

January 21, 2024 (Epiphany 3 B)

Jonah 3:1-5,10
“Modern Jonahs”

I’ve preached on the prophet **Jonah** before. He’s a fascinating guy with a fascinating story. I’d say he’s probably the most self-deprecating of all God’s called servants that we see in Scripture. His book is, of course, 100% true and accurate – but he paints himself in the worst possible way: a disobedient servant who tries to run and hide from God, and who despises the people he was called to preach to, and who just wanted to curl up and die when things didn’t happen as he wanted them to. All of us are unworthy servants of God, but Jonah understood that on a deep level and he wasn’t afraid to reveal the ugliness of his own heart. We might want to focus on the miracle of how he was swallowed by a gigantic sea creature and survived. But that’s not the only miracle in this short book, there are many MORE – and one of them is that God loved this man, forgave this man, gave this man another chance to serve Him, and used this man to bring many souls to repentance / faith / and eternal salvation.

I think that now, because of what took place this past year, I can understand Jonah better than I ever have before. First of all, we had a chance to go to Israel and see the country, and walk around Joppa – where Jonah went to try and run away from God. Just being there helped me understand that part of the world much better – and then the events of October 7th happened. God’s people back in Jonah’s day had experienced those kinds of attacks and brutal invasions too.

If you try to imagine a “*modern Jonah*” I think you can understand this man better / why he felt the way he did and why he acted the way he did. Let’s imagine a Jewish man – who is a Christian, in a land where those who worship the One True God are extremely rare. God now calls this man to go into Gaza City and call those people to repentance and faith in Christ. He knows people who were slaughtered by them. His fiends and family were butchered by them and taken away as hostages. *He’s not going to go and preach to THEM!* It’s not that he’s a coward and afraid for his own life – he just doesn’t **want to** . . . so he plans to hop a flight to Texas and get the heck out of there.

Well . . . you know what God did to this man when he tried to escape on a ship headed for Tarshish from the port of Joppa. He got tossed off the boat and was presumed dead. I’m sure he thought that was the end of the road for him. But . . . God provided some kind of monster sea creature to swallow him. *Could you imagine what it would be like to be **inside** that creature for three days?* Just imagine what it would *smell* like being inside a fish’s stomach. Think of how dark it would be – you wouldn’t be able to see your hand in front of your face. You would be endlessly tossed back and forth as the creature swam around – it makes me seasick just thinking about it. I wonder how many times Jonah threw up. He had nothing to eat or drink; just salty and slimy water with ½ digested fish pieces in stomach acid floating around him, which would be constantly splashing all over him in absolute darkness. He had seaweed wrapped around his head in that hellish pit.

God was teaching Jonah a lesson – Jonah found out the hard way that he cannot run away from God, and that obeying God is far less painful than disobeying Him. Jonah **prayed** from inside the fish: his attitude had changed and he actually rejoiced at God’s deliverance and praised Him for His salvation . . . while yet inside the fish! God’s object lesson had served its purpose, so He commanded the fish and it spit Jonah up onto dry land. God taught Jonah a lesson and it appears to have sunk in, so then God graciously gave him a second chance to do what He had earlier asked, and that’s where our text picks up:

Jonah 3:1–5 (NIV)

3 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. 4 Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

[Those were maybe not the *only* words Jonah proclaimed. I think of it more as if that was the *theme* of the sermon message he proclaimed.]

5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, 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 relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Verse 10 is probably the most shocking miracle in the book – *they listened! They repented! They believed and turned to God for mercy! And – God had mercy upon them!* Could you imagine a **modern Jonah** preaching in the Gaza strip – and the Palestinians REPENT! They abandon their hateful religion / renounce terrorism / return all the hostages / seek forgiveness from God and those they hurt / seek peace with their neighbors? As hard as it is for us to ever imagine *that* happening – it happened when Jonah preached to Nineveh.

Where did the POWER of this miracle come from? Jonah didn't "win them over" because of his deep love for them. He didn't use the latest and greatest evangelism techniques from the "master prophets" who had proven results. He didn't preach such a fantastic sermon that he convinced them all. The people didn't have a "come to Jesus" moment and all of a sudden decide to "give their lives to Jesus and welcome Him into their hearts" – they were spiritually dead and about as receptive to the Gospel as modern terrorists would be.

What's left? The **power of God the Holy Spirit** working through His Word to bust down walls and bring sinners to repentance and faith. God worked the miracle through the power of His Word – spoken by His unworthy servant. Jonah understood that, and by God's grace we understand that too. We share Jonah's understanding of God's incredible and incomprehensible MERCY for sinners, and the Holy Spirit's role in the miracle of conversion.

But – beyond even that, we are probably more like Jonah than you might think – at least I know I am. You look in the mirror and you can see a reflection of Jonah – but it's in reverse. It's the same thing – but it's the opposite / it's flipped around. Jonah was upset because he saw how God's Word worked to dramatically change the lives of hardened sinners. God called Jonah to preach to the people He had planted there in Nineveh.

God called me here and He's planted us here to preach the Gospel to people who live here. I know some of the history of Grace Lutheran Church. Many people have thought that this congregation shouldn't be *here*. Some have thought we should pick it up and move it to a *better* location – like Longview or maybe someplace else. But – what's wrong with the people around here? They can't be any worse than the Ninevites. We too are surrounded by 10's of thousands

of people who "*can't tell their right hands from their left*" (see Jonah 4:11).

So . . . we share the Gospel right here. But – *it doesn't seem to work* – at least not on a scale that we want to see! We want to see the multitudes come to repentance and faith, and flock here to learn about their Lord and Savior. So . . . just like Jonah, we **modern Jonahs** are NOT seeing the results we WANT to see. So . . . we pout. We act like children (as the Jonah of old did) and we throw up our hands in frustration – *No one seems to care / no one wants to listen / no one comes when we invite them over and over and over again.*

Thankfully – God was patient with Jonah and He's patient with His modern Jonahs too. He forgives us as He forgave him. He cares, and He sits with us when we're upset, angry, disappointed, or dejected – as He sat with him – and reminds us what we need to know and what He expects us to do.

What was Jonah's Job? Preach God's Word to Nineveh. *Anything else?* Nope. *What's our job as God's people – called to faith and called to serve Him right here where He has planted us?* Share God's Word / tell others about Jesus / God's love / God's truth / what He's done for us all so that we can live with Him now and forever. *That's it?* Yeah – essentially. And – as for the **results** of letting our light shine – *whose job is that?* **His**. And, if we don't like the results? It's irrelevant. God works in mysterious ways and we leave the results in His hands.

This is very practical as we, as a congregation, make plans to share the Gospel with our community and carry out evangelism in this community. *What's our job?* Preach the Word and get it out there. *So – how do we measure the effectiveness of our evangelism efforts?* *By the number of sinners who repent / the number of new members in our flock / the numbers of people who come to worship on Sunday?* No – those are **results** / they are out of our hands / we may or may not like the results but it doesn't really matter. If our events give us a chance to share the Gospel with other people – that's a success, and that's all God wants or expects us to do. We simply share the Truth in Love – and trust that God's Word never returns to Him empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

To proclaim it is our privilege and the results are in His hands. Jonah learned that lesson, and we modern Jonahs can too. Amen.