

**Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021**  
**“Just Call Me Jonah!”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

Gracious God, be with us today in this place, in the Scriptures and in our words.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts praise your Holy name.  
Amen.

A while back, I mentioned to Rev. Peter Walford-Davis that I would be preaching about Jonah the next Sunday.

He thought that was kind of a *fishy* story but he hoped we all would have a *whale* of a time.

He figured a little fish and fishing humour would be a good way to get you all *hooked* on the sermon.

I think he might be right!

I told these puns not just for a laugh but because we get a little mixed up sometimes as to the point of the story.

We get the idea of the story but we get it a little mixed up when it comes to the meaning.

It's not your fault.

It is the fault of us preachers who

have failed to preach the main point of the story.

For instance when I say, “Jonah” what do you think of: a whale.

That's right we think of Jonah and the whale.

But the whale is only a minor character in the story.

The whale, actually the Bible says “big fish,” is important to the story but still a minor character.

The story is really about Jonah and God's call to go to Nineveh.

The whale is merely one of the means God used to get Jonah to answer that call.

In case you have forgotten the basic flow of the story of Jonah let me refresh your memory.

God comes to Jonah and says, “Go to Nineveh and proclaim my word.”

But Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh so he boards a boat to go in the opposite direction.

God, determined to get Jonah to Nineveh, uses a storm and a whale to take him there. Once in Nineveh, Jonah proclaims God's word.

That is the basic chain of events of the story but there is more there.

To really understand the story you have to know why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.

And the key to understanding why he didn't want to go to Nineveh lies in what Nineveh was to him and those of his nation and time.

"What was Nineveh", you say? I am glad you asked.

According to The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria from about 700 BC to 612 BC

Nineveh was where the Emperor of the Assyrian Empire lived.

The name "Nineveh" was associated with all that the empire did.

When you say "Ottawa" you think of the Canadian government.

When our government does something we say, "Ottawa

did this or that for us."

It is the same with "Washington" or "London".

Nineveh was not just the capital of the Assyrian government, it was the symbolic embodiment of everything that the Assyrian Empire did.

One of the things that Assyria or Nineveh did was conquer Israel, Jonah's home.

Repeatedly, Assyria attacked Israel killing its people and destroying its cities.

In 721 BC Assyria carried off the best and the brightest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity.

It was Nineveh who planned those military campaigns and ordered that killing and enslaving of the Israelites, God's chosen people.

Jonah and his fellow Israelites saw Nineveh as an enemy to God and God's people.

And God called Jonah, a Jew, to go to Nineveh.

To go to the people he saw as his mortal enemy and proclaim the word of God.

And what was that word?

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim to it God's

word of Judgment and  
destruction.

Wait a minute.

Something's not right here!

Let me get this straight.

Jonah hated Nineveh and saw it as  
his mortal enemy.

God tells Jonah to prophesy its  
destruction.

It seems to me that Jonah would  
jump at the chance to go to  
Nineveh and proclaim this  
message, right?

Here was a golden opportunity for  
Jonah to tell Nineveh off.

Here was a Divine sanction to go  
to Nineveh and say, "God'll  
get you for that."

So why didn't Jonah want to go?  
Because despite his prejudice, he  
knew God too well.

Jonah knew that if he warned the  
Ninevites of their  
destruction, they might  
repent.

And if they repented God would  
surely be merciful and spare  
them.

Jonah didn't want to see Nineveh  
spared.

He wanted to see it totally and  
utterly destroyed by God's  
wrath rained down on it  
from heaven.

So Jonah figured that if he doesn't  
tell Nineveh about God's  
judgment they will not be  
warned.

If they are not warned they can't  
repent.

If they don't repent, God won't  
spare them.

Boom! Nineveh is destroyed.

So, Jonah sets out to put as much  
distance between himself  
and Nineveh as he can.

This is where the whale comes in.  
God couldn't just let Jonah get  
away with his little scheme.

So God orchestrated a storm at sea  
to get Jonah thrown  
overboard.

Then God ordered a big fish,  
perhaps a whale, to swallow  
Jonah and take him to  
Nineveh making Jonah the  
first submariner.

When they arrive at Nineveh the  
whale beached itself and  
spits Jonah out on Nineveh  
Municipal Public Beach.

During his ride to Nineveh Jonah  
did some thinking.

He realized that he could not get  
away with running away  
from his calling.

So he decides to do just enough to

say he did what God was calling him to do and no more.

A good prophet would go to the palace and dramatically proclaim God's judgment before the king and all his officials.

A good preacher would enumerate all the sins that Nineveh had committed against God.

Then a good preacher would have graphically described the impending judgment and punishment of God.

But Jonah endeavored to be neither a good prophet nor a good preacher.

He only did what he had to, to get by.

For starters he only went one day's journey into Nineveh.

We are told that Nineveh was three days journey in width.

He only goes a third of the way in.

He is still in the suburbs of the greater Metropolitan Nineveh area.

If you will excuse an analogy with Ottawa, he is just barely inside the city limits.

Then he just speaks one sentence: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown."

He doesn't even tell them that it is

God who will overthrow them.

Just one sentence and somehow I get the feeling he didn't say that very loud.

Then Jonah's worst nightmares come true.

The people of Nineveh repent! In sackcloth and ashes no less! Somehow God convicted the people of their sin and moved them to repent.

And someone told the King about it and he ordered a fast for all the people and livestock in Nineveh.

Despite Jonah's half hearted preaching, God moved the people to repent.

And much to Jonah's chagrin God spared Nineveh.

Don't be too hard on Jonah.

We are all like him to one degree or another.

We all want to see God's judgment rained down upon those we see as God's enemies from time to time.

We want God to destroy our enemies not to save them.

We want to see God's judgment poured out upon the sinful and unrighteous that rebel against God's law.

We want to see God pour out judgment on those being careless regarding the spread of COVID-19.

We want the violence around the world to be put to an end by God's wrath.

There are those personal enemies whose ways of doing things and whose personalities always get on our nerves.

We don't want God to bless them.

We want God to show them that they are wrong and we are right.

But, we know God better than that.

In fact we are supposed to be the ones who know God's Son personally.

And what did Jesus say?

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

But if we love our enemies and pray for those who are against us, God might move them to repentance and save them.

I guess it all really boils down to this.

In God's eyes we are no better or more important than them.

God made us all and wants us all. Jonah should have known better.

God wanted to save Nineveh. After all, God had created and loved the Ninevites too.

If we expect God to forgive us when we confess, we should accept it when God forgives some other sinner when they repent.

But be warned!

If you pray for your enemies, God will hear your prayers.

God will work on them.

They might repent and if they repent, God will save them.

You might find your enemy joining you next week on our Zoom church service!

If we have problems with that then we are the ones who need to repent.

The story of Jonah acts like a mirror to me.

Jonah reflects back to me my prejudices.

Setting aside the whole fish thing, Jonah is one of the characters from the Bible with which I can identify most.

Just call me Jonah!

God help us to recognize our prejudices and work through them, like Jonah did.

Thanks be to God. Amen.