

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

**Glynde Lutheran Church**

**Sermon on Jonah 3:1-5,10**

**Theme: "The message of the book of Jonah"**

**"How are you responding to God's call to you to share the Good News to others?"**

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***Introduction:***

Most of us know the story of Jonah and the whale, about how Jonah was thrown off a ship, swallowed by a whale, and yet lived to tell the tale. But I wonder if you know what the book of Jonah is all about? I wonder if you know why the writer of this story wrote the story, and what the main point of the story is?

This morning, I thought that we'd look closely at this story and see if we can work out its main point. Then we'll ask ourselves what God wants to say to us today through this story.

***Part 1: A retelling of the story***

The story begins:

**"One day, the Lord spoke to Jonah, son of Amittai. He said, 'Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware how wicked its people are'" (1:1-2).**

But what does Jonah do? Does he obey God and go to Nineveh and proclaim to them God's judgement on them? No! He runs as far away as he can in the opposite direction. He goes to the seaport of Joppa and gets a ticket on a boat bound for the other side of the world.

Why does he do this? Well, without reading the story, we might think that it was because Jonah was afraid of what the people of Nineveh might do to him. But that's not the reason!

Later on in the story, we're told that Jonah fled because he was afraid that his words would cause "the lying, murderous" Ninevites to repent and that God would have mercy on them instead of destroying them as they justly deserved (4:2; cf. Nahum 3:1).

You see Jonah, *and the Israelites in general*, hated the Ninevites and the people of Assyria, *for whom Nineveh was the capital city*. Years earlier, the Assyrians had invaded Israel and Judah and nearly wiped them out completely. It was only

through God's intervention that Jerusalem itself was spared and the Assyrians returned home (*2 Kings 19:32-36*).

So, the last people that Jonah wanted to take God's Word to were the Assyrians and the people of its capital Nineveh. And so instead he runs away as far as he can in the opposite direction, aiming for a place where he won't be able to hear the Word of God in his ears (see *T. Fretheim The Message of Jonah, 40-41, 76f*).

But God doesn't let him get away. The writer of the story tells us:

**“The Lord sent a strong wind on the sea, and the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god”** (*1:4-5*).

And what is Jonah doing? He is "lying in the ship's hold, sound asleep" (*1:5*). The captain has to come along and say to him:

**“What are you doing asleep? Get up and pray to your god for help. Maybe he will be sorry for us and spare our lives?”** (*1:6*).

But apparently, Jonah does nothing. He is silent. In desperation, the sailors drew lots to try to find out whose sin it was that was causing the storm. They “believed that the storm was a direct reaction of a god to some evil deed committed by someone on board” (*Fretheim, 84*). And whose name gets drawn out of the hat, so to speak? Jonah's!! (*1:7*).

So they hauled Jonah up before them and questioned him about who he is, where he is from, and what he has done (*1:8*). Jonah admits that he is the guilty one and that he is the cause of the storm. He proposes to the sailors that they throw him into the sea. He says:

**“Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down.**

**I know it is my fault that you are caught in this violent storm”** (*1:12*).

And after much agonising, the sailors do this, and we are told that "the sea calmed down at once" (*1:15*).

Just a comment about this. Jonah remained stubborn to the end. He could have repented and said, “Lord, forgive me. I'll go and preach your word to the Ninevites if that is your will”.

But what does he do? He says to God in effect:

**“Kill me! I deserve your judgement. Kill me!**

**I'm like the people of Nineveh.... I deserve your judgement! Judge me and kill me!”**

But what does God do? He saves Jonah and gives Jonah another opportunity to do his will. The writer of the story says:

**At the Lord's command a great fish (by the way, we're not told what sort of a fish; maybe it was a whale the writer had in mind, maybe not) swallowed Jonah, and he was inside the fish for three days and nights".**

**At the end of that time, "the Lord ordered the fish to spew, vomit, Jonah up on the beach, and it did" (1:17, 2:10).**

Then, the writer tells us, Jonah was again commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh and to preach his message to them. This time Jonah goes, but he goes reluctantly (3:1-3; cf. 4:1; 2:2-9). He still hasn't changed his mind about the Ninevites. He still believes that God should punish those wicked people and not give them the opportunity to repent. But he goes because he has no other option but to obey God (*Fretheim, 109*).

Nevertheless, he makes it as difficult as he can for the Ninevites to hear God's message (*Fretheim, 107f*). He only goes part of the way into the city (3:4a; cf. 3:3b) and speaks only a very brief message to them:

**"In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed"**

He gives no reason for their destruction, just simply gives a message of doom. But lo and behold, his message is believed by the people, and they repent. Listen to how the writer of the story describes what happened:

**<sup>5</sup>The people of Nineveh believed God's message.**

**So they decided that everyone should fast, and all the people, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to show that they had repented.**

**<sup>6</sup>When the king of Nineveh heard about it, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. <sup>7</sup>He sent out a proclamation to the people of Nineveh: "This is an order from the king and his officials. No one is to eat anything; all persons, cattle, and sheep are forbidden to eat or drink. <sup>8</sup>All persons and animals must wear sackcloth.**

**Everyone must pray earnestly to God and must give up their wicked behavior and their evil actions. <sup>9</sup>Perhaps God will change his mind; perhaps he will stop being angry, and we will not die!"**

**<sup>10</sup>God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behaviour. So he changed his mind and did not punish them as he had said he would (3:5-10)**

How does Jonah respond to all this, *to the Ninevites' repentance and God's mercy towards the city?* It makes him angry! (4:1)

The writer of the story says:

**He prayed, 'Lord, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish. Now, Lord, let me die. I am better off dead than alive' (4:2-3).**

Why does Jonah want to be dead? I think that it is because he can't face living life with what he considers to be an unfair God in control. The people of Israel, God's chosen people, were struggling to survive and not seeming to get much of God's help, and here was God having mercy on their enemies, people who were "lying, murderous" scum (*Fretheim, 121*).

God answers Jonah not by granting him his wish but by patiently saying to him: **"Is it right for you to be angry?" (4:4).**

God is saying to Jonah in effect:

**"Am I not able to have mercy on those who turn to me and ask me for forgiveness?" (cf. *Fretheim, 122*).**

But Jonah doesn't give up his conviction the Ninevites should be receiving God's judgement, not his mercy. The writer of the story says:

**Jonah went out east of the city and sat down. He made a shelter for himself and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh (4:5).**

So Jonah, we are told, goes out, finds a place to sit where he can see the city, and waits to see if God will destroy the city as he should.

And what does God do? He patiently continues to try to convince Jonah that he should be pleased and not displeased over the deliverance of Nineveh from judgement. This time God seeks to convince Jonah by means of a parable from nature. The writer of the story says:

**<sup>6</sup>Then the LORD God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable. Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant. <sup>7</sup>But at dawn the next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, and it died. <sup>8</sup>After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind, and Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. So he wished he were dead. "I am better off dead than alive," he said.**

**<sup>9</sup>But God said to him, "What right do you have to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry—angry enough to die!" (4:6-9).**

God's final words in this story sum up the point of the parable and the story as a whole:

**<sup>10</sup>The LORD said to him, “This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it and you didn't make it grow—yet you feel sorry for it! <sup>11</sup>How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!”**

God says to Jonah in effect:

**“Jonah, you are very upset about this plant. However, it cost you no effort and no pain. You did not cultivate it. It grew up overnight, and faded overnight. What, about my right to have feelings for Nineveh? Should I not be concerned about this teeming city? You showed concern for something that lives for so short a time. Do I not have a right to feel mercy for people...and for beasts who are of much more value than a mere plant?”** (*Crossways, 349; cf. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obabiah, Jonah, and Micah, 234; Fretheim, 124f*).

### ***Part 2: The main point of the story***

The whole story of Jonah, then, is a story written to make a point, a great point that comes out again and again in Scripture: that God is a merciful, loving God who wants everyone to repent and to come to know him as their God.

Listen to what some of the writers of the books and letter of the New Testament say, *in echo of Jesus*:

- \* **Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.**

**<sup>9</sup>And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. <sup>10</sup>This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven (*1 John 4:7-10*).**

- \* **First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people; <sup>2</sup>for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct. <sup>3</sup>This is good and it pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth (*1 Tim. 2:1-4*)**

**<sup>8</sup> But do not forget one thing, my dear friends! There is no difference in the Lord's sight between one day and a thousand years; to him the two are the same. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to do what he has promised, as some think. Instead, he is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins (2 Peter 3:9).**

### **Part 3: God's message to each of us**

What's God saying to us this morning? What is He reminding us of? Well, three things, I think:

- 1) Through the story of Jonah, God is reminding us that He loves everyone, *even our enemies*.... And that He wants us to love others in the same way! Listen again to what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

**<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' <sup>44</sup> But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil (Matt. 5:43-45).**

Think of those people around you in your circle of friends, at work, or at play, in your street, who you find difficult to get along with, and to love. God calls you to love them, and to try to lead them to a relationship with Him, through Jesus.

- 2) Also through our look at the book of Jonah, God is reminding us of the reality of His judgement on people for their "sins". The book of Jonah describes how God sent Jonah to the people of Ninevah to warn them of His coming judgement, for their lack of love, and their lying, deceitful, murderous way (*cf. Nahum 3:1*).

You know, sometimes we are tempted to minimise God's judgement.... We think that God tends to turn a blind eye to people's "sins", because He loves them so much.

Well, it's true that God "loves them so much", but it is also true that God is a just God, who can't just overlook people's sins....

If people refuse God's offer of forgiveness, then they will have suffer God's judgement of being separated from God now and in eternity.

Listen to some of the things that Jesus says about God's judgement:

\* <sup>16</sup> **For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, be "lost eternally", but have eternal life** (*John 3:16*).

\* <sup>41</sup> **"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Away from me, you that are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels....** <sup>46</sup> **These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life."** (*Matt. 25:41, 46*).

\* <sup>23</sup> **For sin pays its wage—death; but God's free gift is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus our Lord** (*Rom. 6:23*).

Yes, God's judgement is real, if we don't put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour....

3) And finally, the story of Jonah reminds us that God wants to use you and me to reach out to the people around us with the message of God's love, and the forgiveness of their "sins" through trusting in Jesus as their Saviour.

You know, there is an old story that goes like this:

**Jesus has just risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. He is hanging out with some angels on the clouds. They are looking down upon the earth. One angel says, "Lord, that was amazing; we thought you were a "goner". We thought it was over. But then, you rose from the dead. You trampled death under your feet. You've defeated Satan! What's next?"**

**Jesus answered, "I left a handful of people who really believe in me, and they are going to tell the world about me and make disciples."**

**The angels were stunned. They simply stared at Jesus. The silence got to the point of being uncomfortable. Finally, one angel tentatively asked, "Lord, what is Plan B?"**

**Jesus answered, "There is No Plan B".**

**"There is no Plan B!!" There is just you and me. That's how God plans to rescue people from their coming judgement....**

*Time for Reflection:*

*“Are you responding eagerly, or are you like Jonah doing your best to forget that God has a task and a mission for you?”*

He wants to use you and me to be his witnesses to those around us, no matter who they are: whether they be friends, family, people whom you like, people whom you don't like, whoever. God loves them all, *regardless of who they are or what they have done, regardless of their skin colour or their race*, and he wants them all to come into his family!!

Let's finish with prayer:

**Heavenly Father, forgive us for the times when we've failed to use opportunities that you have given us to speak to those around us about you and what you have done for us through your Son Jesus. Forgive us, Father.**

**Father, we don't always find it easy to speak openly about you to others. Give us, please, the courage and the strength to use each opportunity that you give us to be the witnesses to others that you want us to be. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen".**

*Addendum:*

- \* **Nineveh** was an ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia, located on the outskirts of Mosul in modern-day northern Iraq. It is located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River and was the capital and largest city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, as well as the largest city in the world for several decades.

Today, it is a common name for the half of Mosul that lies on the eastern bank of the Tigris, and the country's Nineveh Governorate takes its name from it.