

When You Want to Hide

In my role as the preschool Bible Story Lady at our church, I was telling the story of Jonah and the Big Fish a few Sundays ago to the 3- and 4-year-olds.

The hard part wasn't bringing the bit about Jonah deliberately running away from God down to the level of little people who still get their fannies smacked every time they run from someone in charge. Same principle, Jonah's story, but how to tell it so they'd understand that some grown-ups are silly enough to think they can hide from an all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful God without being caught eventually.

It would be like Mama never coming to look for you and leaving you in your hiding place forever. Unfathomable.

Even the wee-est ones get how ridiculous that is.

So I simply said, "Jonah was afraid to do what God said (go to Ninevah and tell the people there they were being so naughty they would have to be punished). So he decided to disobey. Yep. He decided to hide from God."

I then asked the children who liked to play hide-and-seek. All hands went up.

"Have you ever picked a really bad hiding place? Like maybe this one." I put my hands over my eyes and said, "Okay, I'm hidden. I can't see you, so you can't see me either."

The kids laughed hysterically.

"Or how about this one?" I walked over to an itty bitty kiddy chair and crouched down, trying desperately to squeeze my entire jumbo adult body behind it. "Can you see me now?" The kids howled.

"Or maybe you've been here." I returned to center stage,

carefully unfolded a paper bag, plopped it over my head and reached out with both hands, searching, groping, even becoming a little panicky and tearful as I fell to my knees. "Are you gone? Did you leave me? I can't find anybody so I must be all alone in this cold, dark, horrible place. Nobody's here but me. And I'm feeling lonely and scared all by myself. I wish ... I wish someone would help me."

Silence. To my surprise, there was no laughter this time. Not even one snicker. Something about being scared and lonely in a dark place had resonated with those 30 little people.

I hadn't expected this. Silence. So thick you could cut it with a meat cleaver. Maybe my acting was a little too good. As I continued waving my hands helplessly in the air, I wasn't sure what to do next. The kids were apparently identifying with me in my aloneness. With Jonah in his disobedience. With all humankind when we choose to dig a hole of disrespect to our Creator, then lie in it and cover ourselves up like a grave. Isolated. Frightened. Confused.

Then out of the unforeseen stillness, a little voice piped up. A warm little voice heavy with sympathy.

"It's OK, Miss Debbie. We're still here. Don't be afraid. You're not alone."

And then I heard footsteps mounting the small stage and felt a tiny hand take mine, and another and another reaching out to comfort me as dozens of little hands found my arms, my shoulders, my waist, surrounding me with comfort and hope.

So there I was, kneeling on a stage with a bag over my head and a huge lump in my throat, swarmed by a hoard of uninhibited children who even at an extremely young age, understood what it felt like to be alone in disobedience and separated from God and didn't want it to happen to me.

I was incredibly moved. It was one of those rare teachable moments that knock your well ordered world off its axis and crack open the door for a peep into a completely different

spiritual realm.

So from now on, I suspect Jonah's story will hold new meaning for me. Maybe I should carry a head bag around with me all the time.

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