

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday After Epiphany, January 26, 2025

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 421, 422:1, 409, 410, 416.

Lessons: Jonah 1:1-17, 1 Corinthians 15: 1-4, Matthew 12:38-42

Sermon Text: Jonah 3:1-10.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You probably remember Jonah as the man who spent three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish.

But do you remember why? It was because of his disobedience to God. It was because he did not want to do what God had commanded. It was because he tried to run away from God. Today let's remember how

JONAH LEARNS – THE HARD WAY – TO OBEY THE LORD

- 1. Jonah was given a direct command from God, but tried to run away from the Lord.**
- 2. When he did finally obey God, God worked through the proclamation of His word and caused people to repent of their sins.**

The book of Jonah begins with these words: *“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”* (Jonah 1:1-3, NIV84)

Jonah disobeyed God and tried to run away! He went the other direction.

Nineveh was about 500 miles east of Israel. Jonah tried to run away from God to the west. Tarshish was in the far western Mediterranean region, perhaps in Spain or Portugal, more than 1500 miles in the other direction. It was the most distant place known to Israel in that direction.

But it was not to be a safe trip. *“The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.’”* (Jonah 1:4-6, NIV84)

When the sailors realized who was responsible for the great storm which threatened their lives, when they realized that Jonah was trying to run away from his God, the true God, *“They took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.”* (Jonah 1:15-16, NIV84) Even throwing Jonah overboard to drown had a favorable outcome. The sailors recognized the power of the true God.

But Jonah didn't drown. *“The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”* (Jonah 1:17, NIV84)

We know very little of Jonah's personal life. The only other reference to him in Scripture is that he lived during the reign of Jeroboam, an evil king who nevertheless was permitted to expand the boundaries of Israel. Jeroboam *“was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.”* (2 Kings 14:25, NIV84)

It took a really drastic event to lead Jonah to obey God. He was thrown into the sea and a great fish swallowed him. We generally think of the word “whale” here. But the Hebrew Old Testament uses a different word which gives the picture of a “great or huge fish”, a word which the King James Version translates “whale”. Some scholars think this was a fish created especially by God for this purpose. Regardless, the three days and three nights in darkness inside the fish led Jonah to repentance. His prayer to God inside the fish ends with the words **“But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.”** (Jonah 2:9, NIV84)

Then we read that **“the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.”** (Jonah 2:10-3:3, NIV84)

As a result of his three days and three nights inside the great fish Jonah finally obeyed the Lord and went where God wanted him to go. It had taken a hard lesson, but Jonah finally obeyed the Lord.

We read that God commanded him to go and preach in the large pagan city of Nineveh. **“Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.”** (Jonah 3:3, NIV84)

He was to preach God’s law because the all-knowing God was aware of the wickedness of the people in that place. When Jonah did get to Nineveh, **“He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’”** (Jonah 3:4, NIV84) God warned that the city would be destroyed.

Is Nineveh so different from the world we live in? Surely God is aware of the wickedness of people today. Although we live in an evil, wicked world, your calling, your mission as a child of God is to proclaim the Word of God, to tell people what God says. You are God’s witnesses in the world. This includes his Law. This also includes telling everyone about the Love of God. This includes telling people about the forgiveness of sins because of what Christ did for all mankind.

The preaching of right and wrong isn’t very popular today. Such a message isn’t really what everyone wants to hear. People are much more comfortable about hearing that we must tolerate and even celebrate what God plainly calls sin. But Scripture plainly tells us what is sin, transgression and iniquity. We learn God’s will, his moral law for all men from the Bible and it is summarized in the ten commandments.

At first Jonah didn’t want to do what God wanted him to do, to proclaim God’s Word. He actually went the opposite direction of what God commanded him to go.

Read the whole book of Jonah for yourself after church today. It will only take a few minutes to read the four chapters of this book.

We don’t have many specific words that Jonah proclaimed. But we do read **“On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’”** (Jonah 3:4, NIV84) He told them that their city would be destroyed. But we see that God caused his words to have results.

Nineveh was a huge city. Scripture says **“Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.”** (Jonah 3:3, NIV84) God said in the last verse of this book **“Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well.”** (Jonah 4:11, NIV84) That is a strange picture and we don’t know exactly how to explain the 120,000 people. Could that be children? If so, there would be many more adults. When God told Jonah in the last verse of this book **“Should I not be concerned about that great city?”** (Jonah 4:11, NIV84) we realize that the people of Nineveh were included in the people whom God wants to **“to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** (1 Timothy 2:4, NIV84)

Jonah’s message as recorded in Scripture is plainly law, but we have no reason to believe Jonah did not proclaim what God told him to say, including the message of repentance and salvation. Jonah himself had suffered a hard lesson and realized he had to obey God. He had learned that God is gracious, for his own life was spared in the ocean.

As a result of his telling the people what God told him to proclaim, we read **“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”** (Jonah 3:5, NIV84)

Even the king, when he heard of this became concerned. **“When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth.**

Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 3:6–9, NIV84)

The people of Nineveh believed God and as a fruit of repentance, they declared a fast as outward evidence of their sorrow over sin. Fasting even among pagans was one way of trying to show obedience to a false god. The Ninevites put on sackcloth, that is, burlap, a coarse cloth that we would call gunny sacks, also as a picture of repentance. Even sitting in the dust was a picture of repentance. Those things were ways to show repentance before Jonah’s God, the true God.

Then we see the blessed results of following the will and commands of God. We see the grace of God! God’s message had an effect, God’s desired effect. ***“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”*** (Jonah 3:10, NIV84)

God’s Word is powerful and accomplished what he wanted it to do.

We see God’s grace and mercy. Jonah knew that the Lord was the God who would forgive even Ninevites. He knew that the Word of God can bring about repentance.

Just as God spared Nineveh when its inhabitants turned to him in repentance, so he is ready to show mercy to all those who throw aside their impenitence and plead with him for forgiveness.

And how gracious isn’t God to us? How much mercy haven’t you personally experienced, even though you know the greatness of your sins?

Jonah should have been overjoyed that the people repented and turned to God. He should have rejoiced with them that they were saved from destruction.

We, too, should daily rejoice and be happy that God has forgiven our sins. Just as we receive God’s grace and mercy, so we should be most willing to share that love of God with everyone we meet.

It was a hard lesson for Jonah to learn that he must obey God. May we learn from Jonah not to turn away from God, so that we, too, may be saved as were the people of Nineveh! Amen.