

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, January 24, 2021**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 3/Proper X/Year B**  
**First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10**  
**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:14-20**  
**Sermon Title: “Jonah or Jesus?”**

## **Theme**

*Before Jesus calls his first disciples, he proclaims a message that becomes known as “the gospel” or good news from God. God is ready to rule our lives. Those who realize this will respond with repentance and faith.*

## **Text**

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

<sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

## Sermon

The First Reading is just a part of the book of Jonah. The entire book is only four chapters and can be read in less than 15 minutes. It is one of the more entertaining stories in the Old Testament, and its message is not difficult to understand.

Jonah was a prophet of the LORD to whom the LORD gave an important mission. The LORD told Jonah:

<sup>2</sup>Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.

What you wouldn't necessarily know is that Nineveh was an enemy of Israel at the time and so Jonah was disinclined to aid in their salvation. On the contrary, Jonah thought it was about time that God destroyed the enemy of Israel. And so, rather than do as he was told, he went the opposite direction to Tarshish.

## Illustration

Now Tarshish may or may not have been a real place. Legend has it that it was on the southern tip of modern Spain, though there is no direct evidence of that. The reason it makes sense that Tarshish would be that place, given the limits of the known world at that time, is that Tarshish would have been the farthest place Jonah could have fled to.

But as we all know, Jonah did not flee on foot, he took a ship. Along the way, a great storm came up that threatened the ship. The pagan crew prayed to their gods and yet the storm raged on. They cast lots to discern who had provoked the gods to cause the storm and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah confessed that he was fleeing his God, the God of Israel, and he suggested that the crew throw him overboard. They did and the sea calmed. Good for the crew. Not so good for Jonah.

Jonah got swallowed by a big fish, not a whale, and spent three days and three nights, in the belly of the fish, re-thinking what he had done, and how he had disobeyed the LORD, and its consequences. He prayed a heartfelt and convincing prayer to the LORD about his error in judgment and the LORD heard that prayer and caused the fish to burp him up and the shore, back where he started.

Having gotten the message, The LORD repeated the same mission; 'Go to the city of Nineveh and prophecy that if the people don't repent of their wickedness, I the LORD will destroy them.' This time Jonah went.

Now Nineveh was a large city, a three days walk across it, populated by 120K people. And while they may have been the enemy of Israel, they too were the beloved creation of Jonah's loving God, and God did not want to destroy them, God just wanted them to straighten up. So Jonah went into the city and obediently proclaimed the word of the LORD, and then went out of the city and sat on a hill to watch joyfully as God destroyed the city.

Well, back in the city, the King heard of the prophecy and ordered the whole nation to repent, fast, and wear sackcloth and ashes, a symbol of their mourning and repentance. And do you know what God did?

**3:10**When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Now, remember, we left Jonah outside the city on a hill looking over the city, with a bag of popcorn, just waiting and watching for this great show of God's anger to rain down from the heavens, destroying all of Nineveh. Oh, it was going to be great!

But it didn't happen. Jonah sulked and pouted and wished he was dead, and then prayed to the LORD,

**4:2**"O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup>And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

God replied simply,

**4:11**Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Let's move on to the Gospel Reading. Once again we are at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the reading contains the call of four more disciples. But it is what came before that call that is important for my purposes today.

**Mark 1:14** Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

These two readings work well together to illustrate my 3 points.

- 1) Whether the people of the world, believe it or not, we Christians believe that God created all that is out of love, and God loves what God has created.
- 2) Our purpose is to love God back, with godly living, but even when we miss the mark there is grace. It's not about us, and it never has been. It's all about God, and God has not been unclear about our mission – and our mission is the love God back with godly living.
- 3) God is interested in the hearts of *people* – all people. God in Christ saves *people*, not nations. Notice that God relents from destruction because of the 120K *people* who are “don't know their right hand from their left.” So even though they are dense, God still loved them and had mercy on them. And aren't we glad, because we've all had our moments when we were a little dense, am I right? Let me hear an amen!

Jonah figured that out when he attempted to scold God by angrily praying,

**I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.**

He was mad at God when he said that. And yet expressions very similar to that are found in Exodus, Psalms, and Nehemiah to name a few, and in parts of our liturgies as attributes of God that make salvation possible. I think the more appropriate response to that realization is to fall to our knees and give thanks to God that God doesn't wipe us out as we deserve.

And from the Gospel Reading, we hear Jesus proclaim:

Mark 11:15 “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

When you hear those words, do you hear condemnation or salvation? I’ll return to that question.

That Good News that he proclaimed is God will bring about salvation through him, God’s Christ. And it is because God *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, that God relents from punishing as we deserve. And for that we should be thankful and turn to a life of godly living, knowing that God's grace is sufficient for us when we fail.

When you hear those words, do you hear condemnation or salvation? I’ll return to that question.

Now last week I heard a really good sermon entitled, "Who Will You Follow?" Many of you heard it too. And that question stayed with me all week, and into the preparation of this sermon. Seems like that same title would be appropriate this week.

Jonah followed his own ambition and all that led to was trouble and frustration and the realization that God loves everyone, even his enemies. Jonah delivered words of condemnation, but the Ninevites heard words of salvation. We could follow Jonah, and constantly be frustrated.

Jesus followed the will of his Father and delivered words that, depending on one’s attitude, could be heard as words of condemnation or words of salvation. The ungodly person hears “repent” and they hear condemnation, and are likely to double down in their orneriness. The godly person hears the same word and they are reminded of their sinfulness and redouble their efforts in godliness.

When you hear those words, do you hear condemnation or salvation?

So “Whom will you follow?” “Jonah or Jesus?”

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Friends, this world can be a confusing place that will grind you down if you let it. Where do you get your inspiration?

In Proverbs 3:5-6 we read, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

No matter which political affiliation you are, which societal movement you align yourself with, there is one that is superior to all. He is our salvation and our model for godly living. Take your inspiration from God revealed in Jesus Christ of Holy Scripture and nowhere else.

The bickering and anger and frustration that we experience so much these days is not of God. Jesus said, <sup>John 10:10b</sup>"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Are you living abundantly? God is Christ wants that for you.

In another place, Jesus heard the Disciples bickering with each other and he said they sounded like Gentiles – that is, people without faith. He said, "It shall not be so among you."

I repeat those words to you. "It shall not be so among you."

- You are better than that.
- You are a baptized child of God.
- You walk in the light of Christ.
- You have the Holy Spirit living inside you. That is what it means to be inspired.

Let no one take that away from you. And when you live abundantly and the light of the Holy Spirit in you is obvious to others, you will be inspiring, too.

## **Prayer**

Loving and merciful Lord God, you love your creation and especially your highest creation, people. And yet what you often see people doing these days does not represent us very well. You know, life can tear us down, and that is not of you, and not what you intend for us. Let your love, grace, and mercy inspire us to love one another, and let that light of your love radiate from us to others who don't know you yet. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen