

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Most people enjoy hearing a good “fish story.” And fishermen love telling them...about the one that got away. And the size of the fish seems to increase every time the story is told. Jonah was no fisherman, but he had a fish story that could top them all. It got away too, but not before vomiting Jonah out upon dry land. When Jonah became an old man, the fish story he could tell, however, was not the one about being swallowed by a whale. He had a story to tell which was even more ridiculous sounding than that. “I went to Nineveh,” he could say, “And it was a great city. It took three days just to walk from one side to the other. These people were wicked before God. And they feared no one; but everyone feared them. And here’s the amazing thing—I walked through that city and I preached God’s judgment, and you know what? The people repented! All of them from the least to the greatest of them; they all turned from their wicked ways to the Lord.” And we can just hear Jonah’s listeners, with smirks on their faces, responding in disbelief: Yeah, right Jonah... tell us a story we can actually believe, like getting swallowed by a whale or something.

We have Jonah’s story written down for us in our Bibles, but for us too, it seems incredible to believe. An entire city filled with wickedness turning from their sins and repenting before God just because one man went there to preach? How is it possible? It may seem incredible to us because we have never seen anything like it in our day. Fishermen don’t catch 400 pound bass, and wicked cities remain wicked cities. And there is also this...how could an entire city repent when today my spouse won’t even come to church? How could thousands upon thousands of people turn to God when today my child, my parent, my brother or sister—just one person—refuses to turn to Him? “I’ll believe Jonah’s fish story about Nineveh when I see that same kind of repentance taking place today within the life of my loved one.”

And to top it off, the story becomes even more incredible to believe when we hear that Jonah did not want to go in the first place. The first time God called him, Jonah ran away in the other direction. So God called him a second time, and Nineveh had within her walls a man sent by God who did not want to be there. Jonah was an angry preacher. He did not love his hearers. Rather, he hated the wicked people of Nineveh. He preached to them because he was commanded to, but within his heart Jonah was hoping that no one would repent. He wanted them to get what was coming to them. After preaching God’s Word to the people, Jonah camped out just outside the city limits so that he could watch with joy as God destroyed Nineveh. But it never came. The people repented. They listened to this cold-hearted preacher. They turned to the Lord, and the Lord turned away from the destruction He was going to send to them. And so we’re supposed to believe today that, not only did Nineveh repent, but that all the people turned to the Lord because of one lousy preacher who had nothing but hatred in his heart for his congregation.

That’s quite a fish story. Especially when today we see congregations, which have pastors who love their people, decreasing in numbers and fading away. That’s quite a fish story when today we see the Word of God preached by, not just one lone preacher, but by many—and still the people of our great nation, and many within our own families, refuse to listen and to repent of their sinful ways.

But you know...the Bible is full of “fish stories.” It begins with one: And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. The stories about God’s people...led by Moses out of

Egypt, the Red Sea, the conquest of Canaan. The stories about the Judges...Samson, Gideon. The Prophet's stories...Samuel, Elijah, Elisha. The stories of King David. And all the stories of Jesus and His Apostles—they're fish stories, all of them. They all seem too incredible to believe. But they are written down for us not just to believe, but that by believing in Christ Jesus we have life in His name.

Do you know that your life in Christ is a fish story? You and I can believe Jonah's story about Nineveh because, in many ways, our story is identical to his. Like Nineveh we also lived in wickedness before God. "They have all turned aside" to commit evil, says the Bible. And this includes you and me. Like Nineveh we, too, were nothing but sinners. Now perhaps we are different from Nineveh in that it was a great city. Yet, within our own minds we think we're pretty great—at least compared to others we are. And just as God was set to destroy Nineveh, so that same destruction was set for us. We've earned it by our selfish living, by our unforgiving attitude, by our wicked desires.

But just as God had mercy on the people of Nineveh, so He had mercy on you and me. Why didn't He leave them alone? Why did God send a preacher to them? It would have been easy for Him to have let Nineveh perish; His preacher even ran away. Why did God pursue these people? For the same reason He pursued you—because of His mercy. It is not in God's heart to ignore the wicked. Out of mercy He confronts them. He sent Jonah to Nineveh, and He sent His preacher to you. God had no desire to destroy the people of Nineveh even though Jonah very much desired that. And God has no desire to see your destruction. And so He brought His preacher to you when you were a baby to wash you of your sins in the waters of baptism. And He brought His preacher to you to teach you the Word of God. And He continues to bring to you one Jonah after another so that His Word is always in your ears, that His Spirit may live in your heart, that you may always confess the saving name of Jesus.

That's all your pastor is...a Jonah to you. Certainly he does not hate you like Jonah hated Nineveh. Your pastor has love in his heart toward you. But that's not what matters. What matters is that he preaches God's Word faithfully. Jonah had no love, but he preached to the letter, every word God told him to preach. What people think is important today really does not matter with God. Your pastor's style, his appearance, his appeal, his likeability, his way with children, his eloquence, his charm and enthusiasm. Jonah had none of these, and yet an entire city turned to the Lord because he did one thing right—he faithfully spoke the Word of God.

Does God work through an eloquent preacher? Does He work through a charming pastor? Does a good speaker grow God's church? Does a pastor have to be well-liked to be effective? There is nothing in Scripture which says "Yes" to any of these. But it does say and promise that God will work as He pleases in the hearts of sinners when His Word is purely preached and taught.

Which is better: to have a doctor who loves you but gives you the wrong medicine and the wrong treatment, or a doctor who is cold toward you but prescribes the right treatment and medicine for you? Jonah was the latter one. What matters far more than what is in your pastor's heart is what is in God's heart. Jonah's love did not cause the people to repent; God's love did. Jonah's mercy did not cause Nineveh to turn to the Lord—he had none—it was the mercy of God that saved them.

And so for you. I can tell you that my heart has love for you, but my love did not send Jesus to a cross for you—God’s love for you did. What’s in your pastor’s heart will not save you from your sins; but what comes out of his mouth will when, what comes out is the same thing that came out of Jonah’s mouth—the pure and faithful Word of God.

And that is no fish story. Because I’m looking at the ones that did not get away. Christ Jesus died for you. You are forgiven of your sins in your Savior’s blood. And with the net of Jesus’ Word and Sacraments, God has drawn you into His Church where His blood always remains on you. You’re not the one that got away. You’re the one who believes all those fish stories in the Bible because you know they are God’s truth. You’re the one who loves to hear your “Jonah” preach to you not because of his style, or eloquence, or charm, but because God has given you a love for the truth of Christ. You’re not the fish that got away because next Sunday, and next month, and next month, and the next...you are drawn up here to God’s altar to where Christ gives Himself for you with His body and blood.

Are there fish that got away? Yes, there are many. But not because God does not love them; not because Jesus did not die for them. And we pray that as God had mercy on Nineveh, and as He had mercy on you and me, so He would have mercy on them—even upon our loved ones—and bring to them a Jonah to speak His Word to them that they, with us within the net of Jesus’ Word, may be and remain fish that did not get away from our loving Savior, Jesus. Amen.