

**Advent, 2017
Hope in the Pit
Jonah 1:17-2:10**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the day on which we have already lit the candle of hope. Naturally our thoughts turn to – the OT prophet, Jonah. Jonah strikes us, not only as an unlikely prophet, but also an unlikely individual to think about as we begin our Advent Season. The connection begins to make sense, though, when you think about Jonah’s need for a merciful God, which was no greater nor less than the need of the Assyrian people to whom Jonah had been called to preach, though these wicked people – some of the cruelest who ever lived, in fact – didn’t have the slightest idea that they needed God’s forgiveness and the hope he would provide.

Our focus, this morning, is Jonah 1:17-2:10, which gives us Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the great fish that the Lord had prepared for Jonah. I would give you the full context, but far better to do that with a video from The Bible Project, which will be shown just after the reading of the text and prayer. Would you please stand as God’s word is read?

1:17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying,

**“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.**

**3 For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,**

**and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.**

**4 Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'**

**5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head**

6 at the roots of the mountains.

**I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.**

**7 When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.**

**8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.**

**9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.**

Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

**10 And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon
the dry land.**

**When you think of the book of Jonah, you most likely think of it
belonging in a Children's Bible Story Book. If so, take another look
at this literary masterpiece with profound truth that pointedly
speaks to many of the issues of our day. You may have been told
that Jonah was afraid and that is why God punished him. Not so.
Jonah was a racist who knew that God would save the wicked**

Ninevites if he preached to them. There is irony and humor in the book as God seems to be amused while watching the unlikeliest of prophets throw one tantrum after another. Do not use Jonah as an excuse to throw a tantrum. When you do throw a tantrum, though, know that God has made provision for your sin.

Rather than give an exposition on our text, I want to offer five lessons from the book of Jonah and comment briefly about each one as we move toward the Lord's Table. Lesson one:

Lessons from Jonah

- 1. This story is about God, not so much about a prophet and a whale**

Most of the time when people read the Bible, they put on their moralistic glasses so that they can learn how to be a better person, thinking, "This is useful for the heaven thing, for sure, but it is good for my neighbors, for my family, and it is especially good for me to read about Jonah so that I can avoid his mistakes and stay out of trouble." But the Bible was not written so that we can have awesome lives, but, rather, it was written to show us who God is, how we are brought into relationship with him, and only then, how we can live in ways that benefit us, surely, but more importantly, how we are called to love others. Before you come to Scripture, make sure you have the right glasses on. Put your gospel glasses on and you will see the truth of our second lesson from Jonah:

- 2. God's ways are not our ways – and that is a good thing**

If God's ways were our ways, Jesus would not have entered the world the way he did. As for Jonah, I am not sure what he was thinking when he ran from God. Did he think he could change God's intended outcome for the Ninevites if he did not obey? We

learn, later, that Jonah knew that if he obeyed God, the wicked Assyrians would be saved and spared God's judgment. I am not sure Jonah thought he could change God's plans, but he did not want to be the one to successfully prophesy to the Assyrians.

Jonah knew his Bible and he knew that God had chosen the Jewish nation to be his people. God told his people very clearly in his word that Gentiles would be brought into the family, but like most Jews, Jonah didn't emphasize that point. In fact, as a member of God's family, Jonah knew exactly how God ought to think and act. Do you ever have that problem? In your great wisdom, be careful not to miss the third lesson from Jonah, which is:

- 3. Do not presume to think you know whom God will save and whom he will not save**

Imagine during these last few years that ISIS had captured 4-5 Arab nations and had established a formidable government and military. Suppose, also, that you *knew* within 50-75 years ISIS would be strong enough militarily to defeat the United States. Imagine that your commission from the Lord was to preach repentance to the people who would experience a short revival and be spared God's judgment only to destroy our democracy and put us under Sharia Law within two to three generations. Jonah's calling was something like that.

Here is the question for Jonah and for all of us – what did any of us do to deserve God's mercy? Why, then, do we treat anyone else as less valuable than we are? If you missed this past Wednesday night's Grace Matters session on Grace and Race, let me encourage you to go to the sermon series on our website where you can hear both the Wednesday night session with five panelists, and there is also a dinner conversation that the same panelists, plus a few more, had a few weeks ago were they discussed the church's response to

racism. I was touched and challenged by what was said on Wednesday. We would do well, not only to learn from Jonah's mistakes but to acknowledge that our God is a merciful God. We have no idea how he is going to build his church, but we absolutely know that there is no room for racism in any of our hearts. The fourth lesson from Jonah:

4. What appears to be a sign of God's displeasure may be his deliverance

Another mistake we make when reading Scripture is to read a story like Jonah and say, "That is how you people are." No, that is how every one of us is. "Who are you talking about – Jonah or the sailors or the Ninevites?" Yes. Maybe you do not think that your sin is as bad as your neighbor's sin, but do not hold your breath for God to put your neighbor in his or her place on Judgment Day. Pray, instead, for mercy.

And, mercy you will receive, if your hope is in Jesus. When the Ninevites repented, God relented from the judgment he was ready to unleash. When we repent and acknowledge that the judgment we deserved was poured out on Jesus, we not only avoid judgment, we gain the riches of heaven in Christ!

Another common misreading of Jonah is to think, "I better not disobey God, or he may judge me." And, so, you begin to think that any bad thing that happens to you is God's judgment. Or, worse, you think that God has no right to allow this horrible thing in your life. What is he doing? It is bigger than you can imagine. The fish was not so much God's judgment on Jonah as it was his instrument of deliverance – for Jonah and for the Assyrians. Without the fish, Jonah would have drowned. Instead, he preached to wicked people, just like himself, who are now in heaven. I am sure Jonah is presently happy about the way things turned out. So, what about

you? Why has this terrible thing happened to you? I don't know, but I do know that one day you it will make sense in God's grand design, which is why the last lesson is so important:

5. Salvation is from the Lord. Trust God – even in the pits

That is the primary thrust of the book – salvation is from the Lord. When you suffer, look to the cross. That is where our salvation was won. Though Jesus died and was buried, just as Jonah came out of the fish, Jesus came out of the grave. Though you are in the pit of despair, trust in God. He is sovereign, over all things – and he is good.

This past Friday night, three Culbreths and two Talleys were blessed to attend a performance of Handel's *Messiah* at Duke Chapel. Both the evening and the performance were sublime. As moving as it was to hear "For unto us a child is born," to the familiar melody and as thrilling as it was to stand with hundreds of others in the magnificent Duke Chapel as the Hallelujah Chorus was beautifully and powerfully delivered by over 150 voices, I was most moved by the biblical account of Jesus' suffering as he died sacrificially on our behalf, and by the hope of the resurrection, that was pointed to in the account of Jonah's experience that we have considered this morning. I thought it would be fitting to prepare for the Lord's table by reciting the first portion of Act II of Handel's *Messiah* as a responsive reading. The text is based on the King James Version, with the Psalms as they are in the Common Book of Prayer. As we recall Jesus' death and resurrection, you will notice that all passages of Scripture, except for the first one, are taken from the OT. As we read, let us remember the great price Jesus paid, dying the death we deserved so that we might live.

Would you please stand for the responsive reading?

Leader

John 1:29

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

All

Isaiah 53:3; 50:6

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; he hid not his face from shame and spitting.

Leader

Isaiah 53:4; 5A

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him.

All

Isaiah 53:5B

And with his stripes we are healed.

Leader

Isaiah 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

All

Psalm 22:7

All they that see him laugh him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying:

Leader

Psalm 22:8

He trusted in God that he would deliver him; let him deliver him, if he delight in him.

All

Psalm 69:20

Thy rebuke hath broken his heart; he is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on him, but there was no man, neither found he any to comfort him.

Leader

Lamentations 1:12

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow.

All

Isaiah 53:8

He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgressions of thy people was he stricken.

Leader

Psalm 16:10

But thou didst not leave his soul in the grave; nor didst thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.

All

Psalm 24:7-10

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, O ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.