

Homily based on the readings from October 9, 2023 (Jonah 1.1-2.1-2, 11; Luke 10.25-37)

It is an interesting coincidence that today, on Columbus Day, our first reading describes someone taking a great journey across the sea. The circumstances of Jonah's expedition, of course, are entirely different from those of the great European explorers. In contrast to Columbus, who set out on a voyage of discovery, the Prophet Jonah is actively running away – from his past life, from his obligations and responsibilities, and above all from God himself.

In geographical terms, it is unclear precisely where Jonah was intending to travel. According to the reading, he “found a ship going to Tarshish.” It is curious that, despite Tarshish being mentioned 25 times in the Old Testament, no one today knows for certain where it was located. One theory, which makes sense in this case, is that the name refers to a region along the southern coast of Spain – about as far as someone from the Middle East could possibly have imagined sailing. Regardless of his

actual destination, it is clear that Jonah is trying to get so far away from God that he can completely escape his attention.

From a modern perspective, the idea of attempting to evade God by boat – or by any mode of transportation – seems somewhat comical. Imagine trying to hide from God by flying to Seattle. Nevertheless, Jonah's voyage is a powerful metaphor for what many of us do every day.

Even if we are not called to be prophets – in the sense of the Old Testament – God has assigned each one of us a particular set of tasks and responsibilities. We may not hear that call as clearly as Jonah did, but it is still there. The question we need to ask ourselves is how we are responding. We may not *physically* be running away from God, but are we *spiritually* avoiding the full force of his message?

One distinctive feature of today's society is the degree to which most of us allow ourselves to be blanketed by noise – not just audible noise, but visible noise as well. Regardless of our age – or our level of

technological sophistication – it is alarmingly easy to drown out the still small voice through which God often chooses to communicate. If the story of Jonah were being written today, I doubt he would have bothered to set foot aboard a ship. He probably would have just turned up the volume on his headphones and opened another window on his web browser.

Whatever the circumstances of our lives – whether we are young or old, stationary or itinerant – we must all set aside time every single day to listen to God. That can be accomplished through active prayer, through quiet contemplation, or just by removing ourselves from the busyness of daily life. In any case, we must recognize that not listening to God is just as bad as running away from him. If we insulate ourselves against God's call, we may not wind up inside the belly of a fish – but we will certainly find ourselves rudderless and adrift.

Although few of us are destined to follow in the footsteps of Columbus – or Saint Brendan the Navigator – all Christians are called to be

explorers. Each of us is invited to embark on a lifelong journey that, as long as we stay on course, will ultimately lead us all to the same destination: the loving arms of Jesus Christ.