

Sent By God (Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20)

Our Older Testament story for today is a short little story, but it's a masterpiece, and it's one of our favorites, isn't it? We all know it—the story of Jonah.

God sent his prophet Jonah on a special assignment. God told him, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. So he decided that he wouldn't go to Nineveh. In fact, Jonah decided he would go as far away from Nineveh as he could get. Thus, Jonah got on a ship headed in the opposite direction—to Tarshish.

God, though, always has the last word, doesn't he? So God sent a mighty wind that threatened to break apart the ship on which Jonah was running away. Everyone on board was afraid and praying to all the gods they could think of. When they learned that Jonah was the one who had displeased his god, Jonah told them, "Oh, just pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." The sailors didn't want to do this, but in desperation, they finally did as Jonah told them to do, and sure enough, immediately the wind and sea calmed down.

Out there in the middle of the ocean, Jonah was about to drown, when God provided a large fish to rescue him. (If it seems unlikely that a fish could be big enough to swallow a man, we have to remember that Jonah was a minor prophet!) Jonah stayed in the fish's belly for three days and three nights. The, finally, Jonah decided to turn to the Lord instead of away from him. Jonah spoke a prayer of gratitude. And lo and behold, no sooner had he said "amen," than the fish spit him out on dry land. God had decided to give Jonah a second chance. As one preacher put it, "God doesn't shoot deserters. He offers them a second chance." Or, as the scripture puts it, "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.'"

This time, Jonah went where God sent him. But apparently he went with an attitude. He still wasn't happy about the assignment God had given him. He went where God sent him, but grudgingly, half-heartedly. I have a mental image of Jonah delivering God's message only once and under his breath, hoping no one

would actually hear.

For Jonah didn't want the people of Nineveh to repent and get the second chance from God that he himself had gotten. The Ninevites were Assyrians. They were notorious for their idolatries as well as for their cruelties. They had invaded and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

But Jonah did speak the eight words God had given him: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" But somehow everyone heard him—and everyone believed his message. From the peasants all the way up to the king, all the Ninevites repented their evil ways. They showed their repentance in the typical Middle Eastern way—by fasting, wearing sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. The king said, "Who knows? God may change his mind and not destroy us." And indeed, this is exactly what happened. God did change his mind. He decided to give the Ninevites a second chance.

And this really ticked off Jonah. Jonah became so angry that he prayed again to the Lord, saying, "This is why I fled to Tarshish...I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing...please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah was rather like the man who was told that he could have anything he wanted, but his neighbor would get double what he got. So the man wished that he would be blind in one eye. Jonah so hated the Ninevites that he preferred to die, rather than see them receive a second chance and live.

The story ends with God once again having the last word. And what a word it is. God said, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" In other words, "Duh. I'm God. I created those people and those animals. I care about them. I love them. Sure, they screw up and do nasty and often evil things. cause they haven't a clue about how good life could be if they'd just listen to me. They don't know their right hand from their left. But it's my very nature to love, to forgive, to show undeserved love—grace."

Indeed, we hear God speaking this same message in the story of the Prodigal Son. Sure, the prodigal son screwed up royally, but the father, who of course is

representative of God, didn't punish or even scold him. Instead, the father forgave his wayward son and gave him a second chance. He even killed the fatted calf to celebrate his repentance and return.

A Sunday school teacher once told her boys and girls the story of Jonah, and then she asked them what the message of the story was. One little girl spoke up, saying, "Never get on a boat. Take a plane." But, of course, we know that the message of the story is much deeper than this. While there are actually lots of messages in the story, one important message obviously has to do with the truth that each one of us, like Jonah, is sent by God. Through the story of Jonah, God is speaking to you and to me.

First, he wants us to know that he sends each one of us on assignments. Each one of us is called to be God's prophet—his mouthpiece.

Second, so that there's no doubt about where it is that God's sending us and what it is that God's sending us to do, he makes it clear that our sending has to do with extending his amazing grace. The story is clearly about God's grace and the role that we are to have in God's grace. Just as the President appointed and sent the two special envoys this week to restore peace, so too God sends us to others who need to hear about and experience his mercy, forgiveness, and grace. God's family is wider than we can grasp, for it's everyone!

Third, God wants us to think about how we're responding to the assignments he has given us. Are we obeying him, or are we running as fast as we can in the opposite direction? To answer this question, we have to be honest about our prejudices and our predispositions. We are people who like listening to TV and radio shows where certain people are separated out and written off as Ninevites. Seventy percent of us Christians support the death penalty. If God sent us to offer a murderer like King David or the Apostle Paul a second chance, would we go? If he sent us to offer a second chance to a coward who stood by and watched while an innocent man was tortured, if he sent us to a man like Peter, would we go?

No doubt God is sending us to such people. He's certainly sending us to those who have made bad choices--those who need to experience his forgiveness, mercy, and grace. We, like Jonah, may not think that they are deserving of a second chance--we may find their past behavior reprehensible. We may think, "You made your own bed. Now it's only right that you have to lay in." Not wanting them to have a happy

ending, we may want to run as fast as we can in the opposite direction. So, are we running away from the tough things God would have us do on his behalf, or are we obeying him?

Fourth, I think God wants us to realize that those who are offered second chances often turn out to be his most faithful servants. Because God offered David, Paul, and Peter a second chance, they went on to do incredible things for him and for others. And, in closing, let us consider one of many modern day examples of this same truth.

George Wallace was a man who lived the first part of his life in a manner that many of us find despicable. At his inauguration as Governor of Alabama in 1963, George Wallace proclaimed, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" That same year, he blocked the door of the registrar's office at the University of Alabama, trying to halt National Guardsmen who were there to help enroll the university's first two black students.

Now, I don't know who God sent to tell George Wallace to repent and change his life, but someone must have been sent by God—someone who answered God's call and went to George Wallace. For in 1983, Wallace was genuinely converted to Christ and sincerely repented of his earlier views on race. As a result, Wallace had the courage to change and say, "I was wrong."

In his last term as governor of Alabama, Wallace appointed black officials to state offices. He even reached out to Arthur Bremer, the man who had tried to assassinate him in 1972. He wrote to Bremer in prison, telling him, "I love you."

On September 13, 1998, George Wallace died, at the age of 79. A day prior to his funeral, an estimated 25,000 mourners, almost as many blacks as whites, walked reverently past his coffin in the Alabama capitol building.

Oh, the persons whose lives might be changed for the better if we don't run away from going to them and telling them of God's grace. And so, may we not be reluctant prophets. Rather, may we constantly be watching and listening for the persons to whom we are being "sent by God." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; January 25, 3009