

“Learning the Lesson”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Jonah (September 22)

Primary Text: Jonah, St. Matthew 12:38-41, St. Luke 11:29-32

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Commemoration of Jonah, is the Bible Book that bears his name as well as references from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jonah, and us, are often slow to grasp what God is teaching us, but we are to as the title of the sermon states to be “Learning the Lesson.”

When we talk about what we can learn from the Book of Jonah, we would probably think of the most well-known aspect of it. The “Cliff Notes” version of the book would go like this...God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah doesn’t want to, so he gets on a ship going the other way. God sends a big storm. Jonah is thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale, and then 3 days later coughed up on shore. He then goes to Nineveh as God had commanded him. So the obvious teaching point, the lesson, is that we need to be obedient to God. We cannot run away from God because He is everywhere. Disobeying God has consequences and it is best to listen to Him in the first place. That sounds simple enough and is certainly a big take-away from the story of Jonah. But is there more to this book? Are there other lessons to be learned here?

Of course there are other lessons to learn. In fact, the swallowing of Jonah by the whale is just a part of this relatively short four-chapter Bible book. A key theme of Jonah is obedience, but God’s forgiveness and love is also emphasized.

In summarizing the Book of Jonah, let's go back to the beginning- where our First Lesson began. We are introduced to Jonah, the son Amittai. He is told to go to Nineveh, which is described as a "great" but "evil" city. He is told to call out against Nineveh, essentially tell them that they are wicked and stand under God's judgment. What else do we know about Jonah and Nineveh?

Jonah is actually mentioned in one other place in the Old Testament, 2 Kings Chapter 14. From this we know that he was a prophet, as Jonah is classified as one of the "minor prophet" books. He delivered a favorable prophecy to King Jeroboam II. So likely he had a good position in Israel. He was a Jew and his hometown was actually only about an hours walk from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Based on the years of Jeroboam II's reign and other details in the book, the historical setting is about 790 BC.

What of Nineveh? It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, one of the enemies of Israel. Today its ruins are found near the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. So they would be pagan Gentiles. Nineveh was one of the greatest cities of the world at the time. It and its suburbs sprawled out for about 60 miles and contained up to a million people. The Assyrians were not only a powerful, but violent people. Ancient writings show that they skinned people alive, buried enemies alive, and even impaled them on poles in the hot sun to die.

So with these facts in mind, it is understandable why Jonah would not want to go to Nineveh-especially to bring a message telling them how bad they were. Jonah was a Jew, one of God's chosen people and they were idol-worshipping Gentiles who were enemies of Israel. Jonah had good standing in Israel. He was being asked to leave that behind and go to hostile territory.

So of course, as we know, Jonah attempts to run away from God and His call. He boards a ship headed to Tarshish, which was in the exact opposite direction that God wanted him to go. What fools we are if we run from God. Because, just as David wrote in Psalm 139, *“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”* Jonah will not get far.

God sends a great storm upon the ship that Jonah is on. The sailors try every method of seafaring they know to survive it, even tossing cargo overboard, and each praying to his own god for rescue. None it works. Eventually it becomes obvious that this is a judgment against Jonah as to why this is happening. Jonah is thrown overboard and immediately the storm ceased (1:15).

Now I told you that Jonah is not only about obedience, but in showing the mercy of God. God shows great patience and mercy with Jonah throughout the book, giving him chances to learn his lesson. But the broader lesson is that God wants to show His mercy, forgiveness, and grace to all through faith in Him. God in both the Old and New Testament is always trying to teach the Jews that His ultimate purpose is not only to provide salvation for them, but the whole world. Remember that the Ninevites were wicked pagans, but God wanted them to realize their sin and repent, sparing their city from destruction. We also see God’s at work with the crew of the ship. They, like the Ninevites, were pagan Gentiles.

The crew is striving to save the ship, and by extension Jonah, with their efforts. But what is Jonah doing? Look at 1:5, he is sleeping! (must have been a pretty sound sleeper) Even after it is determined that Jonah is the cause for this storm that threatens to kill them all and Jonah volunteers to

be thrown into the sea they still try to get to land without having to throw him overboard (1:12-13). These pagan Gentiles show great care and concern. And they don't stay pagan Gentiles either. Notice that by verse 14 they are not calling out to their false gods anymore, but the Lord. And after the storm ended, they sacrificed to the Lord and made vows (v16). God has already worked through Jonah's rebellion and saved, physically and spiritually, a bunch of Gentile sailors!

And of course we have now reached the part of the Jonah account that Christians have known since childhood. The whale, actually literally a "great fish" in Hebrew and a "sea monster" in the Greek when Jesus references it in the Gospels swallows Jonah whole. Jonah calls to God with a prayer, a psalm, from the belly of the great fish in Chapter 2-we read this today. Jonah has realized his disobedience has had great consequences. Once again, we see God's mercy as after 3 days Jonah is vomited up on the shore. No doubt covered in some nasty stuff, but very much alive.

For some reason this has been a troublesome part of the book of Jonah. People have doubted that a sea creature could swallow a person alive and that he could live in the belly for three days. Historically speaking, there are some rare cases where people have been swallowed by large sea animals, especially sperm whales and survived. But the point here is this is a miracle from God. If God can part a sea, walk on water, create the world, be incarnate in the womb of virgin, raise the dead, and a whole other host of miracles it should not be hard to believe that He could do what He did with Jonah. We see in St. Matthew and Luke that Jesus references the saga of Jonah as a literal event.

In Chapter 3 verses 1-2, we see the Word of the Lord come to Jonah a second time with very similar words to Chapter 1:1-2, "*Arise go to Nineveh,*

that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” This time Jonah obeys as he *“arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.”* After his experience of failing to escape from God by the Lord bringing a storm and a three-day prison in the belly of a great fish, it looks like he has learned his lesson! There are several points in the Book of Jonah, where it could end and we say “and they all lived happily ever after”. This is one of those points, but of course it is not the end of the book of Jonah.

Jonah goes and delivers the message from God to Nineveh. He thunders the Law against their sin. He tells them that in 40 days, God was going to destroy the wicked place (3:4). Amazingly, the people of Nineveh “believed God” (v5). These idol-worshipping and violent pagans repent. No less than the King himself calls for repentance. A fast is declared. Sackcloth and ashes are donned. We read 3:10, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”* Again, if we were writing a story we could end it here. Jonah has learned his lesson. The people of Nineveh have learned their lesson. God has shown His power and mercy. A happy ending!

But the story of Jonah does not end here. Chapter 4:1, *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”* He even says in verse 3 that he wishes God would just kill him he was so upset. This is where you just want to throw your hands up and yell in exasperation, “Jonah!” What is this guy’s problem?! You see, he wanted the Ninevites to be destroyed. He didn’t like them. He didn’t want God to show mercy to them. In fact, He basically says he knew this is what God would do because, *“I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast*

love, and relenting from disaster.” (v2). Woe unto us if we, like Jonah, want God’s grace for ourselves or people just like us-but not for others.

Chapter 4 goes on with some more back and forth between God and the bitter Jonah. It ends with Jonah still upset and God admonishing him that he should have mercy on Nineveh as God has had mercy on Jonah. So Jonah has learned the lesson that He can’t run from God and must do what God says. But He has *not* learned the lesson that God’s love and mercy extends to all who will receive Him with repentant faith. This is a lesson we all must learn and take to heart, thus the theme of our hymns for today.

But with the way that Jonah ends it begs the question, did Jonah ever learn this lesson? The Bible does not tell us specifically. However, we can be hopeful that he did. Traditionally, it is believed that Jonah himself is the author of the book that bears his name. This would point that after the fact, he is writing to future readers about how foolish he was and we can learn from his errors. Also, in the ruins of Nineveh today there is a mound that covers 40 acres and is 100 feet high. It is believed to be the burial site of Jonah, indicating that he continued to work for the Lord in Nineveh-thus learning the lesson that even pagan Gentiles are not beyond redemption and loved by God.

There is one more aspect to learning these lessons from Jonah. Because about 800 years after Jonah, the people of Israel had still not learned the lessons of what true obedience to God was and that God had chosen them to be a blessing to the Gentile nations. Jonah is what is called in theology a “type and shadow” of Jesus Christ, meaning that we see characteristics of the Jonah account and Jonah himself pointing to the coming fulfillment in Jesus. We know this because in our Gospel Lesson

from St. Luke 11, as well as in St. Matthew 12:38-41 Jesus speaks specifically of the “sign of Jonah”.

First some similarities between Jesus and Jonah: They were both sent to preach repentance, both sent to preach God’s Word to Gentiles, they both spent 3 days confined somewhere-Jonah in the belly of the great fish and Jesus’ body in the tomb and Jesus specifically draws a parallel with this in Matthew 12. Finally, they were both signs to their generation and ours as well.

But as Jesus Himself says in St. Luke 11:32, “behold one greater than Jonah is here”. Jesus is greater than all the prophets. His work is more miraculous than any ever seen.

The Lord called Jonah to preach His Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God’s own sermon to us all.

Jonah ran away and the Jesus ran to His people.

Jonah fled from his calling to preach repentance. Jesus did not, but purposely sought to preach repentance.

Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord, Jesus always sought the presence of His Father.

The Lord put Jonah in the belly of the great fish because Jonah refused to preach repentance to Nineveh. Jesus was put into the belly of death “the heart of the earth”, because He preached repentance.

The Lord punished Jonah in the belly of the great fish. Jesus took on the punishment which He did not deserve, that makes us whole. He was not punished for His sin, for He had done none, but He became sin in our place.

The Lord heard Jonah cry out in prayer in the belly of the great fish to be saved and was heard. Jesus cried out, not for His salvation, but ours and was heard: It is finished.

Jonah was imbittered at God's grace for the Ninevites in that they repented and the Lord saved them. Jesus rejoices always over the repentance of one sinner.

Jonah was thrown into the depths of the sea to save sailors on the ship. Jesus was thrown into the depths by us all, thereby forgiving us all and so saving all those who by faith believe on His name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.