

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 3 -- January 19th and 22nd, 2012

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city -- a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, but on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

Dear ministers of our Lord. Amen

There are certain things that go together in the Bible. If you say one of those things, you immediately think of the other thing. For example, if I say Adam, you think of...Eve. If I say Cain, you think of...Abel. If I say Noah, you think of...ark. If I say David, you think of...Goliath. And if I say Jonah, you think of...big fish. Almost everyone knows that Jonah is the guy in the Bible who was swallowed by a big fish.

That's why most people don't take Jonah too seriously. Most people are pretty sure that you can't really get swallowed by a big fish and live to tell about it. Most people are pretty sure that this story in the Bible isn't true. Most theologians and pastors think it's a parable, a figurative story with a symbolic meaning. They think it's a fable or a fairy tale with a little moral lesson, like one of Aesop's fables.

But the story of Jonah in the Bible is historically true. The only honest way to interpret the Bible is to take every word literally unless there's something in the context to indicate it's not to be taken literally, and there's nothing in the context of Jonah to indicate that it's just a parable or figurative story. Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings as a real historical person, one of God's called prophets. And most importantly, Jesus spoke of Jonah as a real person and said that just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so he would be in the grave for three days and nights before he rose.

Jonah is a true story, but it's not really a story about a big fish. It's not even a story about Jonah. The part about Jonah being swallowed by a big fish takes up only three verses in the whole book. If it's not about a big fish and it's not all about Jonah, what is it about? The story of Jonah, like every other book in the Bible, is about God's great love. It's about God's love for missions. When you hear the name Jonah, you should think of missions. Jonah was a missionary, and God sent him on a mission. So this morning we're going to forget about the whale and talk about what the book is really all about. The book of Jonah in the Bible teaches us that God Loves Missions. God loves mission people. God loves mission workers.

Sermon Theme: God Loves Missions!

- 1. God loves mission people**
- 2. God loves mission workers**

The time is about 800 years before Christ was born. Most of you know enough of Bible history to know that after the death of great King David and his great son Solomon, the nation of Israel was ripped in half by a civil war. In this case it was the north that rebelled against the south. The southern

kingdom called Judah had the capital city of Jerusalem and the temple for worship and the king chosen by God. The northern kingdom called Israel rebelled and set up their own capital city in Samaria and their own place of worship and their own king. God was not pleased with this. He kept trying to call the people to repentance. Sometimes he sent them times of prosperity to remind them that he loved them. Other times he allowed their economy to fail and their enemies to defeat them to remind them they better come back or else. And through it all God sent prophets or preachers to the northern kingdom to proclaim his message. You maybe recognize some of their names: Elijah and Elisha. Amos and Hosea - - and Jonah. Jonah was one of the prophets God sent to the northern kingdom of Israel.

It was during one of those periods of prosperity that God called Jonah to do some mission work. God called him to go and preach repentance to a major metropolis of the time, the city of Nineveh in the country of Assyria. We're told that there were more than 120,000 children in Nineveh. That means there were probably more than a half a million people there. But Jonah couldn't have been more shocked if God had hit him on the side of the head with a baseball bat. Why in the world would God want him to go to Nineveh? The Assyrians were the sworn enemy of God's people. They were notoriously violent and cruel people. The worst city in America and the worst neighborhood in Milwaukee couldn't come closet o Nineveh. It didn't take Jonah long to decide on God's call. He wanted nothing to do with being a missionary to a violent city and a pagan culture. He ran away, jumped a ship, was thrown overboard during a storm, got swallowed by a large fish, for three days and nights God kept him alive in the stinking, suffocating belly of the fish, he prayed to the Lord to save him, and at the Lord's command, the fish vomited him up on dry land.

This is where our Bible reading today begins. **“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city--a visit required three days.”** Jonah's mistake was he underestimated the love of God. When it says Nineveh was an important city, it means important to God. Jonah knew that he was important to God and that his own country was important to God, but he just didn't comprehend how much God loves all people. Is that a mistake about God that we often make too? Do we underestimate how deep and wide and great the love of God is? When Jesus said that God so loved the world, he put the emphasis on world. When Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations, he meant all nations of the world. When he said to preach the gospel to every creature, he meant literally every last person in the world. God is not Caucasian, he's not the God of America, he's not only the God of Crown of Glory. We all know that in theory, but does it always show in actual practice? Do we hesitate to be missionaries in our neighborhood because of fear? Do we avoid certain neighborhoods, because we don't want “those kind of people” in our church? Do we hesitate to reach out across cultures, because those people wouldn't believe anyway? Do we cut back on missions so we can make things a little nicer here at home? Do we really believe that God so loved the world, or that he only loves lesser sinners like ourselves? Are we really so much different from Jonah, who ran away from God's loving commission?

God loves missions, because he loves people. He loves to forgive sinners, and he doesn't care what the sinners look like. He wants all people to trust in his Son Jesus, and he doesn't care how they talk or what color their skin or how much money they make. He wants every person to be in heaven, and he doesn't care how many sins they've committed, or how far they've strayed, or how lousy their lifestyle has been. God loves missions. Jonah needed to learn more about God's love. Jonah needed to love missions. So do we.

I wonder how God felt when Jonah refused to go. I know how I would have felt if I was God. I would have let the fish eat Jonah. But God loved Jonah. He loves mission workers as much as he loves

mission people. He gave Jonah a second chance. He called him again to go to the great city of Nineveh. **“On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." {5} The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. {10} When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”**

God loved Jonah as much as he loved the people of Nineveh. He forgave Jonah and gave him a second chance. God was also with Jonah and gave Jonah the specific message. It was a very simple message with no-holds barred: **“40 more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.”** God blessed Jonah’s work. **“The Ninevites believed God.”** They repented of their sins. They turned from their evil ways and turned to Jonah’s God for forgiveness. They believed in John’s forgiving God, and God credited it to them as righteousness. And they were saved from destruction.

God loves mission workers. He loves mission workers who cross the oceans. He loves mission workers who cross the street to invite someone to church. He loves mission workers who say prayers for other mission workers and who bring offerings to support mission work. God loves them all. Everyone of them has been given not one second chance, but many second chances. How easily those words “time of grace” roll off our lips, but that is what our life is. Every day is another day of grace from God, another chance from God to do mission work. God did not throw Jonah away when he sinned, and he doesn’t throw us away either for apathy, indifference, fearfulness, bigotry, prejudice and running away from our calling as Christians. He forgives those sins because his Son Jesus carried all those sins to the cross and paid for every one of them.

God has also given us a specific message to proclaim, a message that doesn’t seem too impressive at first, a message from a book that most people don’t believe in. But it’s a message that has power we can’t comprehend, a message that’s able to change hearts in ways we never believed possible. God blesses that message. When we simply share the message, God brings victories we thought we lost, God gives success where we thought we failed. If ever there was a book in the Bible which shows that the power is in the message and not the messenger, it’s the book of Jonah. Jonah didn’t like the people he preached to, didn’t want them to be converted and didn’t want them to be saved. And yet he was the most successful missionary ever – 500,000 converts in only three days! And God does all this – he forgives us, he gives us the message and he blesses the message – because he loves his mission workers.

There’s a lot more in the book of Jonah than a man getting swallowed by a big fish. The message is the same as every other book of the Bible – God’s love for sinners. He loved the sinful people of Nineveh, he loved Jonah, and he loves and forgives you and me. May God’s love that found you and me and brought us into his family and gives us another chance and gives us the message and the promise to bless our work - turn you and me away from whatever keeps us from mission work. God loves mission work. He loves the people. And he loves the workers. Amen.