

Epiphany 3
January 25, 2015

"The 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.

Here are some familiar word associations from the Bible. Adam and ... Eve. Cain and... Abel. David and...Goliath. Jonah and...the great fish. When we think of Jonah we think of him being swallowed by a great fish.

It is truly a miracle how the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, then kept him alive in the belly of the great fish for three days and then commanded the fish to vomit Jonah on dry land. Our Lord Jesus compared his resurrection from the dead to Jonah being in the belly of the great fish.

As impressive as these miracles are with the great fish, they pale in comparison to the miracle that took place in the city of Nineveh through the preaching of the prophet Jonah. Jonah preached to the city and it says "The Ninevites believed God." Whether a whole city turns to the Lord or whether it is only one person coming to faith, it is always a miracle when people are brought to faith in the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This past week I happened to hear an interview with Luke Zamperini, the son of Louie Zamperini. Perhaps some of you have seen the movie or read the book "Unbroken." It is the amazing account of a famous runner who was captured during WW2 by Japanese and severely tortured. After the war he suffered from PTSD. He turned to drinking. He was mean to his wife. He woke up with horrible flashbacks to his days as a prisoner of war. Luke Zamperini told the interviewer that his father was taken to Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles by his mother. There he was led by the Holy Spirit to believe in Jesus. In addition to forgiveness for his sins, he was given strength to say "no" to drinking. Even the terrible flashbacks went away. Luke told how in 1997 he went with his father to Japan to offer forgiveness to the man who had severely tortured him called "Bird."

During this season of Epiphany we think of how brightly the light of God's love can shine in the darkest places. As we look at this miracle in Nineveh, it is my prayer that we will appreciate the miracle of God's grace that has brought us out of darkness into the light of our Savior's forgiveness for us and for people all over the world.

The Lord wanted Jonah to serve the people of Nineveh

The Lord wanted Jonah to serve the wicked people of Nineveh with the message of the gospel even though he had been unfaithful. 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.'" Notice it says "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." The first time the Lord asked Jonah to go to Nineveh and save the people he went west instead of east. It says earlier in this book, "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish." Instead of going 1000 miles east to Nineveh, his plan was to go 2000 miles west in the opposite direction the end of the then known world. Oh, how I wish we could always say that we gladly accept the assignments the Lord has given us instead of going in the opposite direction!

"Man proposes, but God disposes." Oh, how quickly the Lord disposed of Jonah's plan to go west. Jonah's plans to run from God were cut short by God through a terrible storm at sea. When Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard because he was the cause for the storm, the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. It was in the belly of that great fish that Jonah called out for help from the Lord. After three days the Lord commanded the great fish to vomit Jonah on dry land.

What a mess it must have been to be covered with slime and food from the belly of the fish. If I were Jonah I would have immediately gone to the water's edge to wash off the slime and food and smell of that great fish. After such an experience would you not be ready to listen to what the Lord wants you to do? The word of the Lord comes a second time to Jonah. "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Now Jonah is ready to go.. God gave him the words he was to speak.

Our God is a God of second chances. You have evidence of this in the life of Jonah and other people of the Bible. When Pharaoh wanted Abraham's wife Sarah to be in his harem, Abraham was willing to pass her off as his sister and go to the harem just to spare his own life. The Lord gave Abraham a second chance. When David committed adultery and murder, the Lord gave him a second chance when he repented. When Peter cursed and swore he never knew Jesus, Jesus took him back when he repented.

Jesus has called you and me to be the light of the world as we direct other people to the salvation we have in Christ. How many opportunities have I missed in my lifetime? How many times do I go my way when Jesus wants me to go his way? He places so many opportunities to serve and I pretend not to see them. He forgives me and you. He even gives us second and third and fourth and multiple chances.

It had to be intimidating for Jonah to go to Nineveh because it was a great city. "Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city- visit required three days." It was a very important city because of its size but also because of its influence in the world. It was the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire, a people known for their cruelty and brutality in warfare. God's people in Israel had experienced their brutality. Although a highly cultured people who excelled in writing on clay tablets and artwork, they were a nation of terrorists more brutal than the worst terrorists we have in our world today.

The prophet Nahum has this to say about Nineveh, "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." Jonah could not grasp or comprehend how God could have compassion on such a monstrous nation of people. I can still hear a non practicing Muslim say he would not consider becoming a Christian because Jesus turned to a dying thief and gave him Paradise.

The Lord wanted the people of Nineveh to be saved

It is truly a miracle how the Lord spared the wicked city of Nineveh through the preaching of Jonah. "On the first day Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." Jonah was 100% certain that after forty days the city of Nineveh would not repent and it would be destroyed. In the next chapter we hear how Jonah built a shelter outside the waiting for it to be destroyed.

The Lord had other plans for Nineveh. "The city believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth and ashes." What a surprise it was. What a miracle. These awful, pagan Ninevites who knew nothing of God's Word and his salvation now believe God. They show their sincere repentance by donning sackcloth and ashes, and calling on the Lord for mercy. Even the King of Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes. He pleaded with his people to call urgently on the Lord. He specifically pleads with his people to call on the name of the Lord. Romans 10 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Who knows where the Holy Spirit will suddenly cause a large number of people to come to faith? Who knows where one person will miraculously come to believe and become a powerful witness for the Lord as was with the case of Louis Zamperini. Jesus said in his conversation with Nicodemus, "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 Scandinavian and German ancestry. The ancient Vikings were a wild people, They plundered, killed, and enslaved 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. 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, 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).

God had mercy and compassion on these people when he saw their repentance. "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." God's Word tells us that this world in which we live will come to an end. 2 Peter 3 says, "By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire being kept for the judgment and destruction of

ungodly men." 2 Peter 3 also says, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance."

Judgment days is coming. I have nothing to offer God to gain the forgiveness of my sin just as the Ninevites had nothing to offer God. Another week of life on this earth shows me a person who has fallen far short of God's glory in unkind thoughts towards others and multiple failures to love God and serve him as I should. I have nothing to offer God but God has everything to offer me and you.

The Lord was patient with the people of Nineveh. He had compassion on them. The Lord your God has been so patient with you and me. He has brought us to Jesus and washed us clean and made us pure in his sight. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the great fish, Jesus was three days and three nights in the earth before he miraculously rose from the dead to save us. You believe these miracles are true. Each one of us is living proof that our God still performs miracles in the lives of people through his Word just as he did through the preaching of Jonah. Amen.