

Nov. 8, 2020 -- (Pentecost 24, Jonah and God's Mercy)

Sermon Text – Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10 [4:1-11]

- Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord...The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord...When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes ...When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. -

If you had the opportunity to hear me preach last Sunday, you heard me reiterate a theme that we have touched on a number of times during our fall preaching through the Old Testament texts of the narrative lectionary. I reminded you that the people of the world can be divided into two groups in a number of ways. Last week, it was people who like Spam and people who don't like Spam. And it was people who love the flavor of pumpkin spice and people who do not. As you recall, I am a pumpkin spice, Spam person. But all that seems like foolishness, when we come to the story of Jonah. Jonah thought he had it all figured out. There were two groups of people in the world. There were the Hebrew people of Israel, who were chosen by God to be a blessing to the world, and a few others like them, who just weren't very important in the scheme of things, and there were the Assyrians, whose capital was at the city of Nineveh, who represented the foreign power of empire in the world of Jonah's day.

In his mind, the people of God were the good guys and the Assyrians were their hated enemies. If you are a Star Wars fan, it breaks down this way. The people of God are the Jedi rebels and their Assyrian enemies are the Empire, with its hated ultimate weapon, the deadly Death Star. This is a fact – the people of Nineveh were proud of their superior skills and exceptional abilities to kill the Hebrews. Archeologists have confirmed this for us. They found, in the king's palace in Nineveh, a spectacular wall hanging that depicts the Siege of Lachish, a city in southern Israel, roughly halfway between the Dead and the Mediterranean Seas. The artwork displays the terrible war machine, battering down the walls of the highly-fortified city, as well as multiple images of the Judeans being impaled on spears, beheaded with swords, and marched off in chains to Nineveh, where they are presented to the Assyrian Emperor, Sennacherib. There is nothing in this depiction that could possibly lessen the hatred the vanquished Hebrews felt toward their powerful Assyrian

enemies. If the Hebrews could have their way, the Assyrians deserved similar treatment and more as their warranted punishment for all the evil they had inflicted upon God's chosen people.

Simple enough isn't it. Two groups of people, one good and one bad, who wish nothing but the worst on the other, are lined up in perfect opposition to one another. So, when the word of God comes to Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim to those evil people their impending destruction, we might expect that he would be delighted. He is not. He wants nothing to do with Nineveh. He is so opposed to the idea that he immediately sets out on a journey to get as far away from them as he possibly can. And this puts him face to face with God. You heard the details read to you this morning and you know the story. He gets on a ship and heads west. God needs to turn him around, so a storm comes up. The sailors get scared. They cast lots to see who is causing the problem. The lot falls on Jonah, and he tells them to throw him overboard to stop the storm. There, he is swallowed by a giant fish, in which he takes up residence for the next three days.

Now, let's say a word about the fish, as long as we're there. Yes, it was a fish. The Hebrew word is the word for fish. It wasn't a whale, although a whale might make more sense than a fish, if you believe that a person can live for three days under the water in the belly of a sea creature. The writer needs us to know that God took care of Jonah under the waves. God was turning him around, not trying to kill him, and a very large fish makes a whole lot more sense than having him stay with a square, yellow sponge and his pink, buddy starfish in a pineapple under the sea. That image doesn't make much sense either, but we all know what we're talking about. The important thing is that God takes care of Jonah; and, three days later, he finds himself "vomited" up on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and headed back in the direction of Nineveh.

And now that God has Jonah's undivided attention, the word comes again for him to go to Nineveh and proclaim its destruction. This time, Jonah does it. He walks into the city and delivers the briefest of messages, "Forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" As prophecies go, this is really weak. There is no "Woe unto you..." or "Alas, people of Nineveh..." or "Listen up or else..." just "Forty days, and you'll be done." I like that. The effectiveness of God's word does not depend on the ability of the preacher. Thank you, God! Immediately the people of Nineveh repent. They believe God, declare a fast, put on sackcloth, and everyone participates in their repentance, from the rich to the poor, from the famous to the obscure and from the leaders to the followers, animals included. And when God sees what they are doing,

God relents and does not bring punishment upon them, as God had meant to do. And because of this, Jonah is really steamed. He rants. He raves. He sits. He pouts. He wishes he were dead. He lets God have it. "I knew it. I knew this would happen. It's why I tried to run away in the first place. I knew you were 'gracious...and merciful, slow to anger...abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.'" "This isn't right," he wails. "It doesn't fit with the way I've got everything figured out. So, if you won't kill them, then kill me." But God doesn't let that happen either. God still cares about Jonah. God grows up a plant to shelter him from the sun, then sends a worm to eat away at it, so that Jonah's anger is rekindled and God can teach him one more lesson. When Jonah angrily complains that the plant did not last, God asks him how it is that he could be so happy with the plant one moment and so angry at it the next. If he feels justified in changing his mind about one, little plant, then shouldn't God be equally allowed to change God's mind about the many, many people who live in Nineveh and all their animals as well?

We live in a highly divided nation, of that there can be little doubt. National elections really seem to bring that out in us. And while one side is feeling a sense of joy and relief at the outcome, the other is filled with sadness and disappointment. What I find most interesting is that I have heard from people on both sides who say they can't believe that their candidates didn't win in a landslide! They thought they had it all figured out. "This is the way things should be. Everyone should be able to see that. There's no way anyone can possibly disagree." But they can. That is the nature of contests. They naturally divide us into two sides. Sometimes one side is stronger; sometimes the other. And sometimes we believe that God must certainly be on our side and not the other, like the preacher who was quoted in a paper that comes to my house as saying, "You certainly can't be on that side and be a Christian at the same time." I disagree with him. Does that mean that I'm not a Christian? I don't think so. I think he needs to read the book of Jonah, so that he can come to understand that, even when there are clear and obvious choices in our minds, that may not be the way God sees it. We may think we have it all figured out, but God can, and probably will, surprise us. We may get upset and angry and cry out to God that it isn't fair or right for the blessings we believe belong to us to be given to those who are so apparently opposed to us, but that doesn't mean that God doesn't love them too.

Even more than being a story about a bad prophet, who runs away from his call to go and preach to the Ninevites, Jonah is a story about God's mercy and grace. It's a story that reminds us that even when we think we've got everything figured out, even when the choices are so definitively obvious about which are the

good guys and which are the bad, even when we feel there can be only one outcome that can possibly make any sense, God is bigger than that. God is better than that. God is more caring and more merciful and more gracious than we will ever be. And God loves the whole world, all of its people, and even every one of its creatures, so much that God would ultimately choose to send God's Son to die for it. It's a very hard lesson to learn. Jonah had to spend three days in the belly of a fish, or wherever he was, and a day complaining about a disappearing plant, to figure it out. And even when he was set back on the right track and his mission accomplished, he wasn't happy with the outcome. He would rather have died than seen God's great grace and mercy put into action. But God will have God's way. God will choose to love who God will. Some of those people may not be part of our group. Some of them may not be very loveable in our eyes. But think of it this way. If God can love them, as unlovable as they may be for us, then God can love us too, when we make ourselves equally unlovable in God's eyes. My hope is that, in the end, we'll come to see that that's a good thing!

Amen.