

THE SCRIPTURE READING

From the Book of Jonah - see below

“One Whale of a Chance”

Dr. Eugene Lowry

July 19, 2009

Good morning. It is wonderful to be here again. We were here not too many months ago, and those of you who were there at the last evening of the session, it was several days long, as I remember, and if you were there that last service, you will remember something that I said, and I meant it, and I'm remembering it now as we come back, and that is, you know I do go around from time to time to other places to preach, to use the music, etc. Some of those are memorable, not all, but this is one of those memorable ones, and I told you that at the time of that last session that last evening. You just have such a remarkable staff, and the congregation is so incredibly welcoming and wonderful. When you come here, you feel like you're at home. And then the music that you have. Do you how blessed you are with the music program? I hope you do, it's terrific. It's wonderful. And you have a pastor who's very quick with words. You already heard about that, and what I want to add to that story, he did say, "I see anybody can get in," or something, "they'll let anybody..." and I did say, "I see you're here." You know, that's the last I saw of him for two services. I mean, as soon as I said that, he turned, left, and I've been looking for him for two services. I'm so grateful to see you this time. Actually he had a few other things to do during those two services, as you all well know.

Anyway, it's wonderful to be back. It feels happy, it feels good. I know not everybody invites me back, and you did. Somebody is probably thinking, "Maybe he'll get it right this time." At any rate, we're delighted to be here, and we turn to the text. I want to say something about the text. It's a most unusual one, it's one of the minor prophets. We have a bunch of major and then minor prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, and this is different from all the rest. That is, you know, generally, you'll hear something like this, as Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and the hem of the garment filled the tent" or somebody will say, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Or another one will say, "Shape up or ship out." Several of them said that, sort of. "Trouble's happening if you don't change your ways."

Anyway, all of them had to do with the pronouncements they made as oracles of God. Not so, Jonah. Jonah, this book, is a story about Jonah's trip. I should say two trips, as you'll hear about in a moment. But at any rate, there was, eight centuries before the birth of Christ, there was a prophet by the name of Jonah talked about in other parts of the Hebrew Scripture. This was written apparently about six centuries before. Some think it was pointing back and choosing this prophet as kind of an anti-hero. We really don't know for sure, but it certainly is strange, because as depicted here he's larger than life, and they sort of exaggerate, maybe, how strange he is. At any rate, I think of it as a parable similar to the parables of Jesus. You know, you ask, "The pharisee and the publican story - is that true?" and unfortunately, you have to say "yes" virtually every day. And so I invite you to hear the parable of Jonah, then we'll all walk through it

together after we hear it. I'm going to read most of the story. I am leaving out the self-serving prayer in the middle, and I'll tell you why when I get there.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'

The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

And that's about the time he starts to pray. He says, "You know, my life was dwindling away, and I thought of you." Well, that's nonsense. It's that his life was dwindling away, and the Lord thought of him. That's the difference. Anyway, so then it says the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Johah out upon the dry land.

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.' So Jonah set out and went to

Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

This is the word of the Lord.

Well, Jonah was walking down the road, minding his own business, as my mind imagines the story, when all of a sudden he heard this voice, which said simply, "Jonah!" He thought, "That must be the Lord speaking." It was, of course. "Jonah." "Yes, Lord," he responded. "Jonah, I've got a mission for you. I want to send you to another country to bring the Word." "Oh, sure, absolutely, absolutely, God. You just tell me where." "Well,

I'm going to send you to Nineveh." "Excuse, me, where?" "I want you to go to Nineveh to bring the Word." "Nineveh? The enemy's stronghold? You mean the ones who, a hundred and more years ago, killed off everybody here, defeated us terribly. Vicious, mean awful people. Nineveh?" "I want you to go to Nineveh." "Well, I'm on my way," he said, and he was. He was on *his* way, not the Lord's way. Instead of going north and east, to what is now northern Iraq, instead of going there, where God called him, he went south and west, into the middle of the Mediterranean. Why did he do that? Well, for two reasons. He hates the Ninevites, that's one, that's big. He hates the Ninevites. The other thing is, it's said twice or three times, that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

What do you mean? How can anybody talk about fleeing from the presence of God? Well, you understand, he wasn't just narrow-minded about the Ninevites, he was narrow-minded about God. He thought that if he could just get to the center of the Mediterranean, the cell phones wouldn't work, he'd be out of earshot. God couldn't contact him any more. He's going to be away from the presence of God. That's what he thought. So he went down to Jaffa, paid the fare, got on board the ship. No more did they get out from the shore when the storm happened, just sort of immediately. I mean big. They'd never had a storm like this ever before. Oh, huge, big. The sailors began to pray, each to their own God.

Meanwhile, Jonah's down in the hold of the ship, fast asleep. Now, that is peculiar, don't you know. The pagans were praying, but the holy one was asleep. Will the real religious leader please stand? Anyway, the captain asked, "Where is this guy?" "He's down in the hold of the ship." He goes down there, and he says, "Wake up! Why are you sleeping here in the middle of this terrible storm?" Pretty soon, they started asking, "Who are you? Where are you from? What is your country? What is your religion? Where do you come from, anyway?" Then also they cast lots. That's interesting. I don't think they had to cast lots, because just a bit later it says that he'd already told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. So anyway, about that time, the storm gets worse and worse and worse. And finally they say, "What can we do to you, that the storm will subside for us?" He said, "Just toss me overboard." I mean, the guy isn't good, but he is honest. He said the truth. He said, "If you throw me overboard, then the storm will be over." It's to their credit that they did not throw him overboard immediately. I want to tell you, if I'm in there, on the crew, and the storm happens and we start throwing everything off to lighten the load, and it's still worse and worse and worse, I'm going to say I'm not a pacifist any more. If he says, "If you throw me overboard, the thing will subside for you," hey, he's gone, let me tell you. They still tried to row. Notice, it didn't say row toward their destination. They tried to row back to land from which they came, Jaffa.

Somebody said, "The reason he said 'Throw me over' was that he didn't want the sailors to die." And somebody else said about the passing, "No that's not it at all. What it is, is that he'd rather die than to go to Nineveh," and I think that's probably closer. Anyway, finally they had no choice, no choice whatever, so one of them grabbed him by his arms and somebody else by the feet, and they started waving him, one, two, three, heave-ho and out into the deep. Two things happened. First, the moment he hit the water, the storm ceased just like that. But that's not all that happened, because about that time there

happened to be a sea-going celestial taxicab, along about that time, and just as he hit the water, it gobbled him whole. Let me say that theologically. That is to say, at the very moment that judgment was rendered, grace was offered. The judgment, being thrown into the water, he has it coming, the judgment happened. And grace... now, he probably didn't think being inside the fish was called grace, and that's why he started praying a self-serving prayer, talking about his relationship to God. He got real pious, when he was inside the fish.

At any rate, he was inside the fish for three days and three nights. Now I'm going to ask, can you imagine what it was like in there? All of a sudden, it was light but now it's dark. Totally dark. Nothing. And you start feeling around, gooey stuff, and then running into hard surfaces like old bones or something. He probably doesn't know exactly where he is at this point. And then of course the fish is breathing in and out, in and out. I'm going to ask you a question. Have you ever been seasick? If you have, you understand how it must have felt. In and out, back and forth, nausea I can well imagine, that mucous and stuff, it's more than I can imagine, how about you? A terrible three days and three nights, and finally, on the third day, I guess you could say the fish repented. It says it vomited him out, and he lands in the sandy beach, and the sand's all in the muck, and he's trying to get it off his arms and legs, and by this time the light... If you've been in a real dark room for five or ten minutes, you go out - the light just hits you like it's a weapon. He's struck and blinded by the light, and he's still going in and out, in and out. And about that time he hears a voice, and the voice very simply says, "Jonah." Oh, good heavens, it's the Lord Yahweh. "I thought I told you to go to Nineveh." "I'm going," and he did. What would you do, go back to a fish? What are the options here?

So he goes to Nineveh. Says it takes three days to walk across. He walks one day and starts talking, and it's very interesting what he says and what he doesn't say. Now, this is the evangelist who's supposed to go get them to repent, remember? That's the assignment. He does not mention God at all. He does not mention sin, even once. He does not talk about judgment. All he says is, "Forty days, and you're history." That's all he said, "Forty days and you're gone, you're out of here." It was only the king who was able to put it into theological language. People began to repent, and the king himself repented, and they were all in sackcloth and ashes, even dogs and cats wearing sackcloth and in ashes. I didn't make that up, it's right there in the Book. And they all repented. This proclamation was made, no water, nothing to eat, and they turned from their ways, and God decided not to do the evil he had in mind. Think of it - God changed God's mind. Isn't that striking?

In fact, in the story, you know, everybody repents except Jonah. Have you noticed? The sailors repented, didn't they? And the fish repented. And the Ninevites repented. And God repents. How about Jonah? No, no. Now, you'd have to think, normally - just try to think normally right now. If you were an evangelist going to Nineveh and they all repent, what a victory that would be, eh? I mean to say, praise God, such an unlikely place to repent anyway. They all repent. Think of the thrill. I can see him walk with great pride, with all that's happened with the power of God. No, he's angry. He doesn't like it at all. They deserved to die. He doesn't want them to live. He doesn't want them to repent. No

wonder he didn't say anything about God, sin, or judgement. Because he didn't want them to listen. He wanted them to stay the way they were, so they could die. That's what he has in mind, and he says so. And notice, he gives God a lesson, a theological lesson. He thinks he knows more than God. He says, "That's just what I thought of you in my own country, before we got here. I knew that you were gracious." That's disgusting. "Gracious and slow to anger, and merciful, and abounding and steadfast, eager to not do the judgment you planned." It just makes me sick. And God said, "Do you do well to be angry about this?" Jonah said. "I'd like to die." If you ask me, I think he's been dead a long time, spiritually. Anyway, he's just angry, and God tries to say, "Why would you be angry?" "I'd just like to die."

He had his theology right, he just hated it. There are three interpretations of the love of God in the Hebrew texts. One is gracious. That means empowered. Receiving grace is to be empowered. The word mercy is womb-love, to be surrounded with care. And abounding and steadfast love, *hesed* is the term, abounding and steadfast love means a love that won't let you go. Those are the three kinds of love that the Hebrews understood. Gracious empowering, and merciful womb-love, and enduring love that will never turn back. He knew the script, but he hated every line. "I'd like to die," he said. Pretty soon he sets up shop on the east of the city, and the text says that he's waiting to see what happens to the city. Now, we already know what's not going to happen. We already know what is going to happen. So does he. They've been arguing about it already. Why is he sitting there looking at the city? I'll tell you why. He is so smart, as he understands it, he thinks that God may yet change his mind again, and maybe kill them off after all. That's what he wants.

Can you imagine someone thinking that they know better than God? Jonah had it all figured out. Jonah knew who was inside the mercies of God, and who was out. He had it all figured out, and he knew that those Ninevites were the wrong country, the wrong religion, the wrong race, the wrong wrong wrong wrong. He understood who's supposed to it "in" and who's supposed to be "out". Now, you know, he's not the last Jonah in the world. Have you noticed that at all? Not the last one around. There are some of us who are really pious. We've figured out we're the "in" group, and we know who's the "out" group. The wrong religion. The wrong language sometimes. The wrong sex, the wrong political party, the wrong, wrong, wrong. We know who's going to be left behind, you understand. That's an attitude that some of us in religion seem to have. He is not the last Jonah in the world, let me tell you. So he's out there waiting, and the story stops. It doesn't end. It stops, except for other Jonahs that are yet to come, and there's Jonah. Jonah, who will not give up his hatred for those he thinks ought to go to hell. And God, who will not abandon his grace, mercy, and steadfast love. Now, there they are at loggerheads. Who's going to win this one? Well, it's no match, let me tell you, no match at all. Because you see, Jonah is mortal, God is eternal. There's the difference. Big difference. And you know that the hatred is not going to win the day. Finally, the love of God is going to win the day. And finally, you know, finally I know... Jonah will be glad that it's going to turn out the way it is. Jonah can be glad, and so can we.