

Jonah 3:1-10

Pentecost 6, 2022; July 17/18, 2022

Of all the miracles recorded in the Bible, which one is the greatest? That's one of those questions that can have so many different answers. How about the miracle of having the sun stand still as Joshua fought the Amorites? How about when Moses parted the Red Sea? How about raising Lazarus from the dead? Changing water into wine? We could keep on answering that question. So, let's narrow the question down a bit. What is the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah?

It's the fish, isn't it? Everyone knows about Jonah and the fish. God causes a large fish to swallow Jonah and keep him alive in the belly of that fish for three days. That's a miracle. Then after 3 days, God causes the fish to vomit Jonah on the dry land. That's a miracle. But the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is what God does with Jonah.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. He knew what was going to happen if he did. He knew what God was going to do. He didn't want to be part of it. It's probably not what you would think. Jonah spoke about how he felt when he prayed to God. **"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."** In other words, Jonah did not want these people to be saved. They didn't deserve to be saved.

Why? Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. During the time of Jonah they were a rising power in the Middle East. They were expanding and conquering neighboring nations and expanding their influence. The Assyrians were not nice people. They were known for their utter brutality. The empire's economy supported a massive war machine whose only purpose was to destroy enemies and expand the empire. They were ruthless. They did horrible things to people. They were enemies of the Israelites.

In the eyes of the Israelites, they needed to be destroyed. They were cruel, ruthless and they were violent. He knew of the destruction that they were capable of doing. They were the enemy. Why would he want to go to them and give them a way out of being destroyed? He was not going to go because he knew what God would do. It was his worst nightmare. God might just save these people.

If you were God, what would you have done with Jonah? It would have been easy to write Jonah off after he didn't go and tried to go as far away from Nineveh that he could get. We would understand if God would have said: *"Well, so much for that guy. Who else do we have to send to Nineveh?"* But God wasn't done with Jonah yet. **"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."** So, Jonah goes, reluctantly. God only records five words (in Hebrew) of the sermon he preached: **"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed!"** Pretty short sermon? 5 words? You kind of get the feeling that Jonah isn't into this whole mission of getting Nineveh to repent? Not a really loving message, is it? You kind of get the feeling that Jonah is simply going through the motions. There's no Gospel in those words. It's only a message of *"do or die."*

Yet, what do the people do? **"The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."** They repented. What does Jonah do? He goes and builds some kind of a structure outside of the city and waits for the fireworks show to begin. They deserved a good shower of fire coming down from heaven like God did with Sodom and Gomorrah. He wanted God to get rid of these people once and for all. They didn't deserve a second chance. Yet, God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh.

Do we sometimes feel like Jonah? Do we sometimes want people to get what we think they should get? If someone dents our car, we want them to pay. If someone hurts us with words, we want them to get what we think they should. If someone doesn't meet our expectation, we want them gone. Do we ever feel like Jonah? It is much easier for us to understand judgment than mercy. Jonah didn't want God to show the people of Nineveh mercy. Jonah wanted the people of Nineveh to fail.

In the verses after our text, Jonah says: **"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."** Yet, on that day, the largest conversion in the Bible of people repenting of their sin and turning to God happens. A city of 120,000 people repent. (That's almost 4

times the population of Franklin.) Imagine that happening? God didn't write off the people of Nineveh and he didn't write Jonah off. God miraculously turned this whole city away from their sin and turn to God. God doesn't write you off. You may think that God could never forgive me for what I did. There in the book of Jonah you see something big going on here. Something much bigger than just Jonah and a fish. We see the mercy of God for all people.

The pages of Scripture are clear. God **"all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."** God tells us: **"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they repent and live."** God's mercy is for all. That is the modern message and timeless truth we learn through the ancient messenger, the prophet Jonah. The same gracious Lord who sought to bring the great city of Nineveh to repentance, who used the great wind to create the great storm that redirected Jonah, and who provided the great fish to return Jonah to his assigned task, remains great in mercy and compassion for us and others.

The greatest miracle in this whole story of Jonah is the mercy of God in calling Nineveh to repentance. He even uses a reluctant prophet to do it. It's just as great of a miracle that he has done in each of you. God takes sinful human beings like you and me and turns them back to him. Why does God do this? He loves us. Christ showed that love when he came to die for us. God could have destroyed Nineveh, but he didn't. He could destroy us, but he doesn't. That's the kind of God that we have.

So, the book of Jonah is more than a fish story. It's even more than a fishing story. It's really a love story. It's the story of God's love that has gone out through all of human history. God loves you in Christ! You are forgiven! And with God's love comes the highest call a human being receives, as he says to you, **"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men!"** Amen.