

What Jonah Teaches About Mission

I'm attempting today to preach about an entire book from the Old Testament—the Book of Jonah. We all know, even the children, about Jonah—Jonah and the whale. The most interesting part is about Jonah being swallowed by a huge fish and being vomited out near Nineveh where he was supposed to go in the first place.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I want to say something about the entire book and how it came into being. Jonah was probably produced late in the Old Testament period, several hundred years before Jesus came along. The story of Jonah reflects some of the thinking that arose out of the Exile experience. You remember that the citizens of Israel and Judah were overrun by the Babylonian army and deported to Babylon. It was in that period of hardship that they did a good deal of stock-taking. The theologians and thinkers of the time realized that they had indeed missed their calling and identity as God's people. One of the rediscovered aspects of their being was a recovery of the idea that God had formed Israel to be a blessing for all of the earth. Israel was to be a bearer of God's vision of justice and peace and righteousness for all the peoples of the earth. God had never called Israel to simply be God's pet nation.

In the book of Jonah the prophet is called to go to Nineveh and preach about God's judgment and coming wrath. What's significant about Nineveh is that it is the capital city of Assyria, one of the nations that basically destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, disrupted her culture, and deported her people. Nowhere would be more distasteful to a self-respecting Jew than Nineveh. Shouldn't God be interested in actually punishing Nineveh? Why should they get a warning. They're not going to listen anyway.

Jonah clearly has this negative attitude about God's assignment. What he does is to book passage on a sailing ship bound for precisely the opposite direction of Nineveh—toward Tarshish. Of course, God is fighting with Jonah through the entire story, trying to get him on board with his calling to be a blessing even to Nineveh.

God begins by stirring up a terrifying storm. The ship's crew is beset by the wind and waves. Now as we read the narrative, we immediately respect the crew. They do several quite noble things, even with their lives at risk. They pray to their gods. They have spiritual discernment that correctly identifies Jonah as the cause of their danger. They implore Jonah to pray to his

own God. Even when they know that Jonah is the source of their problem, they are reluctant to throw him into the sea. But at length they must make a survival decision to lose one man or everyone on board. Jonah goes in the drink.

This part of the story is probably the best known. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish and lives and prays in its belly for three days. It's interesting how this prayer of desperation is answered. Jonah is rescued after a fashion. But perhaps more importantly, Jonah is summoned again emphatically to go and preach in Nineveh. This time Jonah follows his calling and goes and—with little enthusiasm—preaches to the Assyrians in their capital city of Nineveh. And even more amazingly, the people of Nineveh from King on down repent and are spared.

You know, we read this, and we begin to think, it just might turn out that the gentiles, the non-believers, are the good guys. They're disarmingly sensitive and apparently closer to God and God's heart than is Jonah. Jonah is an embarrassment. He is a special person from the ranks of a chosen people, and he is clearly out of tune with God. He simply cannot get on board with the idea that God cares about the Ninevites. Jonah wants no part of God's mission to them. Even after the terror of being in the belly of the whale for three days; even after seeing the huge metropolis of Nineveh have a sweeping change of heart, Jonah just can't get on board with God's passion for people who aren't Israelites.

It's tempting to think of Jonah much as people think of Noah and his ark—charming, innocent stories for children. But as we read the whole sweep of Jonah, it's pretty clear that its message is very grown up. What it means to be a Christian; what it means to feel a sense of chosen-ness by God is not so we can gloat and feel favored and save. God has chosen you and me not for privilege but for responsibility. Indeed to receive what God is giving you and me we must give it away. Moreover, God has a love not only for you and me, but for every person in the world.

Has it ever struck you that the Bible is strikingly frank in presenting the people of God in critical light and the people who are not believers, or not yet believers, in a favorable light? Pontius Pilate and his soldiers, the ones who carry out the execution of Jesus, are not displayed in the New Testament as brutes. They are almost good guys. Pilate looks much more fair than the raving Jewish leaders screaming for Jesus to be

crucified. It is the centurion who is first to understand that Jesus on the Cross is God in the world.

Many of the episodes of Jesus' ministry are filled with strangers who are not his disciples, who show a heartening level of faith. It isn't the disciples who model the path for the public. They are strangers out of the public who model faith and persistence for the disciples.

This brings us to the heart of what it means to a disciple of Jesus Christ, what it means to be called by name and gathered into Jesus' company. We are missionaries. The very word "saint" means "bearer of sacred object." Whatever God fills you and me with is given for the purpose of giving to someone else who doesn't have it. It's like lighting candles. God gives you and me the light for the purpose of lighting other candles. And notice we don't lose the flame when we give it away.

Jonah is a caricature of the kind of me-centered Christian faith we spoke about two or three weeks ago. The warning is clear—don't be him. God is absolutely intent on using Jonah to save the Ninevites, and God be absolutely intent on using you and me to carry something wonderful to someone or some situation that is outside the church. There is someone in each of our lives who deeply needs us to care, to listen, to coach, to support. Don't run from that. Christ has given each of us and groups of us resources to bring transformation to concrete situations around us. Do you have difficulty envisioning what that may look like? Think of the stream of guests who speak about their sense of calling on Wednesday nights. They're usually lay people who have heard some call to Nineveh and have gotten there and who are doing some amazing things. It can be bring water systems to Zambia, it can be working in the Hillside neighborhood, it can be working with troubled kids, it can be reading to students, it can be bringing meals to shut-ins. We can do this in our own lives and in our own church. And we'll be amazed at the response. Jonah certainly was.