

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Epiphany 3

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

More than a fish story

—Jonah 3:1-5,10

When you think of the Prophet Jonah, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Of course it's Jonah being swallowed by the big fish. Some people say "Jonah and the whale," but a big fish is more accurate. Some people are convinced that Jonah in the belly of the big fish is just a fish story, a cute tale or a Hebrew legend; after all, where would a fish big enough to swallow a man come from, and who can survive for three days in the belly of a fish? Yet Scripture tells us this is precisely what happened, that the LORD specially prepared this fish to swallow Jonah, and God miraculously kept Jonah alive during his time in the belly of the fish. But Jonah is more than a fish story in another sense. The book of the Prophet Jonah is not primarily about Jonah being swallowed and kept alive in the belly of a big fish—although that's a very interesting event. No, the book is about a prophet who didn't want to be a prophet, about a man of God who didn't want to do what God told him to do, about a preacher who didn't want to preach.

"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.'" In Jonah's day, the Assyrian Empire was the great power on the world stage. The Assyrians were sweeping across the Middle East, murdering, plundering, pillaging, raping, and subjugating everything in their path. They committed horrendous atrocities against the victims they conquered. Their acts of cruelty and violence were known throughout the world. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

Jonah had no desire to preach anything to the Assyrians, so he ran. He went in exactly the opposite direction, to Joppa on the coast, where he boarded a ship for Tarshish, at the far western end of the Mediterranean Sea. He wanted to get as far away from Nineveh as possible, and as far from the LORD's call as possible. That's how he ended up in the belly of the big fish. A huge storm struck the boat, Jonah was identified as the reason for the storm, and the men on the boat threw Jonah overboard. As he sank into the depths he was snapped up by the fish, and three days later the LORD commanded the fish to disgorge Jonah back 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." This time Jonah obeyed and went to Nineveh, but as the saying goes, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Jonah still didn't want to be there. So he went into the city and proclaimed: *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* Take closer look at Jonah's message to the Ninevites. There was no call to repentance that's recorded for us. Maybe Jonah told the people to repent and turn from their sin, but there's no record of him saying that. There is certainly no message of grace. There is no promise of forgiveness, no hope, no message that the Lord will graciously receive them, forgive their sins and set aside the destruction. No, that's not what Jonah preached. According to the book of the prophet, all he said was, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." You can almost hear a man smelling of fish guts and seaweed saying with great glee, "Forty more days, and you people are going to get what's coming to you. Forty more days, and God is going to wreak vengeance on you and repay you for all your violence and wickedness. Forty more days—and I can hardly wait!"

Jonah's words did not have the effect he hoped they'd have. Jonah hoped he would be ignored, perhaps even scorned and ridiculed for his message. But that's not what happened. *The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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 preached. Nineveh repented, and that was not what Jonah hoped to see. How do we know? Because Jonah himself reveals his true motives. Scripture tells us, "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'" Jonah then went out to the east of the city, built himself a little shelter and waited for the Lord to deliver destruction. God said to his prophet, "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Jonah just wanted to die. And that's where the book of Jonah ends. Jonah is mad. God is merciful. End of story.

You can see what I mean when I say that Jonah is more than a fish story. It's about a desire for revenge on one's enemies. It's about a self-righteous desire that other people get what's coming to them. It's about anger at God because God is merciful.

Do you ever feel as Jonah did? Do you ever look at someone who has hurt you or wronged you, and think, "I hope God gives you what you deserve"? Have you looked at people whose thinking, whose ways, whose lifestyles are openly evil, and think, "I hope you get what's coming to you!" Do you ever wish God would rain down fire from heaven on your enemies? Have you ever told someone they can go to hell—or at least wished it? Have you ever become impatient with God because he's taking too long and letting things go way too far before he steps in and gives people what they justly deserve? When the opportunity arose to take a stand against what is wrong, have you ever turned tail and gone in the opposite direction? Have you ever been indifferent and unconcerned about the plight of the perishing, about the looming destruction of those who are dying in unbelief? I have. All the above. So have you. The mind of Jonah—spiteful, vindictive, vengeful— is something that you and I know very, very well.

But from the book of Jonah we learn more than a fish story. There are two lessons we want to learn from this account. The first is simple and obvious: Repent. That's Christianity 101. That's the first message Jesus himself preached as he went through the towns of Galilee at the beginning of his ministry: "Repent and believe the good news!" Turn away from sin. Leave behind wickedness and disobedience against God. Turn away from sin and turn toward God. Repentance is not just groveling in humility, sackcloth and ashes. Martin Luther said in his first of the 95 Theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ commanded 'repent,' he willed that the whole life of the believer be one of repentance." Repentance is a complete change of mind, a total change of heart, a completely new way of thinking. It's a new heart and mind that is given to you and me by God's Holy Spirit. That's the first lesson: Repent!

The second lesson for us from Jonah is a lesson about God and who God is. He is the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. The atrocities of the Ninevites defy human comprehension—stark and graphic examples of man's inhumanity to man—but the grace and mercy of God were bigger than all that wickedness. God relents from bringing destruction. God forgives. This is how great God's love is for a human race that is fallen, wicked, rebellious, debauched, and evil to its core: God himself stepped in to save us! God himself took on human flesh, only without sin, to bear the burden of our sins in his body on the tree of the cross. Jesus suffered the worst of man's inhumanity to man, as he was pierced and nailed to an instrument of torture, humiliation and abject shame, so that by his wounds we are healed. By his blood we are cleansed. By his life sacrifice is made. And just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man was three days and three nights in the belly of the earth, before Jesus burst from the tomb on Resurrection Sunday to declare mankind's sin forgiven and death destroyed.

This is Jesus' message of God's grace to you: Repent and believe the good news! It does not matter what atrocities you have committed. It does not matter what horrible places you have been. It does not matter what shameful, embarrassing, degrading, sins you have become guilty of. It does not matter how many times you have stumbled and fallen into the same sin over and over again. For spite, for vengeance, for turning tail and running, for coldhearted indifference—for these sins God's Son, Jesus Christ, suffered and died. God's grace is bigger than your sin! Jesus died for the least of sinners and for the worst of sinners (that would be me). Your sins are forgiven, for Jesus' sake! Repent and believe the good news! Turn to Jesus and revel in his love and his forgiveness.

The world we live in today is gritty and messy, violent and ugly, filled with spite, malice, rage and vengeance. This is the world that God so loved that he gave his only Son. This is the world of sinners for whom Jesus bled and died. God's grace is the undeserved love that defies human comprehension, that rescues the lost and justifies the wicked. That's more than a fish story. Amen.