

## “Jonah—the Reluctant Prophet,” Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Epiphany 3-B, Jan. 25, 2015

It was a personal challenge for me two weeks ago to take down every book from the shelves in my office so that the walls could be freshly painted again. But behind every cloud there is a silver lining; and the silver lining for me behind this cloud was the opportunity to reorganize all the books on my shelves into the four major branches of theology once again. There are some books that deal with church history, others with systematic theology, others with exegetical theology and also practical theology. Sometimes, no matter how hard I try to keep my library **organized** there are times when I find a book that belongs over there that is actually over here. I’ll say to myself, “Now how in the world did that book end up here!?!”

Friends, the 66 individual books that make up the Holy Bible **are organized into various sections** too and some Biblical scholars wonder how it was that this little book of Jonah, only four chapters long, ended up among the prophetic books (albeit among the Minor Prophets) since there are only eight words of prophecy ever spoken by Jonah in the whole book; the eight words of the text that I just read to you: *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed!”* (Jonah 3:4) **And in the Hebrew text - these eight English words are really only four Hebrew words!**

The book of Jonah is not so much a book of prophecy as it is a book written about a prophet named Jonah and his relationship with God. Why the opening verses of this book plunge us immediately into Jonah’s refusal to obey God’s call upon his life! We read in verses 1-3: *“Now the Word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’ 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!”* (Jonah 1:1-2)

Brothers and sisters, I can imagine that at this point the Prophet Jonah was feeling rather smug and self-satisfied. Perhaps he was feeling that he had outsmarted the LORD God whom he later professes to have faith in when he says to sailors aboard that ship. *“I worship the God of heaven, who made the seas and the dry land!”* (Jonah 2:9) Perhaps it would be helpful for me to point out some of the major themes to you that are found in the book of Jonah.

- (1) First of all there is the issue of God’s sovereignty. Even though it may look at times that God has lost control of this whole situation, **God remains in control.** God was in control of the storm that he hurled out onto the sea to churn up the waters. God was in control of these so-called “pagan” sailors who discerned that the gigantic storm they were battling, so severe that it caused them to throw their very valuable cargo into the sea and lighten the boat in an attempt to save their lives, **was the result of some man’s disobedience of his god upon that ship!** They all

pray to their foreign gods to no avail; but then remembered that there was a passenger down in the hold of the ship where they found Jonah he is fast asleep. In this way Jonah is a prototype of our Savior nine centuries later whom will also be found sleeping soundly aboard a small fishing vessel in the midst of a terrible storm. **The big difference here is that Jonah ends up being tossed out of the boat due to his disobedience, while Jesus will end up being nailed to a cross, not because of his disobedience but because of our disobedience for he was without sin!** And when that task is completed, the seas become completely calm and these sailors are now even more frightened than they were before. **And God is still the One who in his great sovereignty, sent that big fish to rescue Jonah; the God of whom we read in 2 Peter 3:9 "Is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and be saved!"**

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- (2) Secondly, there is the major theme that almighty God often uses sinful human beings like Jonah, and me, and you, to accomplish his saving purposes in this world. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:20, *"We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us to be reconciled unto God!"*
- (3) Thirdly, we should notice throughout the book of Jonah that God is much more interested in showing mercy to people than he is in bringing about his judgment upon them.

Friends, the book of Jonah is not only a little book about a prophet and his relationship to God, but also serves as a **wonderful missionary tract reminding the nation of Israel how often she had failed in her mission to bring the message of God's saving grace upon the world!** Isaiah captures this natural tendency of the people of Israel and all human beings when he writes, *"All we like sheep have gone astray! We've turned everyone to his own way!" (Isaiah 53:6)*

**Someone has also once said, "There are no atheists in foxholes!"** And from the second chapter of Jonah we can surmise that there are **no atheists in the bellies of whales either!** Like most people who have a tendency to ignore the LORD God when things are going well, but who suddenly find themselves deeply creviced between a rock and a hard place, Jonah began praying earnestly to God. Jonah prayed: *"I called to the LORD out of my distress. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. O LORD my God as my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you, what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"* (Jonah 2; selected verses) And now listen to the closing verse of chapter 2: **"Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land!"**

It's a funny thing but I came across a true story on the web site **"DAILYMAIL.COM"** yesterday entitled: "She Promised to Church Every Sunday" about something that just happened this

past week in Australia. A young 19 year old girl named Louise Saunders ended up surviving a harrowing experience of spending 2 and ½ days alone in the dark in and sweltering jungle, bruised and bleeding and facing up to the reality that she might die! All of this happened when she made the poor decision to set off alone to walk to the top of Mount Tyson in Australia's tropical north this past Tuesday, January 20, at the end of her working day in the small town of Tully. About a third of the way up—about a half-mile, she somehow missed the path and plunged blinding onwards into a dense rainforest. She realized, as the trees became thicker and seemed to close in on her that she was lost. Fortunately, just before her cell phone went dead, she was able to contact a friend, Joanne Woodward, to tell her she was lost. It was an awful ordeal to say the least. She remembered how her friends had told her that there were deadly snakes in the jungle and how they lay under the carpet of leaves that covered the mountain and now...here she was...her legs unprotected, a snake ready to strike at any moment, and that's not even the half of it. But while she was scared half-to-she, she prayed fervently to God that if he rescued and saved her that she promised to go to the church every Sunday for the rest of her life. She eventually found her way to safety, but **I am wondering if she will actually be in church this Sunday morning or not!?! We all know what it means to bargain with God**, and yet just because God comes through for us, doesn't necessarily mean that we will honor the promises to him that we have made.

From reading Jonah's laments in chapter 2, anyone would believe that this was certainly a life-changing experience for Jonah. But was it really? And that's where we are when we read in our Gospel lesson today:

*"Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."<sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"<sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them."*

**The Ninevites BELIEVE God and responded in the only way they know how—by showing sorrow and regret for the way they've ignored and rejected God. They were grief-stricken at the realization of the great offense they have caused to God. This remorse wasn't just a few people in Nineveh—the whole city responded, some 120,000 people. Even the king was convicted of his own sin and declared a fast. Everyone dressed in sack cloth and ashes and the LORD God forgave them all the iniquity of their sins. **And what a beautiful story this one might have been if the story had ended here at chapter 3, but there is another shocking chapter yet to come!****

**God wants to show us the reaction of Jonah and how all throughout his life, no matter how mightily the LORD God has intervened into Jonah's life to save him—that for the most part Jonah just remains an old sourpuss without a grateful bone to be found anywhere in his whole body!**

**And so my brothers and sisters, "What's the moral of the story!"**

**The moral of the story is that there is a great deal of difference between knowing the truth and living the truth.** All the things that Jonah said while he was inside the fish were all things that he knew to be true before he set foot on that boat, but even though he

knew it, he didn't live it! Even though he knew these wonderful truths about God, it still didn't stop him from running away from God.

**And it's at this very juncture that every one of us can be just like Jonah too! We can know the truth of what our great and loving God has done for every one of us in the gift of his Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! But this does not mean that any one of us is actually conscientiously committed to living it out!**

When we take time to genuinely think about it, we can know with a certainty that our lives have been saved from the constant domination of sin, leading us to make foolish decisions and preventing us from continuously engaging in self-destructive behavior that would only harm us and cause deep hurt and pain to come to those we claim to love. But there is still a big difference between professing our faith and actually living it out!

The book actually ends in chapter 4 with Jonah being very unhappy. You'd think that because his ministry proved to be highly successful with 120,000 people turning their backs on sin and turning back towards God that Jonah would be elated. But actually he is profoundly angry. Still he hikes out to the edge of town, makes some type of shelter for himself. He's hoping that God might change his mind and bring utter destruction and his judgment upon these Assyrians anyway.

**JONAH GOES ON TO SAY THAT HE KNEW GOD WOULD DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS, BECAUSE HE IS THE GOD WHO IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL, SLOW TO ANGER AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE! FUNNY, THOUGH ISN'T IT, DEAR FRIENDS? **JONAH DID NOT SEEM TO MIND GOD BEING COMPASIONATE AND GRACIOUS WHEN HIS OWN LUNGS WERE FILLING UP WITH WATER AND HE BELIEVED HIMSELF TO BE A GONNER FOR SURE!****

Well JONAH HEADS TO THE EDGE OF THE CITY. And God plants a plant there that rises up quickly and provides some shade over Jonah's head to save him from much discomfort. While Jonah initially rejoiced in the provision of that plant, the next day God appointed a worm to attack that plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said to himself, *"It is better for me to die than to live!"* But God said to Jonah, *"Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"* And he said, *"Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die!"* And the LORD said, *"You had pity upon that plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I have had pity on Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"*

Basically, God is saying to Jonah, "How can you be so heartless?" God wants to show compassion to the people of this world. He has an overwhelming concern for the lost. God wants to see the lost saved, but Jonah couldn't care less about them. **Jesus summed up his whole life's work one day as his being sent into this world "to seek and to save the lost."** Jesus told the parables about the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. He said that the whole of heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents.

This is God's attitude toward the lost. In this story the painful contrast is there. God—with a heart for the lost; Jonah with no concern for the lost at all. In closing, let me just ask you to imagine with me that God and Jonah

represent two ends of a continuum with Jonah being on the left side of that continuum as one who had no concern for the lost people of this world, and God being on the right hand side of that continuum as the One who is wholeheartedly concerned for the loss, who so loved the world that he spared not his Son, but gave him up for us all!

**Where would we as a Christian congregation find our proper place upon that continuum?**

I know where this church has been to a very high degree throughout much of its history. Mount Olive Lutheran Church has been a congregation of believers committed to outreach, committed to seeking out lost souls of this world and sharing with them the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus that has come to us, by the grace of God, through the Gospel.

In these days, God has blessed our partnership in the Gospel with one another is fast bringing but so another major milestone, with the debt on our buildings soon to be retired completely! How committed will we be in seeking to discern what new challenges will be setting before us in the days ahead? You and I know what Jesus said one day: *“To those whom much is given, from them indeed, shall much be expected!”*

There is only one prophet in the Old Testament whom Jesus compares directly to himself and that is the Prophet Jonah. When Jesus adversaries had asked him to provide them with a sign one day to prove to them that he really was the Promised Messiah of God, though he had given them sign, after sign, after sign already, our LORD JESUS CHRIST says: *“An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!”* (Matthew 12:39-41)

May God continue to give to us the very same philosophy of ministry that drove St Paul to be such a powerful witness to the Gospel in this world, when he wrote to the Corinthians 9:19-23: *“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

My brothers and sisters, all throughout his life it seems that Jonah was the reluctant evangelist! And the question before the house today to every one of us as individuals and to our congregation as a whole is: “How about us?” Are we reluctant evangelists like Jonah too! By the grace of God we haven’t been and by the grace of God may we never be! Amen