



DATE: November 8 (23rd Sunday after Pentecost)
SCRIPTURE: Jonah 1 and 3
TITLE: The story of Jonah

Half of the story of Jonah is well known. It is the story of a man who is called by God to go to Nineveh, but instead Jonah gets on a boat and heads in the opposite direction to Tarshish (Nineveh is in modern-day Iraq while Tarshish is on the southern tip of Spain. Tarshish was quite literally the ‘ends of the earth,’ as far as Jonah was concerned).

While en route to Tarshish, his ship was rocked by tremendous storms. His shipmates realized that he was the

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reason, and he volunteered to be thrown of the boat. Once overboard, he was swallowed by a “great fish,” sat in the belly of the fist for three days and three nights, and then was vomited out onto dry land. After this great ordeal, he follows God’s command to go to Nineveh.

This is the story of Jonah that most know. It is the story of a man trying unsuccessfully to run from God. The part of the story most forget is what happens after he gets to Nineveh.

In Nineveh, Jonah becomes one of the most successful preachers in the entire Biblical narrative. He preaches God’s message to the Ninevites and the unthinkable happens—they listen! They are moved by Jonah’s words and the people and leaders of Nineveh decide to change their ways. As a result, God’s impending doom and destruction is averted. God decides to spare Nineveh. It is easy to say that Jonah is the most effective and successful preacher in the entire Bible. As a result, he is miserable.

When he realizes that God is no longer going to destroy Nineveh, Jonah is despondent. You see, Nineveh was not a Jewish city. Nineveh was

the capital of the Assyrian Empire. It was Assyria that invaded Israel, and destroyed the capital city of Samaria. Nineveh was not just a foreign city—it was an enemy city. It was the home of the most hated and despised people of the time. When God decided to show mercy to Nineveh, Jonah was devastated.

Chapter four of the Jonah story includes an object lesson that God teaches Jonah. The prophet wishes for the people of Nineveh to perish, but God reminds

Jonah, that even the Ninevites are his children. Jonah is frustrated by God’s mercy.

Thus we can learn a couple of lessons from Jonah. One is that running from God’s calling is futile. God pursues us – and will use great lengths to help guide us on God’s path. Second, God’s mercy is greater than we expect. Jonah resented God’s mercy when he felt it was given to the wrong people.

Who may the wrong people be today? We all want God’s mercy, but Jonah is a gentle reminder to us to examine who we may harbor resentment and ill-will toward. Is it people from the other party, a foreign nation, a former friend who once wronged you? Who are those from whom we would withhold God’s mercy?

The story of Jonah ends with a question left unanswered. God asks Jonah, “Is your anger a good thing?” Indeed, we must examine our own anger. If we are ever to get to peace, reconciliation, and fellowship; if we are ever to get to the place where we can love our enemies; we are left to answer the question God asks. “Is your anger a good thing?”