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The National Presbyterian Church

Prophetic Words – Jonah: GRACE

Jonah 3:1-4:4

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In our sermons in Lent,

We're looking at a number of books in the Bible known as the Minor Prophets:
There are twelve of them and on Sundays we're looking at 5 of them,
And today we come to the Book of Jonah.

The Book of Jonah is probably the most famous of these books
And for one reason:

The fact that the book tells us that the central character
– whose name is Jonah (one of the great religious leaders of Israel; a prophet in ancient
Israel)

was swallowed by a great fish or a whale.

That's why people know the book!

And that's not a bad thing

Except for the fact that

it's by no means the main or central message of the book!

As *if* the book was written to let us know that

God is powerful enough to save people who fall into the sea
by keeping them alive in the belly of fish for 3 days and 3 nights!

Now, I of course, believe that God can do that.

– In fact the Creator God who made the universe and everything in it can do whatever God
wants!

But - that's not why it was written!! It's not the central message of the book!

In fact if you take a few moments to read the whole book

Just four short chapters

it becomes clear *pretty quickly* that *the fish story* is almost a red herring a side show,
which, unfortunately has become so large and memorable that *the main show, the
main point* of Jonah tends to get missed lost at sea!

Which begs the question, of course, as to *what the main show is?*

What's the message? What's the point?

What's the reason for writing the book of Jonah in the first place?

Why's it in the Bible?

Well if you get past *the fish story*

What emerges from Jonah's four brief chapters is this:

That:

1st God is a God of Grace. That is, God is a God of second chances.

And If that's the case for people like you and me,
for us, and for people like Jonah then
 2nd – it's almost certainly going to be the case that
God is going to be a God of grace
 for people who are *not* like us, people we don't even like, indeed people who, *in our opinion*
 don't deserve a second chance at all – whether from us or from anyone! Let alone God!
 And then 3rd If that IS the truth (*that God's grace extends to people we think don't deserve it at*
all) *Then who are we* –who do we think we are
 to treat any group of people with contempt or to withhold our love?

Let me say it again:

1st God is a God of Grace; a God of 2nd chances
 2nd And if that's the case for us, for people like you and me and Jonah
 then it's almost certainly going to be true
(God is going to be a God of grace)
 for people who are not like us,
For people who don't belong to our group, our race,
our nation, our religion, our class.
People we're prejudiced against, or afraid of:
People we stereotype and demonize
 and who in our opinion don't deserve a 2nd chance at all
 whether from us or from anyone! Let alone God!
 3rd And if that IS the truth
(that God's grace extends to people we think of as awful)
 Then who are we (*who do we think we are*)?
 to treat them with contempt – or to withhold our love ?
even when it's hard as it was for Jonah

That's the message of the book
 And that's why Jonah spent three days inside the fish!
 But let me tell you how it happened, going back to chapter 1
 Before it happened, and then what followed after.

Like all of God's people, Jonah the prophet was far from perfect

- *There were people that Jonah despised and hated and stereotyped*
- In particular, people called *the Assyrians* with their capital city of Nineveh (*in what is now the city of Mosul*)

These people were bad! Not just annoying or frustrating;
 not just *half bad*! They'd been really bad and cruel and violent especially when they
 conquered the nation of Israel in the year 722 BC,
 – In fact, another minor prophet, Nahum, tells us that they were *relentlessly and mercilessly*
cruel and violent at that time.

So God's judgment and condemnation
 was something that they clearly deserved.

AND in fact at the beginning of the Book of Jonah
 It looks as if they are going to get it!

– We learn in the first verse that Jonah is the prophet that God asks to go to Nineveh and preach about God’s impending Judgment on the Assyrians.

Jonah Ch. 1, ver.1 –

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,
2“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it;
for their wickedness has come up before me.”

And you’d have thought that Jonah

would have been *only too happy* to represent his people and do this

- it would have been a road to instant popularity and fame
because Jonah wasn’t alone: every faithful Israelite hated them, and no doubt believed that
- the only “good Assyrian” was a dead Assyrian
- *if they’d had the power*,
no Assyrian would be let into their country
let alone live there as an immigrant
- the ethos/spirit in the air was that they were *bad to the core* every last one of them – and they *all deserved* what was coming to them,

And you’d have thought that Jonah *would have been eager*
to tell them this:

- eager to tell them that “*God would get ‘em in the end!! They’d pay!*”
- that “*God would have the last word over all their abuses of power*”

But he isn’t – he isn’t eager! In fact the opposite seems to be the case
Jonah tries to run away from God *as if* he’s scared of something:

Not surprising really – Perhaps: scared that the evil Assyrians would kill him – before he even had a chance to speak

We’re not told the reason for Jonah’s action at this stage in the story
but what *we are* told is this – that

Instead of heading North and East – heading to Nineveh
Jonah gets on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea
And Goes *west* not east, heading to Spain not Nineveh

And that’s when a storm comes up and the fish enters the picture

And we’re told that *both the storm and the fish* are sent by God to get Jonah’s attention.

In fact the storm is so fierce that the ship is about to break up. And the pagan sailors are scared to death and their superstition tells them (correctly in this case) that the storm had something to do with Jonah. And when Jonah tells them *that it’s all his fault*. And that *the only way out – is to toss him overboard*.

The stunning thing is this: they don’t want to do it!!

Here’s this person

- *who was like a cancer in their midst*
 - *whose presence could have killed them*
- AND they want to show him grace, not judgment

In fact these *sailors break all the stereotypes* of what pagan, godless sailors were supposed to be like. And when they finally can do no other than throw Jonah to what seems like his death

Their consciences are stricken. They pray to the LORD for forgiveness

They take no pleasure in Jonah's demise,

Instead they feel guilt. And their hearts are broken for him!

And so too is God's heart!!

God's heart *for Jonah* is broken too

- In fact, instead of letting Jonah drown,
God sends the big fish as an act of grace

To save him

To swallow him up, and then spew him out ALIVE

3 days later on the shore of the sea

Where God gives Jonah a second chance, a second chance that he simply does not deserve
SO Jonah Ch. 3 begins like this

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying,

2“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,

and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

And when Jonah takes this second chance (and he does) – heading east not west *another miracle takes place*

Far greater than a whale swallowing a man

The miracle takes place when Jonah *does* what God asks:

- *he preaches judgment* to the people in Nineveh
- He tells them that judgment is coming in 40 days – less than 6 weeks!

And lo and behold, what happens miraculously is that these

“godless, merciless, bloodthirsty, less-than-human
so and so's”

LISTEN & BELIEVE!!

and REPENT! And PRAY!

And SEEK GOD'S MERCY and GRACE

AND THEY GET IT!!

God gives it even to them, that's the miracle in Jonah!!

Jonah 3

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then 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.

- ⁸*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.

- ⁹*Who knows? (says the king) God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”*

And then we read at verse 10

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.

And Jonah was mad!!!

And that's when the truth comes out – that when he refused to go to Nineveh the first time it wasn't because he was scared to death that the evil Assyrians might hurt him or kill him but quite the opposite. It was because he was scared that

*that God would be kind and gracious
to the very people he, Jonah, despised!!*

So that all the hatreds and fears and stereotypes in his head and heart
that he shared with society around him

would have to be adjusted and changed, and put to death:

and he'd rather die at the hand of God than be embarrassed to break with the crowd, admit his mistake, and make those changes:

Jonah 4:2 - Jonah prayed to the Lord and said,
*“O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country?
That is why I fled to Tarshish [in Spain] at the beginning;
– for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful,
– slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
– and ready to relent from punishing. (x 13 in OT)*

³*And now, O Lord, please take my life from me,
for it is better for me to die than to live.”*

In the end

It's not exactly clear *that* Jonah ever really gets it that he agrees with God *or that* the action and grace of God actually transforms his thinking and attitude to the Assyrians.

But the message of the Book is clear

1st God is a God of grace; a God of second chances
And if that's the case for us, for people like you and me and Jonah
– if we need 2nd chances again and again

Then (in 2nd place) it's almost certainly going to be true

*that God is going to be a God of grace
for people who are not like us,*

*For people who don't belong to our group, our race,
our nation, to our religion, or to our class.*

For People we're prejudiced against, or afraid of:

For People we stereotype and demonize.

and who in our opinion don't deserve a second chance at all
whether from us or from anyone! Let alone God!

And 3rd, if that IS the truth (*that God's grace extends to people we think of as unworthy*).
Then *who are we (who do WE think we are)?*

to mindlessly join the crowd, or withhold our love,
or to treat with contempt or fear - those embraced by God?
Even when it's hard, as it was for Jonah.

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