

Worship Theme: "Cry Mightily to God" (Jonah 3: 8)

Live streaming at 10:25 AM on Facebook: [First Christian Church Decatur](#)

***"God Saw What They Did"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 24, 2021

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**Holy Scripture -- Jonah 3: 1-10 (NRSV)**

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup> When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup> Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

<sup>10</sup> 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.

Sermon

***God Saw What They Did***

Google the "100 Best First Lines from Novels"

Number one on the list is Herman Melville opening three words in Moby-Dick (1851):

*"Call me Ishmael."*

*"Call me Ishmael,"* says our Narrator, who then promptly takes us to church.

On a Sunday morning Ishmael goes to church in Whaleman's Chapel

where he hears a memorable sermon by Father Mapple,

who also was once a whaler.

Father Mapple preaches on ***Jonah***.

The message of the sermon is also the theme of the novel Moby Dick:  
*"If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves."*

As sure as dawn follows the night,  
there will be times and experiences in your life  
when it will appear that the ways of God,  
the ways of love and grace, mercy and justice,  
are contrary to what you and I want or how we live.  
God's will runs contrary to our will  
more often than we might care to confess.

That is when – in public or in private –  
God sees what we do, hears what we say, knows our thoughts and dreams,  
loves us as we are, meets us where we are,  
to hear us confess and repent,  
wills for us to believe and follow the ways of love.

Yet we tend to put preconditions on whom we will love unconditionally.

Many a time we *"try to narrow God down  
to those we are comfortable loving."*  
(David R. Weiss, "Hearts Unbound," Institute for Welcoming Resources, 2013.)

Maybe that is why we have this parable in the Bible called Jonah.

In the Book of Jonah we find that the Bible speaks to us in a parable,  
a parable in four crisp, fast-moving chapters,  
a parable that introduces as varied & vivid a cast of characters  
as any short story in any genre.

The Word of the Lord introduces us to Jonah, disobedient, reluctant, sulking,  
sailors who are superstitious and scared,  
a fish that is so great it can swallow a human whole,  
a corrupt king and a sinful city.

Watching over all is God,  
commanding nature's wind and whales  
& commending nurture and compassion,  
a deity with a mind set on bringing down great vengeance  
on those who disobey and disavow the will of the Spirit.

The Book of Jonah is told in parabolic form.  
A parable is a short story with a hidden, submerged meaning,  
one meant for you to uncover & unpack & reveal & revel in  
-- a personal message for you to discern for yourself

only after the storyteller has left the stage, the pulpit, the building,  
leaving you with a box full of dynamite spiritual revelation  
that goes off when the parable teller is on the other side of the hill,  
hearing the boom from a distance.

(Clarence Jordan analogy)

Parables are like that.

Parables are like this.

And so the parable begins...

[Pick up your remote control and hit the arrow button that means PLAY.](#)

*Now the word of the Lord*

*came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,*

*“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it;  
for their wickedness has come up before me.”*

Now, Jonah was well aware that the people of Nineveh  
had been beating up the Israelites for a long time,

Jonah, says the Lord, go to Nineveh  
and proclaim God’s judgment against them.

God’s mind was set:

What the people of Nineveh needed to do was to repent,  
to turn 180 degrees away from doing evil  
and toward the love of God.

To repent is to turn away

from all that separates you from God, one another, and yourself.

To repent is to turn toward God,

acknowledging with every fiber of your being that wherever God goes, you follow.

To repent is to repurpose your life,

yoking two of God’s greatest gifts to humanity: re-creation and faith.

As you may well imagine

Jonah wasn’t too keen about going deep into enemy territory,  
especially enemies he believed did not deserve God’s grace and mercy.

For just a minute put yourself in his sandals.

Why should Jonah make welcome

those whom he deemed to be the unchosen?

Why offer the Good News to people who oppressed and beaten your people?

Why extend grace to those who are less than, who you deem unworthy?

His attitude is not so surprising or strange to people of faith  
or folks from any walk of life:

Jonah expresses in his words and deeds

*“the staunch nationalistic, anti-universalistic attitude  
that seems to have characterized  
Israelite religion and outlook at times.”*

(Craddock, et al, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Page 129)

The Bible says, *“Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.”*

Jonah and his attitude went in the opposite direction of Nineveh,  
sailing by ship toward Tarshish.

Tell me, how does one get away from the presence of the Lord?

And yet, how many of us had heard the call to go to Nineveh,

only to respond, *“You know, Tarshish looks a lot easier and more lucrative; besides, it  
has swimming pools and an open bar.”*

Pick up your remote control again;

hit FAST FORWARD as we go through the parable double-time.

Jonah headed to Tarshish on a small ship.

A great storm came up; all seemed lost.

Jonah sought to persuade the sailors that the storm was his fault.

The sailors threw lots and Jonah lost.

They threw him overboard, which was what he thought he wanted.

God saw what Jonah was doing.

Praise be, instead of drowning in the sea Jonah was saved.

*“The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah...”*

The story continues:

*“The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah;  
and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”*

While he was in the fish’s belly he prayed.

The prayers Jonah lifted were ones that Hebrews at the time  
most likely learned as children.

Jonah took advantage of this journey in the dark and dank fish belly to relent,  
and to repent, and to decide to redirect his life,  
to do God's will rather than only his own.

Three days later Jonah was delivered unto dry land.

A second time God told him to go to Nineveh.

*"If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves."*

This time he obeyed God.

This time Jonah listened, moved as directed,  
going straight into the land of those whom he considered his enemies.

Hit PAUSE on your remote.

A friend told me about the time his small daughter ran into the living room  
and gave him a great big hug.

He could see in the mirror on the wall that while she was hugging her father  
she was sticking out her tongue at her brother.

The dad didn't know what to do; the mom sure did.

She said, *"Child, take your arms down from around your father's neck.*

*He loves your brother as much as he loves you.*

*You cannot love your father*

*and stick your tongue out at your brother at the same time."*

By sending Jonah to Nineveh, God was saying the same thing:

*"I see what you are doing.*

*I love your neighbors as much as I love you.*

*You cannot, you must not, you shall not*

*love your Creator and hate your neighbor at the same time."*

Now FAST FORWARD on the remote until it brings us to LIVE:

So Jonah strode into the heart of the city and said,

*"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

*"And the people of Nineveh believed God;*

*they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,*

*from the greatest of them to the least of them."*

<sup>6</sup> *When the news reached the king of Nineveh,*

*he rose from his throne, removed his robe,*

*covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.*

<sup>7</sup> *Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh:*

*"By the decree of the king and his nobles...*

<sup>8</sup> *Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth,*

*and they shall cry mightily to God.*

*All shall turn from their evil ways*

*and from the violence that is in their hands.*

<sup>9</sup> *Who knows?*

*God may relent and change God's mind;  
the Lord may turn from...fierce anger,  
so that we do not perish."*

*<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways,  
God changed God's mind about the calamity  
that God had said God would bring upon them;  
and God did not do it.*

God saw what they did.

Mass conversions and confessions  
were initiated by a reluctant servant named Jonah  
simply meeting people where they were.  
By simply loving God's people,  
daring to bring mercy and hope to the unchosen, the broken, the enemy,  
Jonah made known the radical love of God.

A friend in Decatur excitedly described a bumper sticker she'd seen.  
She was pumped because it quoted Glen Hike's book, The Shelter of Each Other:

***The most radical thing  
we can do is  
to introduce people  
to one another.***

Jonah made the introduction,  
made the invitation,  
made an intentional effort,  
then made himself get out God's way!  
We can see Jonah stepping aside, stepping away,  
letting God do the claiming and the cleaning.

And how about the organic nature of the confessions and conversions?

Change starts not at the top but here, where we are, amongst the people.

Imagine the whole people of God saying to each other, "Enough!"

Enough is enough is enough!

And then, and only then, do leaders see the writing on the wall,  
see the intrinsic value of spiritual and social change,  
see the will of God's love and compassion

is greater than the ways of sin and greed, violence and hate.

Ledru Rollin said, *"I must follow them, for I am their leader."*

Leaders worth their salt are listeners first,  
always looking to the next generation,  
seeking to lift the lowly and see the invisible.

In the parable before us the king calls for unity,  
a unity grounded in accountability,  
a collective unity that had its genesis in the collective of God's people.

Without accountability and amends, proclaims the king,  
there can be no unity, no cohesive movement, no change worth embodying.

In this parable of grace we witness the powers that be  
having the courage to change their convictions,  
to admit their wrongs,  
to seek to right the ship,  
right themselves,  
make right what has for so long, too long,  
been damaging and detrimental,  
harmful and hurtful.

They humbled themselves before the Lord.

***God saw what they did.***

My Lord and my God, what they did was witnessed by the Holy Trinity.  
Jesus Christ would later compare Himself to Jonah,  
in a moment of honest vulnerability  
sharing his inner connection with Jonah, a reluctant prophet.

Yet this reluctant prophet from Nazareth  
saw what they did  
while in Heaven sitting at the right hand of God.

God and Christ and the Holy Spirit saw what they did.

They did what no one expected.

They said they were sorry.

They confessed the errors of their ways.

They put on ashes and wept and swore their allegiance to God.

And then – only after they confessed – did they change their ways.

And then the parable takes a twist no one saw coming.

*"When God saw what the [people of Nineveh] did,*

*how they turned from their evil way,  
God repented of the evil  
which God had said [the Lord] would do to them;  
and [God] did not do it."*

God changed.

That's what the Bible says.

Right here in black and red ink.

Not only did the king and the townspeople, women and men and children repent,  
God repented, too.

Rather than laying desolation upon all in the land,  
they are witnesses of the shift of a God of Judgment  
choosing to become the God of Mercy,  
choosing to redeem and resurrect the community.

**They saw what God did!**

They saw that the Word of the Lord is real, has depth and breadth, meaning and hope.

They saw that we live in a resurrection-drenched world.

They saw that God practices what God preaches.

[Put your remote on PAUSE and ponder this parable.](#)

Watch out...the Word of the Lord is going to go off in your life and lead you to love.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*