

Third Sunday in Epiphany
January 26, 2003
Jonah 3:1-5,10

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Don't Be Surprised; the Word Works!

1. By God's power
2. For man's salvation

NIV Jonah 3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city-- a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." 5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 10 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.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For all the problems that the prophet Jonah had, doubting the power of the word of the LORD wasn't one of them. Jonah may have rebelled against the LORD's call to carry his message to Nineveh in Assyria and boarded a ship in a vain effort to "flee from the LORD." Jonah may also have been a pretty dismal example of the kind of heart one hopes to see in a missionary. He's almost devoid of passion to share the good news of the Messiah with people of every race and language. He was not a man who was inclined to say with the apostle Paul, **"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."** (1 Cor. 9:22) Jonah didn't even seem to have a strong desire to live. When a storm on the Mediterranean Sea descended on that vessel in which he was trying to flee from the LORD, he advised his shipmates to toss him into the sea in order to calm the storm. His only realistic expectation had to be that he'd drown. And later when his mission to Nineveh proved to be a roaring success, he was so upset that he asked God to take his life.

So here's a thumbnail sketch of Jonah: He didn't want to follow the LORD's call. He didn't have a burning desire to save souls—not Assyrian souls at least. He didn't even seem to want to live very badly. Sounds like the perfect man to call as missionary to Nineveh, right? Not by a long shot! So why did the citizens of the great city of Nineveh at some time in the 9th century B.C. repent *en masse* of their violence, wickedness, and unbelief? Should we attribute this phenomenal mass conversion to the passionate, charismatic, and joy-exuding ministry of Jonah? I think we've pretty well ruled out that explanation. There's only one way

to explain what happened in Nineveh. It was the Word that Jonah proclaimed. The Word of God's law broke pride-hardened hearts in pieces. The Word of God's gospel comforted the brokenhearted and assured them of God's compassionate desire to save. Based on our observation of what happened when Jonah preached the Word in Nineveh we say this morning, **Don't be Surprised; the Word Works!** the Word works 1] by God's power, and the Word works 2] for man's salvation.

1. By God's Power

It says here, *"Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to that great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'"* To understand this scene you have to go to that place in your brain where you store your memory of powerful odors. Select the odor of a fish market, specifically of fish that are past their prime selling date. Got it? Good! That's what Jonah smelled like just then. Dripping wet and stinking like the innards of a fish, he had discovered that not only could he not run from the LORD, he could not even die by drowning. Though his shipmates finally took Jonah's counsel and heaved him into the churning ocean, Jonah did not drown. That was because the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah spent three days in that fish's gullet, wet, dark, frightened, and wrapped in seaweed. It was like being buried, and in that Jonah became a type of Christ and his resurrection. Jesus said, **"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."** (Matt. 12:40)

So here's Jonah, back where he started from, chastened, and hearing a familiar voice: "Go to Nineveh. Proclaim my message."

It's easy to be hard on Jonah, but I'm not sure very many of us would have bouncing around in eagerness at the chance to preach the Word of the LORD in Nineveh. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was a hostile place for a Jew like Jonah. The Assyrians were as cruel as they were powerful and their war machine rolled on unhindered by any moral constraints. Strong men got weak in the knees at the word that the Assyrians were coming. To get a handle on this, imagine that Iraq was as powerful as our country and simmering with hatred for Christians—and that it was looking threateningly in our direction. How eager would you be to go to Baghdad as a missionary? And later in history, Jonah's reservations would be validated as the Assyrians rolled into Israel and crushed the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.

But there was something else that was holding Jonah back. These people were Gentiles. It simply wasn't clear to Jonah that the God he worshiped wanted to include non-Jews in his promises, too. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that God was making it clear to Jonah, but Jonah just couldn't believe it. He equated the kingdom of the LORD with the nation of Israel. He was like many Christians

today in that he felt no particular compulsion to share his hope of salvation outside the circle of his friends, or at most, outside his own culture.

But there was something about a ride in the belly of the fish that got Jonah to broaden his perspective. It says here, “*Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*” It’s amazing. This big city with hundreds of thousands of unfriendlies hears Jonah’s message and takes it to heart. Of course, the message is abbreviated here. Jonah must have said more than a tape loop of, “Forty more days and Nineveh will repent.” That was the law message. There was gospel, too, as sweet and gracious as anything they ever heard in Israel and the people of Nineveh, from the king to the lowliest servant, repented. They sat in dust. They wore sackcloth. They even put sackcloth on their animals and made their animals fast. They were sorry for their sins and they sought God’s compassion.

You probably know that some people struggle with the book of Jonah. Jonah has more miracles per verse than any other book of the Bible. And it’s particularly the miracle of a fish swallowing Jonah and the LORD maintaining Jonah alive in the belly of that fish that pulls the chain of the skeptics. “How can that be?” they want to know. But I would contend that the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is not that the prophet was swallowed by a fish and rescued from drowning. The greatest miracle in Jonah is that a whole metropolis of unbelievers repented of their wickedness and looked to the true God for compassion and forgiveness. Here, too, the skeptics would like to propose an alternate understanding. Maybe, they say, what happened is that Jonah succeeded in scaring the people of Nineveh and they temporarily backed away from their violent ways and climbed a few rungs higher on the ladder of morality. But, while that explanation may be easier to believe, it puts anyone who subscribes to it squarely at odds with Jesus. Jesus said, “**The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.**” (Matt. 12:41) In other words, expect to see people who were 9th century B.C. residents of Nineveh on the right side come Judgment Day. Those people truly believed.

How did that happen? It’s plain to see that it wasn’t anything in Jonah. It was the power of the word of the LORD. Notice what it says here after Jonah delivered his message: “*The Ninevites believed God.*” It was God working through his Word here. God was responsible for this massive conversion. His Word has awesome power!

We all confess that, don’t we. We know the passages well: “**So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to my empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.**” (Is.

55:11) And **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...”** (Rom. 1:16) We would never deny it: God’s Word is powerful. But why is it, then, that so often our lives tell a different story, a story of the Word neglected, underused, and even ignored? It’s truly mystifying: We have the Word, we steadfastly affirm its amazing power, yet we don’t always use it like we could. Who would knowingly refuse to take an amazing medication that would cure his physical illness? Yet we frequently keep at arm’s length the divine medication that can heal our souls. In our times of testing we turn elsewhere for guidance and consolation. The worries, riches and pleasures of life take precedence and the Word is choked out. Jonah here is calling us to repent of our penchant for paying lip service to the Word while failing to use it for the good of our souls and the souls of others. It’s the very Word that we too often despise that assures us that for Jesus’ sake our sins have been trampled underfoot, blotted out, and removed even from God’s memory. The Word declares it: through Jesus who died for us at Calvary and rose to live again after spending three days in the heart of the earth, we are forgiven.

The amazing spiritual transformation that took place in the citizens of Nineveh is beyond doubt a demonstration of the power of the Word of the LORD. But we shouldn’t think that this was God doing this great miracle simply because he can, just a kind of pyrotechnic display of his almighty power. What was behind this great conversion of Ninevites was God’s yearning for the salvation of the people of Nineveh. The Word works for man’s salvation.

2. For man’s salvation

The final verse in this chapter says, *“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.”* From the human perspective it appears that God changed his mind. He was bound and determined to overturn Nineveh, but then he “repented” (like the KJV says) and did not destroy the city. Actually, God knew all along what he was going to do. Those who repent of their sins, as the people of Nineveh did, can be assured that in the LORD they will find pardon and compassion. Day forty-one came and Nineveh was still standing because God had compassion on people who bowed before him in repentance.

What did Jonah think of all this? Well, he had found a spot east of the city where he could wait to see what was going to happen to Nineveh. And nothing happened. The people repented. There was no flaming destruction. Jonah was appalled and disgusted. He said 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.”** He’s quoting a famous passage from Exodus 34 where the LORD defines his name “LORD.” His reaction is essentially, “O LORD, are you telling me I’ve gone through all this just to see the city of Nineveh repent and be spared your angry judgment?” To which we can only say, “Well, yes!” This is not reason for moaning and wishing to

die, but for rejoicing that we have life. Without God's gracious compassion, none of us has anything better to expect than his unending anger and eternal destruction. Compassion is the name of our God—and we're glad that it is. Our mission, now that we've learned of God's compassionate forgiveness, is to lead others to know and believe in Jesus so that they can join us in living in the confidence of God's compassion and eternal life.

The past couple months have been time of reviewing our priorities as a church body, as we've found that we no longer have the resources for all the ministry we've been doing. Is our priority educating future pastors and teachers, or is our priority sending missionaries in this country and overseas? In reality, it's very hard to separate the two. If we aren't training pastors and teachers, we won't have missionaries to send. So in reality, whether we're operating a college and a seminary or reaching the lost in Malawi or Mexico, it's all part of our response to the Savior's command to make disciples of all nations. What must be behind it, though, is a heart like God's, a heart that beats with compassion for unbelievers of every land, a heart that is driven by a desire by all possible means to save some.

The power of the Word is not in doubt. We see that in Nineveh and in many other places besides—even in our own lives. The Word works. With the Word as our tool and a compassionate heart like the LORD's, great miracles of conversion still take place today. Amen.