

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Our text does not mention it, but we simply cannot speak of Jonah without speaking of the great fish that swallowed him. A whale, we've been taught. And perhaps so, for the Jews referred to all creatures in the sea as fish. Three days he spent in the belly of this whale. The horror of those three days is unimaginable to us. And on top of this, Jonah had no way of knowing if he would ever be freed from the belly of the whale.

This is a fate we surely would not wish upon our worst enemies. And yet it is the fate Jonah wished upon the people of Nineveh. He disobeyed a direct command from God to go and preach to them. He boarded a ship to *flee from the presence of the Lord*.

What kind of people were the Ninevites that Jonah would take such drastic measures? They were the worst of the worst. Imagine a city of 120,000 filled with terrorists, rapists, pedophiles; people who were always inventing new ways to torture and kill their enemies. Even Sodom looks like a wonderful city in comparison with Nineveh. If any city deserved to be punished, it was Nineveh. If any group of people did not deserve to be shown mercy, it was the people of Nineveh.

Who are the Ninevites in your life? The driver of the car who cuts you off and then has the audacity to give you the finger? The jerk who intentionally hurts your loved one? Imagine a city filled with such people, and only such people. Would you pray for them? Perhaps our prayer would be that God visit punishment upon that city.

This was Jonah. He hated the people of Nineveh. He did not want to preach to them because he did not want them to repent. "Forty days until God destroys Nineveh? Good! I can't wait! Let no one interfere with the coming judgment. There's no way I'm going there to warn them!"

Jonah was God's prophet. But was he to be a prophet only of doom and judgment, and not a prophet of grace and forgiveness? Apparently so, in his mind. Jonah took it upon himself to determine who should be destroyed and who should be forgiven. But this was not for him to decide. Who was Jonah, and who are we, to tell God who deserves mercy and who does not!

And to impress this fact on Jonah, God does an interesting thing. He hurls Jonah into the depths of the sea, and He appoints a whale to swallow him, and after three days to vomit him out of its mouth.

The very fate Jonah believed that the people of Nineveh were deserving of, he himself had to experience. Jonah entered into the belly of the whale, sitting there in gloom and darkness, so that he would learn repentance. Only then could he preach repentance to the people of Nineveh.

Sitting in the belly of a whale is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a blessing from God; one of the greatest blessings of all. The people of Nineveh were grateful for that whale. It turned their preacher around, back to their city. "Thank you, Jonah," they may have said upon repenting of their wickedness. But also, "Thank you to that whale out in the sea, for God used you, dear whale, to save us from destruction."

Sitting in the belly of a whale is never a pleasant experience. Some of you know this firsthand. You've been there; maybe we all have. Perhaps the whale of a horrible illness has swallowed you whole. Or the whale of a financial crisis has swallowed you up. It might be the whale of another kind, and you may still be sitting in its belly, wondering if you will ever be freed from it.

It takes faith to see our whales as blessings. Jonah had such faith. Rather than becoming angry and cursing God, he called to Him in his distress. He prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed. And Jonah thanked God from the belly of the whale. For had that whale not swallowed him, he would have drowned in the depths of the sea.

We're told that God *appointed* that whale for Jonah. Does He not also appoint whales for us? And yet we moan and groan when we are swallowed by our whales. We act as if we have no God, or that God does not care about us. But is God our God only when life is good? That's not faith. Anyone can believe in such a god. Faith is trusting God from the belly of the whale.

Where, we ask, is God? He enters into the whale's belly for us. Jesus speaks of Jonah. He is a sign, Jesus tells us, pointing to His three days in the belly of the earth. Nineveh could not have been saved from destruction had Jonah not sat in the belly of the whale. Nor could we be saved from destruction had Jesus not been laid in the belly of the earth.

We need to hear this...we are the Ninevites. Don't compare your hands, feet, and mind with theirs. For then you will believe that you are not like them; that you are better, much better than them. Compare your heart with theirs. They're identical. Your heart, and mine, is no better than their heart, even if you and I have not acted out the sin in our heart with our hands, feet, and mouths. So the people of Nineveh did not deserve mercy? Neither do we. No one deserves mercy. The definition of mercy is that it is undeserved.

And this is God. He is merciful by nature. He gives and blesses not because we earn or deserve it. He acts as He does because it is in His heart.

Looking at Jesus, we see God's heart. He does not flee from the presence of God. He obeys His Father's command. He is thrown into the depths of hell on the cross. He is swallowed up by death. And He spends three days in the belly of the earth. But then He comes out of that belly. And He preaches to us that this earth, our Nineveh, will be destroyed, so that we repent of our sins and believe in all our Lord did for us.

Jesus is far greater than Jonah. Jonah preached judgment. Jesus felt God's judgment for you. Jesus preaches repentance for the forgiveness of your sins. And He comes here today - to us sitting in the whale's belly - "I forgive you," He declares; "Here is My Holy Supper for you. Here is forgiveness. It is pure grace and mercy. It is for you who live in the belly of the whale so that you learn to trust in God who will, and who does, deliver you."

Jonah was in the whale's belly for three days, but it surely seemed like three years to him. No matter how long it is for you, God will not forsake you. He's been there. And He is with you now. And He will lead you out. He will act in mercy toward you. Amen.