

Sermon, January 30, 2011

OUR NINEVITES

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me”. Jonah 1:1

Jonah didn't want to preach to the Ninevites. He thought of himself as a prophet to the Israelites. He cherished the “chosen people” status. He felt comfortable with his own kind, language and culture. But what if the Ninevites were to convert? God has the power to do that you know. We hear that this is Jonah's fear from the mouth of Jonah himself. Then that whole city would be believers. It was a big sophisticated city. It contained luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens and even a zoo. Well, you could speculate what might happen then. Their sons might become priests. I'll be going there for theological education rather than Jerusalem. Soon those Ninevites might start running everything.

Not on my watch.

I'm running. That's exactly what Jonah did. He got on a ship to the most remote, furthest away place he could find and sailed towards Tarshish.

It's all a pleasant story to read, until the Holy Spirit wakes us up to the fact that we stand as Jonah, realizing that God has also called us and given us a commission. Yes, we have as clear a command as he gave to Jonah. Our command is from Jesus himself in the New Testament, “Go forth and baptize all nations teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”.

But how much going forth are we doing?

And our Ninevites aren't nearly as far away as Jonah's were. Jonah would travel many days to get to his target audience. In some cases we only need travel as far as Islington and Finch. But will we go to them? Will we bring them to church? Will we invest time to befriend, mentor and catechize them. And yes, their presence might upset our club-like atmosphere of our church. Still, though these outsiders may seem strange, I assure you that they can't possibly be as different to us as the Ninevites were to Jonah.

Perhaps part of our problem is that we think our Ninevites are the same as us. We have unrealistic expectations saying, “I get here, why can't the rest of the world?” We forget what power we are given by God's grace. We walk in the light while they dwell in the darkness. We have eternal hope while others outside the church reside in despair. We have life and salvation through Word and Sacrament while they remain dead in their sins. The prison guard calls out “Dead Man walking” and you know the only destination he can walk to is the death chamber. He cannot walk towards the Light. He's a dead man walking. But we speak of the redeemed, by God's grace, as “walking in the light”. We need to get our expectations straight. Until a person is instructed in the word, is baptized, shares the faith we can't expect anything. Pastors need to go forth to our Ninevites with the Word while the laity needs to bring forth our Ninevites to the Word.

We bring them to a Word. We call this Word of God the Bread of Life. We call it a nourishing of the soul. So when you invite a friend to go out to a supper what do you do?

You generally offer to pick him up unless he insists that he go on his own. But even if he comes to the door on his own you don't generally let him sit down by himself in the midst of strangers and feel abandoned. You give introductions. You make sure he feels at ease. There is a certain responsibility you feel as a host to do everything you can to make your guests feel at ease. You also do everything to make your guest safe. You even restrict some of his activities in your home. You don't let him jump into your pool until he's learned to swim. You don't let him ride your motorcycle until he's got a license. At our Church we don't encourage him to partake of the Lord's Supper until he's been instructed. We think of it as a medicine of immortality and as with all medicine it must be taken in a certain way, with proper preparation and understanding. We properly prepare and protect our guests. It isn't enough to simply drop the invitation off at the door and let matters take care of themselves. So why should we think that it's enough to put the sign at the end of the lane?

So we have our task to go forth and bring forth the Ninevites to hear the Word of the Lord.

But for whatever reason, we run from our task as Jonah.

But thanks be to God for in his mercy he treats us as He treats Jonah. We run from our task and get on the ship. Still the Lord is there. We slip down into the bowels of the ship with Jonah and begin to die a spiritual death. Still, the Lord is there.

The Lord does not give up on us. He continues to issue forth his call. In Jonah's case, he sent a storm. "The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up". Maybe he sends a storm to us in the ship of this Church. But the shaking comes in the form of financial instability, or shortage of workers or internal conflict. Things that churches of all kinds experience, and God allows to test our faith and refocus on our reason for being, namely missions. Our work is a matter of life and death.

Jonah sensed the hand of the Lord behind the storm and acknowledges that he is the reason for it. He says, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you". In every way the prophet Jonah foretells the Coming of the Christ. And in this detail we have some real epiphany message. God in the flesh is thrown into the storms of our lives and dwells among us. His presence compels us to in turn to ask of Him "throw us into the lives of others".

In the time of crisis will we see the hand of God behind the storm? Will we believe that God works together for good in all things? Will we say "Send me in?"

Jonah did so. It was act of utter selfless repentance. And God used this opportunity to speak of the central tenet of our faith. Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights before he was spewed forth onto the dry land. Jesus points to this event as historic fact saying: "I give them the sign of Jonah". For just as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish three days and three nights so also shall the son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights (Matthew 12:14) before the resurrection. And even as this event was in the future for Jonah it nevertheless had a transforming impact on Jonah in his here and now.

Jonah would experience the power of our Lord's forgiveness and transformation in His death and resurrection even before the historic event of Christ's death and resurrection

would occur. I was just speaking to our PAT students yesterday about how the historic event of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection though occurring in time changed everything in the future for us, but because our Lord is eternal it changes everything for everyone of every time, even Jonah.

In the death and resurrection of Christ there is forgiveness of sins, resurrection from the dead and strength to new life. What Jonah experienced through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea we regularly experience through the waters of Holy Baptism.

Through the waters of Holy Baptism, renewed day by day as we make the sign of the Holy Cross, our commission to go forth to all nations is also renewed day by day. We, like Jonah have another chance. As long as we draw breath in this mortal body we have a new chance by God's grace. The commission is renewed.

We know what Jonah did. The great fish spewed out Jonah and he went to Nineveh. He triumphed in his calling as we shall also triumph. In the triumph over death, there is the ultimate triumph over evil. We ought not to fear.

"Yea though I go through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil" says the psalmist. Jonah was here even in a deeper valley. He was, as described in chapter 2, at the "roots of the mountains". He was in the depths of the realm of the dead. Still he was to fear no evil. He did not need to fear for his Lord would go to such depths for him. Our Lord goes to such depths for us and even greater into the eternal abyss. We confess "He descended into hell". And in such depths our Lord proclaimed victory over sin, death and hell itself. Where our captain of salvation trod we follow in triumph. We triumph over evil. What more shall we fear!

Therefore embrace the mission. "Go forth to all nations". "Go forth even unto our own Ninevites"! Jonah went forth and embraced his mission. But he continued to struggle even as we do. Jonah was continually challenged in his compassion. It is a character trait ever renewed by absorbing God's compassion for us. May we learn of such compassion and then share it. May we embrace our mission to our Ninevites.

Amen.