himself as that fool, who is swallowed up for three days, only to be raised to save a world, which God, unaccountably, has chosen to love.

The sign of Jonah that Jesus gives the Pharisees sounded like farce; a REAL Messiah wouldn't die but lead, like King David, a glorious revolt and throw off the oppressor!! Jesus had a bigger picture in mind and his disciples, whom he hand-picked, who had witnessed his authoritative teaching and miracle after miracle, inaugurating the kingdom of God, they too ran away.

God is the God of morality, of imagination and of divine comedy.

Sermon in a sentence: God doesn't run away from runaway's. Jesus re-instated the disciples following his resurrection. If God can use these former run-aways, surely there's hope for us.

How could we apply this teaching about God as a God of morality, of second chances, God with a sense of humour? "The gospel," Flannery O'Connor says in one of her stories, "burns away our virtues, which is why it is so shockingly funny and why it takes the divine comedy to save Jonah and the Ninevites and the rest of us from our terrible seriousness."

There's a handy short form many use online, 'OMG.' People don't use in disrespect, just as a quick way to express shock, disbelief or exasperation. Many are desensitized to the shock of OMG that it IS offensive and does disrespect our religion, as it breaks the third commandment. Their reaction might be, did you say OMG breaks 'the second amendment?' How do we stop ourselves, lower the temperature on our defensiveness and instead, engage with gentleness and respect, minus the side-order of greasy judgment?

Here's a suggestion: next time you read OMG or hear yourself say it, you, who have set apart Christ as Lord of your heart and of your day, could say, and go ahead and quote me "OMG is fascinating! It's a handy short-form, for sure. My Pastor was saying that there was a guy named Jonah from the Bible who was basically saying, OMG! I'm NOT going there, and he runs away. But you can't outrun your conscience. God got a hold of Jonah, he runs back and does the job God wanted done. It made a huge difference because the lives of an entire city were transformed: violence, corruption, injustice came tumbling down and people were built up. Bottom line: God doesn't run away from run-aways. OMG is in the bible, as people learn to run WITH God. Pastor said that OMG turns into powerful prayer. Handled correctly, that OMG might prove useful sometime!"

An adventure survivalist named Bear Grylls thought all he needed were his buddies and a backpack. He felt he was invincible, and could run his life his way. Then on the Alpha course he realized that God, not him or his friends or his adventures, was the centre, the maker of the greatest adventure of life by faith in Jesus. Bear Grylls now runs with God.

A woman from Montreal already felt down, when life wasn't going her way, then she got sick and things spiraled further. Someone invited her to the online Alpha course and she found people who genuinely cared. She found Jesus. Her small group prayed for her and she went to her doctor and found she was no longer sick.

Plant the seed of the word in your heart and who knows how God might use a good word from you to bring new life.

OMG is short hand for disbelief

AND an opening for belief.

That is exactly the point of the sermon series, Apologetics for the 21st century; in other words, how do we give a reason for the hope in us? Conversation flavoured with courtesy and respect for the other person, equipped with enough knowledge of the reasonableness of our religion can make a difference and save a life. God is a God of morality AND second chances. Life has its comedy and tragedy. Why not consider meeting the One who can help us laugh and love and live and die the way we were intended to?

God doesn't run away from run-aways.

Come and journey. Amen.