

Being The Community – Delivered 01-24-21

Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-10; Jonah 4 (sermon)

The story of Jonah and the whale is a favorite story among our children. It has been taught in Sunday School here and in Friday Evening Smore's and VBS.

Adults and children are fascinated with the idea of being swallowed alive at the command of God.

Often with adults it can help to spur us on when we are clear God is calling us to do something but we are reluctant to do what 'thus says the Lord'.

And if we dig deeper into the book we will find a fuller message for us today.

To fully understand God's text to us from Jonah today, we need to get some further information.

First of all, Jonah was from the region of Galilee in the Northern Kingdom of Israel around 850 BC.

This time line would make him among the earliest of the Minor Prophets.

In that day, the great power of the world was the nation of Assyria, whose capital city was Nineveh.

Assyria often ruled its neighbors harshly.

If the surrounding nations submitted and paid Assyria tribute, then there were some benefits, at least to the ruling classes of these nation states.

If the nations did not submit to Assyria, then terror would be brought upon that nation.

Israel and Judah saw both sides of the kingdom and people of Assyria.

Part of the submission was to acknowledge the gods of Assyria as being superior to the gods of the surrounding nations.

Some leaders in Judah like Ahaz made these accommodations which caused great tension among God's people. T

This caused an even more difficult situation of division to become even worse.

Now Jonah, as an Israelite who served the One True God of the Israelites, the idea of serving the Assyrian gods was an abomination.

Jonah came to utterly detest and despise the Assyrians because of this demand that their gods be worshipped in direct conflict with God's command that His people shall have no other gods but Him and put no other being in their heart for worship.

God came to Jonah and asked him to go to Nineveh and preach there.

He was to decry the wickedness of the city.

This was to be done by the God of Israel.

Jonah would be risking his death by a gruesome form of execution known as impaling by proclaiming such a message to Nineveh.

But the fear of this was not really Jonah's primary motivation here.

Jonah's response to God was to board a ship to Tarshish.

A land which was as far as a one could go in the 'known world' at that time from Assyria.

Those are not the actions of someone who wants to do the task that God has declared before them and called them to.

Such a strong and intense reaction indicates that Jonah was afraid of something.

Jonah was willing to suffer the terrors of the sea and being received by those in Tarshish rather than to obey the will of God.

But as pastor Donna said in her children's sermon.

We can run from the Lord, but we cannot hide

God knows everything, even where we may be at a given moment.

God can do anything.

There is nothing so hard that the Lord cannot do it.

Clearly getting Jonah back on track means that God will use any means he determines he needs to use.

So the LORD intervenes in Jonah's journey.

The Lord in a dramatic fashion, creates a great storm, so great that the ship was in danger of sinking, making the sailors afraid for their own lives

The sailors are terrified.

These terrified sailors of many lands and many faith backgrounds, the scripture says each one of them begins crying out to their own god.

Surprisingly, Jonah does not appear afraid by this.

In fact, while the storm rages on, Jonah is sound asleep in the boat as though he hadn't a care in the world.

The sailors, again, beside themselves in fear, could not understand this any better than the disciples of Jesus who saw Jesus asleep in the boat when they were in danger.

Jonah had to be awakened and be told of the danger.

And we see Jonah rebuked by words accusing him of not caring that anyone was about to die.

Surprisingly, Jonah is not even afraid to be cast into the stormy waters, not appearing to care about living or dying.

Had it not been for the divine intervention of our miracle working God, and God's ability to act in mercy to Jonah, he certainly would have perished.

Even when the storm quiets and dies down, Jonah is cast into the sea, he isn't in a position to even swim to safety.

And then our scripture says that God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.

The only thing swimming in the sea that would be big enough to swallow Jonah would have been something the size of a whale.

God says he prepared a great fish.

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Jonah spent three nights in the fish's belly.

Jesus later relates the story of Jonah to His own death and resurrection.

Then Jonah was restored to land, the land where creatures lived and not fish.

Indeed Jonah felt as though He had passed from death to life.

And the fish doesn't just drop him off gently,

We are told the fish vomited him back onto the dry land.

Now, after this dramatic moment, God comes to Jonah again and tells him to go to Nineveh and preach.

Essentially, go to your enemies and bring them a word of salvation directly from me.

So Jonah went and preached “Yet forty days and this city will be overthrown.

The residents of the city of Nineveh believed the message, and everyone from the king down to the common beast fasted and showed the signs of true repentance.

They believe the word of God that Jonah had brought to them.

Though they could easily be considered enemies, though they served different Gods, Jonah brought a transformation word to the people and they believed.

They prayed and they believed.

The prayers of the Ninevites was answered, and the city was not destroyed.

Like the Gentiles sailors, the Ninevites had more fear of the LORD than did Jonah.

Even though they had been enemies of God and God's people, they now have a better understanding of God through this tremendous display of mercy and His saving actions.

And does Jonah seem pleased that all these new people who had once been enemies are now counted among the family of his God?

Jonah, the scripture tells us is angry.

If Jonah felt that the LORD was going to really destroy Nineveh, he might would have obeyed the first call.

There would have been no detour to Tarshish across the know world.

Here, Jonah reveals was angry that Nineveh would believe and repent.

Jonah now learns something of God's character.

That God is more willing to save than destroy.

In the end, God wants all people to be in His Kingdom.

This was all just too much for Jonah.

Jonah wanted to see revenge and punishment visited on those he considered 'enemy'

Saying that he would rather die than live in this world where anyone, even the horrible Assyrians could become a part of God's Kingdom, can be the recipient of such a blessing from God.

Jonah is angry with the Lord, despondent and feeling defeated.

And our loving God asks a question of Jonah. "Is it right for you to be angry?"

But the LORD who had provided the gourd in the first place caused it to wither.

Jonah was left burning in the full heat of the sun.

He who had just so recently accused God of being merciful now only wishes for mercy on himself.

This is a powerful exchange between God and Jonah.

God reveals much of himself to Jonah.

God speaks to us through this book and lets us know He is merciful, He is loving, and in Him all things are possible.

And God uses this moment as a powerful teaching tool that if we are to desire mercy, we must first be merciful.

We can see from the Book of Jonah how intertwined its message is with the message of Jesus in our Mark reading.

Jesus announces the Good News, The time has come and the Kingdom of God is near.

Jesus' message to everyone is that salvation in Christ is available to everyone.

Jew and Gentile alike.

Frinds as well as enemies.

And in Mark Jesus speaks a word to His disciples that has rung across the ages to all His disciples.

“Come, follow me and I will send you to fish for people”. Mark 1:17

Jesus says He will make us ‘fishers of men’ gathering into the nets that He casts a lonely contrite world of those who God loves.

Those whom God created like the Ninevites.

Those wo whom God has loved and cared for just like He did with the plant.

Jesus in His earthly walk would minister to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Just as the Psalmist spoke in Psalm 62:5 “my soul finds rest in God; my hope comes from him.”

The world continues to be a world filled with those who are hopeless, and who can find their only hope in Him.

The world will not hear unless we go out into it.

Even in the days of Covid and social distancing, God’s word still needs to go forth.

The world still needs to hear the God who calls and asks people everywhere “pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”

Psalm 62:8

We cannot be like Jonah, the one who was such a reluctant missionary.

We cannot become like Jonah and pass our own judgement on the people we are sent to minister to.

Judgement is God’s job.

Taking God’s message to a waiting world is ours.

Carrying on God's mission by being the Body of Christ, His hands and feet in His world until the day He returns.

Instead of being judgemental and angry servants, God wants us to be rejoicing over the reconciliation of sinners.

No one deserves His mercy, but He offers it willingly.

Jonah was willing to die rather than preach repentance to Nineveh.

We must be the opposite.

We must be bold and willing to offer a world as wicked as those who were found in Nineveh at the time of Jonah.

God sees them and knows their need, just as He knows ours.

God knew that if they would repent and believe on Him, the one true God, that they would be saved.

In God's plan, mercy was meant for them.

But Jonah wanted to act out of anger, and fear, and in his own understanding.

Fear and anger are emotions that we must be so careful to manage and allow God to give us an alternative.

Fear and irrational anger can bring nations and people of opposing political ideologies to war.

Fear and anger unchecked can destroy homes, families, and nations, and can eat away at an individual's health and very soul.

Most importantly, our anger can prevent us from seeing the God who knows all and is in all.

It can make us forget that when God calls us to do something, His ways are not our ways.

When God calls, we have to put all other things aside and answer His call in obedience and love for Him.

When God calls us, we have to put aside our own judgements of others and seek God's face.

We are called to go out and make disciples of all nations

We are to baptize and teach them to observe what Jesus has commanded.

May God give us both boldness to proclaim the Gospel as well as the motivation of love to reach the lost.

The same God who called Jonah, calls us.

Repent and believe the good news that all who call upon the name of the LORD shall be saved.

AMEN.