

MISSION—WITH FINGERS CROSSED?!

JONAH 4:1–11

A myth persists among many readers of the Old Testament that Israel and/or Judah were the only objects of God's concern, that he did not care about anyone else. Not so! As the Lord had made clear to his people already back at Mount Sinai, he wanted them to be a kingdom of priests. They were to show and tell the nations who God is and what he is like. In this sermon we follow along as the Lord deliberately sends one of his prophets to another nation, not Israel or Judah.

The prophet is Jonah. He has become famous these days for his bout with the great fish. But the thing people would have found most remarkable about this prophet at the time was not the fish he was in, but instead the fix he was in. For the Lord sent Jonah, who was a prophet and an advisor to the king of Israel at a time of relative calm and tranquility, on a rather surprising assignment. Jonah was to go not simply to any old foreign land, but specifically to cold and cruel Assyria.

In an age when many peoples knew how to be cruel, the Assyrians specialized in it. They became masters of horror and terror in warfare. For example, they would pile up huge heaps of the skulls of their victims. They wanted the very mention of their name to strike fear into the hearts of their neighbors. The Assyrians were, if you will, the motorcycle gang of the ancient Near East. At this time, they were somewhat weak. Therefore, they could not launch the kind of military strikes that would eventually destroy Israel and nearly destroy Judah. But the Lord was sending Jonah into the heart of Assyrian power, right into the capital city of Nineveh.

Remarkably, Jonah said no. He refused his assignment from the Lord. Instead of heading east, he hopped aboard a ship sailing west. Jonah was saying a capital NO to his prophetic calling. He was trying to get as far away from it as he could. The Lord would not take no for an answer, though. He sent a great storm that endangered the ship. When Jonah was tossed overboard by the crew, the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow him and save his life. At length, the fish deposited Jonah on land. The Lord again commanded the prophet to go and preach in Nineveh. This time Jonah complied. He had preached there for only one day, and the people repented. Remarkably, this cold and cruel people got into sackcloth, everyone from the king on down. It has been observed that this was,

if anything, a greater miracle than Jonah's rescue at sea by the Lord through the great fish.¹ What a demonstration of the power packed by God's Word!

At this point, Jonah shows what had been bothering him deep down all along. It turns out that he had not run away from his calling due to fear. True, Jonah had underestimated the Lord's power to lead and protect people. Still, the reason why Jonah forsook his assignment and went west was not that he thought God's message would not work. Rather, he knew it *would* work. This prophet went on his mission to Assyria kicking and screaming, only after the Lord seized him with the great fish. Yet even while he was preaching to the Assyrians, he had his fingers crossed behind his back, as it were. He wasn't afraid that no one would listen to him. He was really afraid they would hear and repent, as in fact they did by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jonah seems to have thought of the Lord and his gifts as only for the Jews, not for the Gentiles. He would have preferred to die rather than to see these Assyrians enjoying anything good from God. They just didn't measure up in Jonah's mind. He still wanted to see them get theirs.

So Jonah settled upon an observation post outside Nineveh, probably hoping against hope that the Lord would unleash some sort of calamity upon the city. In attitude, he resembled the friends of Job, who were sure that Job had sinned a great sin because they thought he was undergoing judgment for it. Jonah knew that the Ninevites had sinned great sins, and now he was expecting them to be judged accordingly. Jonah was also like the elder brother in Jesus' story of the waiting father, resentful of his younger brother who had frittered away his inheritance but who was shown such lavish mercy by their father. And Jonah was like the Pharisees who had blood in their eyes when they brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus said to them, "Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." At length he asked the woman where her accusers had all gone, and added: "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:7, 11).²

Are there people you and I would actually like to see falling under God's judgment? Maybe it's someone with whom we have locked horns. Perhaps it is a person who rubs us the wrong way, or any number of folks we find somehow distasteful. Or maybe we should be thinking more about people we do not know. Perhaps we have nothing in particular against them, but we don't find much for them either. Nothing about them

¹ AE 19:37.

² See Farrar, as cited in Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 79.

commends them to us enough that we are moved to bring them the Gospel. Jesus said that in the last days, the love of most people will grow cold (Matthew 24:12). The Church Father John Chrysostom observed that nothing is so cold as a Christian who does not care about the salvation of others. That was Jonah, saying he would rather die than live and see God showing mercy to the Assyrians. To a frightening extent, isn't it also you and me?

God taught Jonah a lesson with a plant that grew very quickly and shaded him as he watched the city. The next day, the Lord made it wither up. Deprived of his comfortable shade, Jonah started complaining again and wishing to die. You and I also can grow extremely concerned over the slightest things, things of no real importance in the long run, if those things directly affect us. However, we can remain shockingly indifferent to far more important things. The Lord always maintains the right sense of proportion and importance. The Creator of heaven and earth made people to be of far greater value than vines, grass, or birds! Even if Jonah had no concern about that great city of Nineveh, the Lord did.

So concerned was God that he sent his only Son into the world. When people put Jesus on the spot, demanding him to show by a sign that he was who he said he was, he refused to perform on demand like a trained dog. He said the sign they would get was the sign of the prophet Jonah: as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days, so Christ would be in the bosom of the earth for three days before he rose from the dead. (See Matthew 12:39–40.)

Jonah's bout with the great fish turns out to be extremely important, after all. In like manner, Jesus would die, be buried, then come back alive and well, proclaiming the Lord's Word. He comes out of that tomb and says, "Yes, it was tough to bear all the sins of the world. I bore the cruelty of the Assyrians and the coldness of Christians who are not concerned about the salvation of others. But I have done it. I have taken all your sin, and I have paid for it. It can no longer hurt you. It need no longer bother you. It is all forgiven. Your sin—forgiven. It will not separate you from me."

Jonah knew that. Exasperated as he was with the Lord, he still spoke to God like a child addresses his father. We can too. The Lord's love for us and for all people is so much greater than our smallness of soul and selfishness in sin. It embraces us, cleanses us, and imparts new life—all on account of Christ!

Therefore we do not recognize any conditions by which anyone needs to qualify for God's grace. He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the

truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Whoever we meet, Christ died for these people and rose from the dead. God’s great Good News in Christ is for them. We need not worry that God may not “mean” it in their case. He really does mean it for everyone, whoever they are and whatever they have done.

We proclaim the Lord’s Word, then let him take it from there. His Word remains enormously powerful. Notice how powerful it was in Nineveh, even though Jonah had been preaching it with his fingers crossed. The effectiveness of God’s Word, as shown among the Ninevites, encourages us to keep going. We keep spreading this Word, which remains God’s own power unto salvation.

But how do we get ourselves off dead center? How do we get moving? It’s so easy to get stuck.

Once there was an artist who painted in a studio on the second floor of a downtown building. Every day he would see a beggar on the sidewalk below. The beggar hardly made for an appealing sight. He had dirty clothes, an unkempt beard, and disheveled hair. One day, the artist decided to draw a sketch of the beggar. He drew the man wearing a new suit, clean-shaven and neat. Showing this picture to the beggar, the artist said: “This is you. This is what I see in you.” The beggar stared at the picture for a long time. Finally, he said, “If this is the man you see in me, this is the man I want to be.”³

You and I resemble that beggar. Yes, I am talking about us, not the people we tend to look upon as unworthy and who have nothing to commend them. In our sin we are like the beggar, desperately in need of new life. This is what God gives. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). God sees us the way he sees Christ: not dirty and sinful, but crisp and clean and new. This is the new man, the new you, created by God himself in Baptism. If this is the man God sees in me, this is the man I want to be. So I lay aside the comfortable but terrible old clothes of sin and apathy and unconcern, and I put on the new, that is, the new baptized self that is really me. And I want to tell the Good News about Jesus.

The Lord was making this point with Jonah. The Lord asked his wayward prophet, “Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who don’t know their right hand from their left?” Such concern is God’s gracious way. As someone who belonged to the Lord, it was to be Jonah’s way too. By the power of God in

³ Adapted from *The Lutheran Hour*, “God’s Power for Your Life,” July 25, 1971.

our Baptism, it will be ours as well. *Receiving God's salvation in Christ by faith, we serve our neighbors in love with the Good News of salvation.* For us, no mission with fingers crossed!

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