

Epiphany 3B

January 22, 2012

Hymns: 379 - 525 - 560 - 470

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise! Amen!

First in a three part Series: PROCLAIMERS OF THE GOSPEL

JONAH 3:1-5-10

JONAH – RELUCTANT PROCLAIMER OF THE GOOD NEWS.

OK – so what is the moral of the story of Jonah? Someone in jest has offered this moral: “The story of Jonah shows that....you can’t keep a good man down.” Funny, but the very point of the lesson we need to learn is that Jonah was behaving badly. He wasn’t being very good about what he was supposed to do. God came to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, a great but wicked city, and **“Preach against it because its wickedness has come up before Me.”** In other words, Jonah’s assigned task was to proclaim God’s judgment on Nineveh’s sin and unbelief.

But Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the historic enemy of Israel. In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the Assyrians plundered Palestine, looted and burned its cities and deported its inhabitants – at least, the ones they did not subject tortured death. In 722-721 B.C., it was Assyria that destroyed the Northern Kingdom. And so, Jonah hated the Assyrians. When God came to him and told him to preach to the people of Nineveh, Jonah went in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship traveling westward, bound for Tarshish on the coast of Spain, at the opposite end of the known world. He was fleeing from his calling; he was fleeing from the Lord. Of course, Jonah was playing dumb to the reality that Jehovah is a universal God from Whom there is no escape.

Isn’t amazing sometimes the truths the devil can get us to overlook? Boy, do we get suckered time and again! You have probably heard sermons before from the book of Jonah on the futility of running from God. Yet we all do it all the time in our lives. We don’t board ships. We do it with our minds and hearts. We tune God out. We ignore the voice that calls us to serve our neighbor, serve our church, serve our God. We all have been called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. Our life is changed – dramatically. And mostly in this – that we now have a calling from God to be what He would want us to be, to do what He would want us to do, to act when and in the way He would want us to act. And we do all this with the gifts and time He has given us, where He has placed us.

Have you discovered your calling from God? What is He calling you to do now? This day, this week? At this stage in your life? Where you live or where He is calling you to?!

Jonah tried to flee from his calling and from God. But what happened? You know the story. The ship that he was on encountered a vicious storm and was tossed about on the waves like a toy. The winds and the waves were so fierce that seasoned sailors begged to their gods for mercy. Finally they cast lots in order to determine who the gods were angry with. “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?” they prayed.

The lot, of course, fell upon Jonah. Jonah confessed that he had displeased his God by seeking to flee from God’s presence. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” Jonah replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come.”

To their credit, these men did not want to throw Jonah overboard. They did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man - for You, LORD, have done as You pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him

overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. And the Bible tells us that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights. Someone has said that it was perfectly easy for a great fish to swallow Jonah whole. After all, Jonah IS only one of the MINOR prophets.

Anyway, it is interesting to note that Jesus once referred to the story of Jonah. Remember how He told skeptics that the only sign that they would receive would be the sign of Jonah? Christ would emerge from the ground on the third day after His crucifixion just as Jonah had emerged from the belly of the fish. Now we all should know the story up to this point. The big fish can no longer stomach Jonah after three days and coughs him up on dry land--alive and well, and probably well chastened. At this point the Lord came to Jonah a second time and told him again to go preach to Nineveh. And this time Jonah was in no mood to argue. So he went to Nineveh and preached like he had never preached before.

“Forty days,” he cried, “and the Lord will destroy this city. Forty days is all you have to repent.” And something amazing occurred. Says the Scripture, “The people of Nineveh believed God.” They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth--all of them, from the greatest to the least. Even the king of Nineveh repented. He dressed in sackcloth and issued a decree of total surrender to the will of God. The revival was an astounding success. Every sinner repented. Every heart was changed.

You would think that a preacher would rejoice in such a great victory being given to him. But not Jonah. And then the very thing Jonah feared most occurred. God changed His mind and decided not to destroy Nineveh. Then we come to some of the most fascinating sentences in all of the Bible: “But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, *‘O Lord, isn’t this what I said, when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God Who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’*”

Can you believe that? Jonah had preached to the Ninevites. They had repented. Because they had repented, God had changed His mind about destroying them. Jonah should have been thrilled. Instead Jonah was so upset that God had changed his mind about destroying these people--he was so angry that he asked God to take his life. He was so angry that he literally wanted to die.

Then Jonah went out on a hill overlooking the city to see what would happen to Nineveh--to see if God would acknowledge Jonah’s displeasure and let the Ninevites have it anyway. And, at this point, God decides to have a little fun with His cantankerous prophet. God makes a plant grow up near Jonah to shade him while he sits and pouts. And the plant pleases Jonah immensely. It’s one thing to have a temper tantrum. It’s another thing to sit all day in the hot sun. If he’s going to sit there until he dies, at least he will do it in comfort!

But then dawn comes the next morning and the Lord sends a worm to attack the plant that is shading Jonah so that it withers and dies. Then God sends a hot east wind, and the sun beats down on Jonah’s head. The heat is so intense Jonah faints. The heat makes Jonah so uncomfortable and so angry that again he asks God to let him die.

But then God speaks to Jonah. God asks Jonah if he is angry over the plant dying. Jonah answered that of course he is, angry enough to die. And then God teaches Jonah a lesson. In two of the most important verses in the Bible, God says to Jonah, “*You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?*”

And that is how the book of Jonah ends. One scholar suggests that the figure “120,000 persons who do

not know their right hand from their left” is referring to young children in the city - which implies a total population of 1 million or more. This is the lesson Jonah learned that day: God’s love is a universal love. God’s love is as certain for the people of Nineveh as it is for the people of Jerusalem or New York or San Francisco or Phoenix or Birmingham or Brooklyn Park. God’s love is as certain for the single bedroom apartment dwellers along Zane, who have children in our preschool, as His love is certain for those who live in 1\2 million dollar homes on the north side of 610 here in Brooklyn Park.

Furthermore, God does not respect national background or skin color, or family status. God loves all people--white people, black people, rich people, poor people, old people, young people--God isn’t interested in labels, professions or even philosophies. God is only interested in people. “God so loved the world,” states John 3:16. It doesn’t say, God so loved North America, or English speaking people, or capitalists, or liberals, or anything like that. “God so loved the world”--that’s the Gospel.

I don’t want to drive this point into the ground. But this is what the book of Jonah is about. God loves everybody: Jews and gentiles, Arabs and Africans, the people of Nineveh and the people of Israel. There is no place in the kingdom of God for any kind of hatred or prejudice that directs or restricts our Christian witness. Christ died for everyone’s sins. Your sins, my sins, but also the sins of our worst enemies.

The demand for us to love all people is still with us. The little children’s song says it best, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” The book of Jonah ends abruptly with the God’s words, “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” It is a haunting ending to the account. Nothing is said about whether Jonah ever had a change of heart. How about you and me? Does our heart go out to all people – believers and unbelievers? Friends and boat captains and terrorists? Jesus bled and died for each and every soul in this world. Do we not with Him want all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth – the Gospel? Amen.

May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, Who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen!