

January 25, 2009

Epiphany 3

"The Mighty Miracle in Nineveh"

JONAH 3:1-5, 10

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 important city-- a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, 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 had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

The book of Jonah holds before our eyes some amazing miracles. It says that God prepared a great fish that swallowed Jonah. That's a miracle. God kept him alive in the belly of that great fish for three days. That's a miracle. Then God commanded the great fish to vomit Jonah on the dry land. That's also a miracle. Jesus considered this to be factual history when he says, "Just as the Jonah was three day and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man must be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." As amazing as that miracle was, an even greater miracle happened when Jonah preached to the people on the streets of Nineveh. It says that the whole city turned to the Lord and repented in sackcloth and ashes.

The Lord still performs miracles in the lives of people today. He takes people who are dead in sin and unbelief, and turns them around to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. There are times when this happens in large numbers, and other times when it happens one by one. This morning we want to take a closer look at this mighty miracle that happened in Nineveh with an understanding the Lord is still in control of his church in these last days, and still performing miracles all around us.

The Lord chooses the man

What amazes us is how the Lord chooses unlikely people to be involved in these miracles of people coming to faith. That was certainly true in the life of Jonah. We are told, "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 that I give you.'" The first time the Lord spoke to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh he went as fast as he could in the opposite direction. Recall how he boarded a ship on the Mediterranean Sea that was bound for Tarshish, ancient Spain. The storm arose. The sailors threw Jonah overboard, hoping the sacrifice of Jonah's life would appease the anger of his God. God prepared the great fish that swallowed Jonah. For three days and three nights Jonah prayed to God in the belly of that great fish. The Lord miraculously spared his life and the Lord commanded the great fish to vomit Jonah on dry land. It was there on the sand of the sea, humbled and covered with vomit that God spoke to Jonah a second time and said to him, "Proclaim the message I give you" to the people of Nineveh.

The Lord has a way of using unlikely people to get the word of salvation out to those who are lost and without hope, those facing eternal death and destruction. We think of how the Lord choose Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, a man who was 80 years old and very content to live the simple life of a shepherd in the Sinai Peninsula and never see Egypt again. It seems the Lord loves to take people out of the comfort zone and use them for his special purposes. Could it be that these economic hard times might take us out of our comfort zone and put us into unlikely places where we will have an opportunity to share the gospel with people in ways we never had before? He used Saul the evil and violent persecutor of Christians, a man with blood on his hands, a man who enjoyed the moment when Stephen's head was being crushed with stones, a man who was a Hebrew of the Hebrews to break new ground in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. The Lord told him, "You are my chosen instrument to bring light to the Gentiles." Last week we heard how the Lord took unlikely Galilean fishermen and used them to shake the world with the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Do you want more evidence the Lord picks unlikely people to bring the gospel message to the world in these last days? Then look into the mirror. Study the face that stares back at you. In 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul says, "We have this treasure in jars of clay." The treasure of the gospel came to you and me with all of its life saving glory. We even believe Baptism washes away sin and Holy Communion gives us the body and blood of Jesus. We didn't deserve this treasure in any way shape or form. With Paul we have to confess, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief." Then this treasure is entrusted into our hands, not to be hidden under the mattress of our bed, but to be taken with us where ever we go in our community, and unrolled and unraveled to everyone we meet. Think of what a miracle your life is and what a miraculous privilege has been entrusted into your life and the lives of the people of this congregation. How do you measure the miracle of God preparing a great fish to swallow Jonah with the miracle the Lord has chosen you to believe in Jesus and then share his glory?

The Lord chooses the mission

Let's get back to our lesson for today and see how the Lord not only chooses the man, but he also chooses the mission, the place where the Lord will perform mighty miracles in the lives of people. "Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city- visit required three days." Nineveh was an important city because of its population of over a half a million, a London or New York of its time. It was a great city because of the size of its walls. Some say the walls were a hundred feet high and wide enough at the top for three chariots to ride abreast around the top of the walls.

It was an important city because of the way it terrorized the world. The city was noted for its wickedness as the prophet Nahum said, "Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims...Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over corpses." Listen to these words of bragging from one of the ancient kings of Nineveh whose name was Ashur-nasirpal II. "The heads of warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire !...some I impaled on stakes and others I bound on stakes around the pillar." I read once that Assyrians were noted for capturing a town, and then cutting off all the noses of the people in the town, who had dared to resist them.

Nineveh was also important to God. It was in this most unlikely city of Nineveh that God chose to raise up a group of people to repent of their sin and trust in him. You never know where the Lord is going to choose the next mission field to bear abundant fruit for him. Jesus mentions that in his conversation with Nicodemus when he says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Some of us sitting here this morning come from Scandanavian and German ancestry. The ancient Vikings were a wild people, plundering, killing, and enslaving the people they captured. They bowed before the gods they found in the forest and even exposed their newborns to the cold if they were unwanted, not unlike our land today that pulls babies from the wombs of mothers and puts them to death. God claimed this land of cold and darkness and evil as his mission field and brought people to worship Christ as their Lord and Savior. They gave up their gods of the woods, and mountains and fiords. As a lasting reminder of this heathen worship we still have the days of the week with names such as Wednesday (Woden's day) and Thursday (Thor's day) and Tuesday (Ties' Day).

You and I were born into this world, like the people of Nineveh, without God and without hope. Not an hour of life on this earth goes by when you do still see in your life evidences of how you were born into this world from the corruption that still is found in every human heart. "There is none that does good, no not one"- chilling words from Romans 3 that show us clearly the need for salvation outside of us, found only in Christ. From all eternity God chose you to believe in Christ. Ephesians 1 says, "For God chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." He chose you to be a kingdom of priests and holy nation as the Revelation tells us, washed in the blood of the Lamb.

The Lord chooses the moment

That glorious moment of believing also came into the lives of the people of Nineveh. Our text says, "Jonah started into the city, going a day's journey, and he proclaimed, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.'" The word overturned is sometimes used in the Old Testament for a blessing coming into the lives of people such as the Lord turning sorrow into joy. Mostly it is used for the overturning that comes with destruction, such as the overturning or destruction of the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jonah preached about destruction and the people were convicted in large numbers, running scared, sharing with friends and neighbors the terrible thing the Lord was going to do.

Only one day of preaching about the judgment of God and the blessings of repentance and salvation and immediately the people begin to believe the message of Jonah. The word for believing is the word we still use in our prayers today, the word "Amen." The people began saying loud "amens" to everything Jonah said about destruction and the said loud "amens" to everything he said about the Lord's plan to rescue them. They even declared a fast, and all of them from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. Even the little children wore sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes. The Lord had compassion of these people. He forgave them their sins. He loved and cherished them as his dear children, covered with the same blood of the Lamb of God that covers us. The amazing miracle at Pentecost, 3000 people brought to faith through Peter's sermon, pales be comparison to this golden hour in the mighty city of Nineveh. Even our Lord Jesus did not see the immediate response to his teaching and preaching that Jonah saw in people of Nineveh.

What can we learn from this mighty miracle in Nineveh that we can take home with us this morning? God still performs miracles today. He chooses the man, the woman, the child. He chooses the mission. He chooses the moment. Whether large numbers of people come to faith through one pastor's sermon or through your sharing of the gospel, or whether years of preaching and teaching produce only one convert, the miracles are in the hands of the Lord. As you leave our worship today, remember that you are part of miracle taking place here on the Central Coast of California. Amen.