



# ZUMBRO

LUTHERAN CHURCH

July 23, 2017

## Unexpected Detours Can Change Us

Jonah 1:1-17 NRSV

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### JONAH 1:1-17 (NRSV)

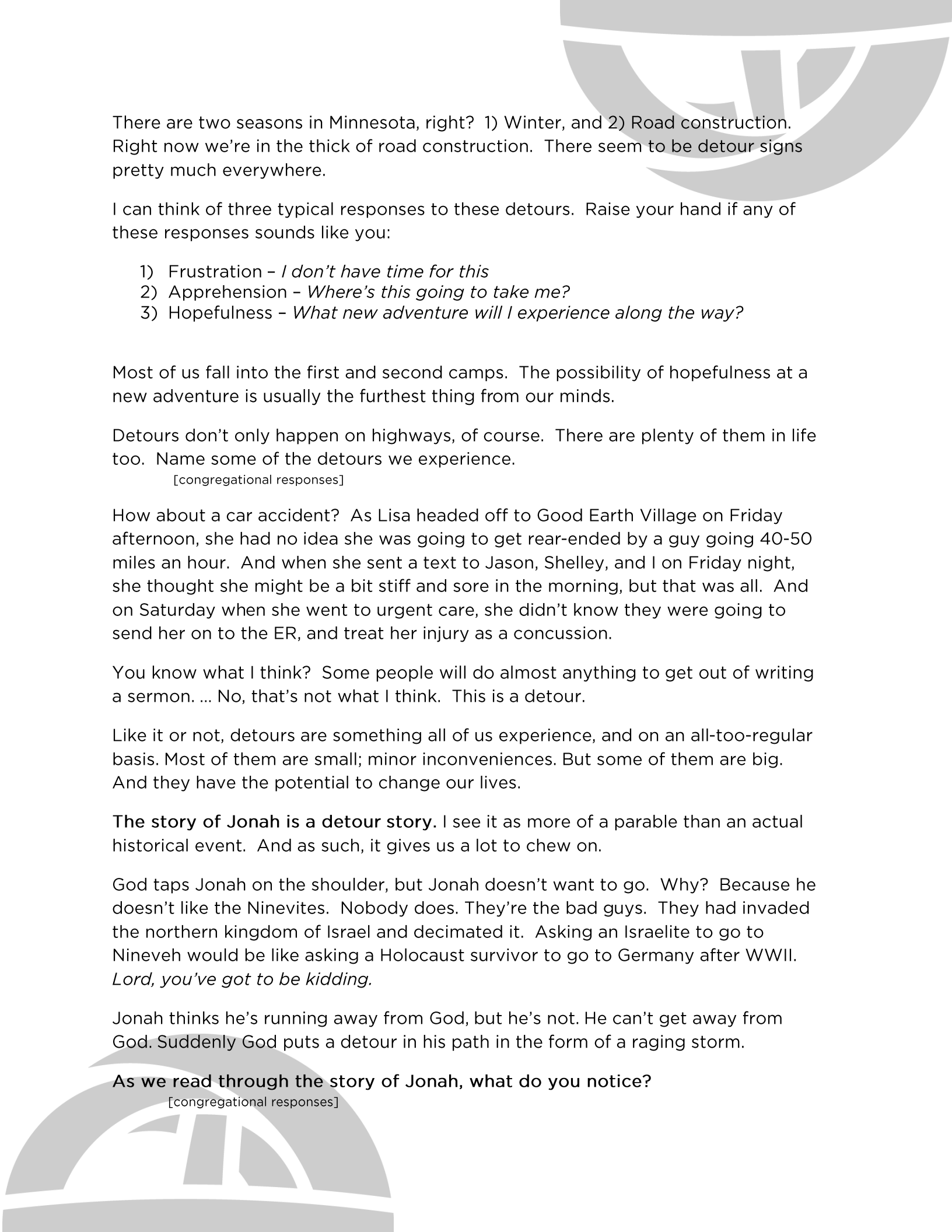
Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup>But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup>Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup>The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

<sup>7</sup>The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup>Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” <sup>9</sup>“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” <sup>10</sup>Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

<sup>11</sup>Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may quieten down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup>He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” <sup>13</sup>Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. <sup>14</sup>Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” <sup>15</sup>So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

<sup>17</sup>But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.



There are two seasons in Minnesota, right? 1) Winter, and 2) Road construction. Right now we're in the thick of road construction. There seem to be detour signs pretty much everywhere.

I can think of three typical responses to these detours. Raise your hand if any of these responses sounds like you:

- 1) Frustration – *I don't have time for this*
- 2) Apprehension – *Where's this going to take me?*
- 3) Hopefulness – *What new adventure will I experience along the way?*

Most of us fall into the first and second camps. The possibility of hopefulness at a new adventure is usually the furthest thing from our minds.

Detours don't only happen on highways, of course. There are plenty of them in life too. Name some of the detours we experience.

[congregational responses]

How about a car accident? As Lisa headed off to Good Earth Village on Friday afternoon, she had no idea she was going to get rear-ended by a guy going 40-50 miles an hour. And when she sent a text to Jason, Shelley, and I on Friday night, she thought she might be a bit stiff and sore in the morning, but that was all. And on Saturday when she went to urgent care, she didn't know they were going to send her on to the ER, and treat her injury as a concussion.

You know what I think? Some people will do almost anything to get out of writing a sermon. ... No, that's not what I think. This is a detour.

Like it or not, detours are something all of us experience, and on an all-too-regular basis. Most of them are small; minor inconveniences. But some of them are big. And they have the potential to change our lives.


**The story of Jonah is a detour story.** I see it as more of a parable than an actual historical event. And as such, it gives us a lot to chew on.

God taps Jonah on the shoulder, but Jonah doesn't want to go. Why? Because he doesn't like the Ninevites. Nobody does. They're the bad guys. They had invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and decimated it. Asking an Israelite to go to Nineveh would be like asking a Holocaust survivor to go to Germany after WWII. *Lord, you've got to be kidding.*

Jonah thinks he's running away from God, but he's not. He can't get away from God. Suddenly God puts a detour in his path in the form of a raging storm.

**As we read through the story of Jonah, what do you notice?**

[congregational responses]



## And what do you wonder about?

[congregational responses]

### Jonah will face other detours along the way.

He ends up in the belly of a big fish. Before it's over, he seems to have a change of heart.

### And another detour:

The fish spits him out on dry ground. Jonah hears God's call again: *Go to Nineveh.*

This time he goes. He proclaims a message of fire and brimstone: *Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.*

### And still another detour:

Nineveh repents. Disaster is averted, despite what Jonah preaches. And the people are spared.

Clearly, Jonah does not like these detours. In particular, he doesn't like Yahweh being gracious and merciful toward those big, bad Ninevites. *Really, God, aren't we your special people? Why show mercy to a bunch of folks who clearly don't deserve it?*

The last verse in the book of Jonah is a question. God is the one who's asking. It goes something like this: *Jonah, why shouldn't I be concerned about Nineveh? I love them too. They hardly know their right hand from their left. Clearly, they need my help just as much as anyone in Israel.*

Our story ends with Jonah scratching his head. And I'm sure Jonah's readers wondering what in the world they're supposed to do in response to this gracious and loving God.

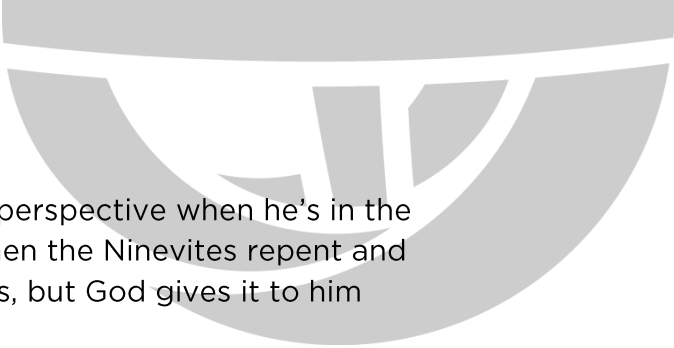
Detours are hard. They can lead to frustration – *I don't have time for this.*  
They can lead to apprehension – *Where's this going to take me?*

So here's the question: In the middle of our frustration and apprehension, is hopefulness even remote a possibility? Are we able to imagine that God can take a difficult situation and turn it into something good...maybe even some sort of new adventure?

Paul writes in Romans 8: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..." I've always like this verse. I suppose it applies to detours too. But boy that's hard to believe some days.

**Perspective is key if we're ever going to believe it.**





Jonah's world is small. He gets some badly-needed perspective when he's in the belly of that fish. He gets even more perspective when the Ninevites repent and turn to God. He doesn't necessarily like what he sees, but God gives it to him anyway.

Like Jonah, our world can be small too. In searching for perspective, we look not only at the world immediately in front of us, but hopefully at a the larger world around us. And along the way, we may even get a glimpse of what God sees.

There's a video clip called *Zoom* which is all about perspective. Take a look.

<https://youtu.be/vRXYKQEJeqk>

**What did you notice in the video? And what do you wonder about?**

[congregational responses]

As we journey through life, we're going to come up against detours. Whether they lead to frustration, apprehension, or perhaps even hopefulness has a lot to do with our perspective.

The story of Jonah reminds us that God loves all people, and that includes you and me.

Indeed, God's most important work is to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Like Jonah and Israel, we are called to share that love with a world that badly needs it.

Sometimes we end up with detours in our path. Whether God causes these detours or simply allows them, I don't know. But I do know that God uses them. And God uses them especially to enlarge our perspective and maybe even to give us a glimpse of things from God's point of view.

Friends, if you find yourself in one of these detours right now, take heart. Wake up from your sleep. Ask God to help you to see. And then, hang on, because this detour might just change your life. Amen.

