

JONAH: IT'S GOOD ONLY IF IT SUITS ME

What do you know about the Old Testament prophet Jonah? Most people remember that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Correction: The Bible says “great fish”—maybe a whale, maybe not. But do you know about Jonah the missionary? Do you know about Jonah and the gourd?—or the rapidly growing plant, maybe a gourd, maybe not. Do you know about Jonah’s selfishness?

Jonah 1:1-3, 15, 17 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. . . . But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. . . . They picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. . . . Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2:1-2, 9 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish’s belly. And he said: “I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. . . . I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. . . . Salvation is of the LORD!” So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

3:1-5, 10 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” . . . So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. . . . Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

4:1, 3, 5-7, 9-10 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. . . . So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered . . .

Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!” But the LORD said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”

Jonah didn’t seem to be cut out to be a prophet—at least not a prophet of the sort for which God used him. God said, “Go to Nineveh and preach there.” Nineveh was a large city of 120,000, a city of three days journey (Jonah 3:3), likely meaning it took three days to walk around its borders. Nineveh was a capital city—important, prosperous—capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian Empire about 800 years before Christ covered much of the middle east today—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, parts of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. They were idol worshipers. They were enemies of Israel. They were known for cruelty. God instructed Jonah to go, but Jonah did not want to go and did not go. Perhaps he was afraid, perhaps he was intimidated, perhaps he felt it was useless, perhaps loyalty to his nation would not let him go there. God’s role for him did not suit him. He took the first exit.

Are there times when God’s plan for you doesn’t suit you? So you drag your feet, you come up with excuses, you ignore what’s laid out before you, you just don’t do it? “But I wanted more children, but I didn’t want another child, but I wanted to live in the fast lane, but I wanted easy living, but I wanted to be the one in charge, but I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, etc.” God has for each a special role in life. It may not be glamorous, it may not be easy. It doesn’t mean you can’t look to expand, or cut back, or get a different job. It does mean follow the Lord’s leading. If God has shut a door, don’t insist on trying to open it. And realize that your role in life is ultimately tied to nurturing souls in Christ’s Kingdom, serving the Gospel message of forgiveness and salvation in the crucified and risen Jesus. It includes service right here at St. Luke’s, it includes raising and nurturing your own family in the Lord, reaching out to far away places through our CLC synod, touching the lives of others with the Savior’s love in the community around you, not just kindness, but openness about the Savior.

Jonah sailed away to Tarshish—evidently in the western Mediterranean world. God went after him. A great tempest unexpectedly struck the ship. The sailors were frantically trying to manage the ship. Jonah was not shy about admitting that he was running away from the LORD, which made the sailors even more frantic. They knew about the God of Israel, Jehovah. Jonah didn’t much care if he lived or died. He expressed no remorse for trying to dodge God. He did not cry out, “Stop, Lord! I’ll go!” The job didn’t suit him. He told the sailors to pitch him overboard. They reluctantly did. The storm stopped. The sailors then revered Jehovah, at least for the moment—maybe longer! God works in mysterious ways, even in our rebellion, always reaching out to others.

God had more for Jonah to learn and to do, and did not just write him off. There are likely lots of times He could write you off too, but in His patience and love He doesn't. He is concerned about you and will still use you—for His Kingdom of salvation in Jesus. Go with Him, not against Him.

God sent the great fish to swallow Jonah. There Jonah stayed for three days and three nights. He had time to ponder what was going on. He should have been dead, but wasn't. God had broken Jonah's self-interest and pride as he had been sinking down into the bowels of the sea, with no possible escape. *"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. . . . I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. . Salvation is of the LORD!"* Jonah repented of his "this doesn't suit me" attitude. The Lord was very kind, merciful, and forgiving to him and spared his life.

The Lord is interested in you too, Don't ever despise His concern for you, even if you think you're too good for what He has on your plate. He is your Savior. He has saved you from drowning in your rebellion and sin. Jonah was up against it, before he finally woke up. Sometimes God has to lead us to a point of saying, "I CAN'T FIX THIS MESS. I'M DONE!" Then finally we look to Him for forgiveness and direction in life.

The fish burped Jonah out onto shore. Do you suppose Jonah felt like it was a new day, like he had just been reborn? When you recognize that your life, and your role in life, are in the hands of the God of mercy and love, then each day is a new day! God again sent Jonah to Nineveh, and Jonah went. How could he thumb his nose at God? Jonah served well. The Lord's message of impending doom and destruction brought this godless city to its knees. They repented in sackcloth and ashes, forgetting about style and looks. They repented. *The people of Nineveh believed God.* They trusted in Him and His promised mercy for sinners. It was not just outward—"we believe there's trouble coming, so we'll change our outward conduct." This was a change of heart. They "believed God," is the very same expression used of Abraham, when God told him to count the stars. God told Abraham he would indeed have countless descendants through the promised Seed, the Savior. (In fact through faith in Jesus we are all Abraham's descendants!--Romans 4:11-15.) "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). Nineveh repented, believed, and God spared them. These non-Israelite idol worshippers listened to God's message better than the Israelites did. In the New Testament Jesus says that the men of Nineveh will rise on the last day and judge the people of Israel, because Israel ignored one greater than Jonah, the Son of God himself (Matthew 12:41). Citizens of Nineveh will be in heaven! Who knows the great impact the Word of Christ will have on others through you—even just one. You may not always be able to see "successes" in God's Kingdom, as Jonah did. God knows.

There is more to the account of Jonah. God had won Jonah's outward compliance, obedience, and service. But Jonah's heart was still not into it. God wanted his heart too. Sometimes it works that way with parents and children or with husbands and wives. Winning outward compliance is not the end of the story nor the end-goal. It may seem like it. It may be a relief to get that far, but winning the heart is the real goal. We see why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. It wasn't fear, or intimidation. It didn't suit him to go because He didn't want them to be shown God's undeserved mercy and forgiveness--God's grace. Did he think they didn't deserve it, did he think they were the wrong skin color, did he think they spoke the wrong language? Something. He was angry that God spared the city and the people! *I fled previously to Tarshish for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm (Jonah 4:2).* These words of Jonah are the very words God used to describe Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6! God didn't let Jonah drown in the sea, because He is a gracious and merciful God and wants none to be banished to hell. But now Johan was angry because Nineveh was spared. How blind of Jonah! But are you any different? Do you have a grudge against someone and not want them to be blessed and forgiven by God, but you are? You want to see God make them squirm?

Jonah finally got the point through the pleasant plant that God sent to shield his head from the hot rays of the sun. When the plant died Jonah was angry. But Jonah would not have been angry if all the inhabitants of Nineveh had died! God would not let those souls of Nineveh, spiritually ignorant of right from left, die, now and forever. Jonah learned to appreciate the gracious forgiveness of God for himself and for all. Although the book ends abruptly without specifically stating so, how else would a prophet of God be considered faithful to write part of the Old Testament? He understood salvation through the future Messiah as a gift of God for all. Jesus pointed to Jonah as a prophet with a great message—not a sham prophet. When the Pharisees demanded of Him a sign, He said, *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* (Matthew 12:39-40). Jonah, the reluctant prophet, preaches still today the victory in Christ and forgiveness for all in Christ! That's a role and privilege suited for you too.

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---