

“God’s Word Works”

Jonah 3:1-5

In our Old Testament lesson, we read about one of the, you might say, anti-heroes of the Bible. Jonah was the reluctant prophet. In our text, we read of the second time the Lord came to Jonah commanding him to preach to the people of Nineveh. But it’s the events following the first command that usually get the most attention.

Instead of going to the people of Nineveh and telling them of God and His will for them, Jonah booked passage on a boat heading for Tarshish. Tarshish is modern day Spain. For the ancient world, Tarshish was the end of the earth. Only the sea lay beyond there.

In our Sunday morning Bible class, we are at the point in Paul’s letter to the Romans where he is planning on going to Spain, for a very different reason. Paul wants to go to Spain for the opposite reason that Jonah wants to go there. Paul wants to share the good news of salvation and the forgiveness of sins with Gentiles who do not know the Lord.

Jonah would do anything rather than preach to such people, especially those from a nation that he particularly didn’t like. After all, the city of Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were a notoriously cruel and ruthless people. The Assyrians invented crucifixion as a form of punishment. The Assyrians were the ones who

would later carry off the 10 Northern tribes of Israel never to be heard from again.

Jonah did not want to share God's Word with them. He did not think that they deserved it. Jonah knew what the Assyrians were like. Either his message would be received and God's mercy would be poured out on those undeserving sinners. Or his message would fall on deaf ears and he would probably end up being tortured to death in some gruesome manner – as was the custom of the Assyrians to do to their enemies.

It may be surprising to those who don't know of Jonah beyond that he was swallowed by a great fish, but Jonah's biggest concern was that the people of Nineveh would repent and God would pour out His mercy upon them.

Jonah knew how God's Word works. The power of that Word is not dependent upon the eloquence of the speaker, nor upon the supposed innate value of the hearer. God's Word works because it is God who makes it work.

There are those who are the nicest neighbors, pillars of the community, helpful, giving, yet have no time or use for God. Then there are those who are a little rough around the edges, who outwardly appear to be on the fringe of acceptable society, yet God works marvelous deeds in their lives. We see it all the time.

Jonah thought that he knew to whom God's Word should be preached. And he was sure that the Assyrians did not deserve to hear it. And he could make the excuse that it would not make a difference; they were far too evil; so why bother trying? The reality is that Jonah knew that God's Word could overcome the evil of those people. And he didn't want

them to hear that message of salvation. He hated them that much.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus explains to His new disciples that they will be fishers of men. These former fishermen would understand the analogy. When Peter, Andrew, James, and John cast their nets into the Sea of Galilee, they never knew which fish they were going to bring into their boats. They put their trust in the Lord that they would be successful and that He would provide. They were to put that same effort and trust into their discipleship. Besides, some of the disciples themselves were a little rough around the edges when you look from whence they came.

Now Jonah, after initial reluctance, and most likely much prayer (he did have three days in the belly of the fish to think about it), Jonah proclaimed God's Word of impending doom for the city. If the people rejected God's message and did not repent and turn from their ways, they were doomed.

And much to the amazement of Jonah, and also to his chagrin (again, Jonah was not happy that God did not destroy Nineveh. He still saw them only as the enemy), [but] Nineveh was spared.

God's grace and compassion was poured out upon their repentant hearts, and His anger relented. God spared that generation, and most assuredly welcomed those who remained faithful into the kingdom of heaven.

Jonah never thought this was something that could or should happen. After all, they don't deserve it. Look at all the rotten evil things they did during their lives up to this point. But the Lord is full of compassion. When He turns us to Himself, He forgives our wickedness and remembers our sin no more.

It does not matter what the people of Nineveh did in the past. All that matters is that they heard the Word of God, believed that Word, trusted in the Lord, were turned from the evil of their lives, and received God's forgiveness and promise of life.

They may have been a little rough around the edges, but they were still God's children. Because of our sinful nature, we are all a little more than just tainted or tarnished in the sight of God. In the catechism, we talk about our sinful nature as "the total corruption of our human nature, passed down from Adam through our parents."

Jonah's problem was that He did not understand the fullness of our depravity. He assumed God acted like we do and judged our worthiness by how we measure up to those around us. "Compared to them, I'm doing pretty good." When you think about the worst sinner you know, and you don't consider the person in the mirror as an option, you might want to take a closer look and examine yourself as St. Paul urges us to do.

On the contrary, God fully understands that we are totally corrupt and have nothing of value to offer Him, but He loves us anyway. And He sent His Son to free us from our corruption, depravity, and death.

Like the people of Nineveh, we are blessed in the hearing of the Word of God. The power of that Word is not dependent upon the eloquence of the speaker, nor upon the supposed innate value of the hearer. God's Word works because it is God's Word and He is full of compassion.

Amen.