

Epiphany 3 1/21/18
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

THEN THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO JONAH THE SECOND TIME, SAYING, "ARISE, GO TO NINEVEH, THAT GREAT CITY, AND CALL OUT AGAINST IT THE MESSAGE THAT I TELL YOU."

I am going to begin this morning by making a confession. And, it's kind of a light-hearted confession – sorry to disappoint those of you who got excited there for a moment – but, when you are having a bad day in the ministry, do you know what you do? You go to the nursing home. Now again, this is not meant to offend anyone, but whenever you are having a bad day all you have to do is go to the nursing home because the folks there are always excited and happy to see you, and it's just impossible to have a bad day when you are surrounded by people like that.

I say that because some folks – they aren't so happy to see pastor. I know you will find it hard to believe that anyone would not be excited and happy to see loveable, huggable pastor, but there are some folks out there. And, in spite of whatever reason or reasons they may say, the real reason is because of the truth of God's Word. I preach the truth of God's Word and that is what itching ears do not want to hear.

And, you know what? You can relate to that! What's that old saying? "The two things you are never supposed to talk about are religion and politics." Well, politics, that's under the banner of Christian freedom, so you are free to do that you want on that one. But, religion, no, in our Gospel today, you are reminded that you, Dear Child of God, are a fisher of men in Christ. And that means that you do confess before men that we believe the Bible teaches that only those who are in doctrinal agreement with us should commune at our altar; that marriage is the life-long union of one man and one woman; that abortion is the ending of human life; and that is a

message that the itching ears of this world do not want to hear. And, that is a message quite honestly, that you, Fisher of Men, are not always comfortable confessing before men.

You know who else could relate to that? Jonah. He wasn't real comfortable with it, either. God called him to be a fisher of men in Nineveh. Nineveh, of all places. Nineveh was the capital city the Assyrians, and the Assyrians were the enemies of the Israelites. And the Assyrians, and the people of their capital city, were evil -- all evil, all the time. They were ruthless. They would besiege a city and demand the inhabitants surrender their property and possessions. If they didn't, they would invade and behead the male inhabitants, and then pile the heads at the city gate, so that that huge pile of skulls would stand as a warning to anyone who would dare take a stand against the Assyrians. They were known, in their dealings with people, to employ every form of trickery, deceit, and scandal under the sun. And in Nineveh, there was a temple to the fertility goddess Ishtar, right in the middle of the town square, which tells us that among the Ninevites, sexual immorality was the norm.,

That's the great city of Nineveh. So, are you starting to understand why it is that when God said to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me," Jonah arose and hopped a boat for Tarshish (Jonah 1:2)? Who would want to deal with those people, being as evil as they are? Certainly not Jonah.

You know the amazing thing about God? You know the Bible. "For God so loved the world." That's right, the LORD our God loved even these people of Nineveh. So much so in fact, He sends the Prophet Jonah to call the people there to repentance. Why would God do that? Why doesn't He

just join forces with Jonah, hop a boat to Tarshish and overthrow Nineveh in His wrath? That would make a lot more sense to us.

For the very same reason that God does not get on a ship and sail away from you, away from your city. Let's be honest about it, Beulah, Glen Ullin, or wherever you call home is no better than Nineveh and the Ninevites. We are just as evil, with the same kind of problems. Wait a minute, Pastor, you say! Ok, yes, to be sure, you have not beheaded your neighbor, but your anger against your neighbor has shown itself in your thoughts, words, and deeds, in your harsh, unloving words and your refusal to be reconciled. No, there is no temple to the fertility god Ishtar in the midst of our town, but your lust and sinful desire for someone you are not married to is a living witness that sexual immorality is alive and well. In your dealings with your neighbor, deceit, trickery, jealousy, envy is the order of the day.

You would think that God would wash His hands of you, sail away, and leave you to perish in your sin and death. But, God is love. By nature, He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. By nature, He is patient, not wanting you to perish.

So, to call you to repentance, God sent you a Prophet. A Prophet who was the very Son of God, who took on human flesh and dwelt among us. He is the One God sends into your life, to call you to repentance. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel," He proclaims to you (Mk 1:15).

Just as the Prophet Jonah went on a 3-day journey, the Prophet Jesus went on a 3-day journey for you, and for your salvation. Friday, He took from you every all your immorality, your idolatry, your deceit, your scandal, your anger, your lies, all your sin and all your evil. He took it all

upon Himself and went to Calvary's cross, and there He bled and there He died and there all your sins died with Him. And just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish, Jesus was buried and spent three days in the belly of the earth. The 3rd day, God delivered Jonah from the belly of that fish, and, on the 3rd day, God delivered His Son from the belly of the earth. Jesus came forth from the tomb, alive, and victorious over all your sin, all your immorality, all your idolatry, all your deceit, all your scandal, all your anger, all your lies, and He comes to you and gives you His victory by means of His present-day prophets and their preaching, Baptism, and Holy Communion. For in and through these means, He calls you to repentance and forgives you all your sins.

The Prophet Jonah worked repentance in the Ninevites, and the Prophet Jesus worked repentance in you. Not only does Jesus do His work in you, He also does His work through you, so that repentance He worked in you also made you a fisher of men.

Paul reminds us, "The appointed time has grown very short" (1 Cor 7:29). It's dangerous out there! Nineveh was a dangerous place. And, you don't have to go to Nineveh, for wherever you go, there will be rejection and ridicule, disbelief and doubt. So, your natural instinct is to be like Jonah and run away.

We must never allow our fear of men to be greater than our fear of God. The Christian life is the life of repentance. Daily we return to the waters of our baptism to die to sin and rise in Christ to shine His light. God feeds us with His grace in His Word and Christ's body and blood that we may follow in the footsteps of Jonah, and Andrew, Simon, James, and John to overcome our fear to walk by faith to be fishers of men. And as we proclaim the Word of Christ, Christ will work repentance in the hearers of

that Word, so that the rejection, unbelief, evil, hatred will be replaced with the fruits of repentance – faith, love, kindness, gentleness, goodness.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY. AMEN.