

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12 (NLT)

Grace and Peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

As some of you are aware, and if you didn't know, that's okay, don't worry about it, PLEASE do NOT feel bad. I celebrated an anniversary of my birth this last week. It was one of those significant ones, the half century mark. When my wife Marianne began asking me several months ago how I wanted to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, I must confess that I really didn't WANT to celebrate my fiftieth birthday. First of all I really don't like a big fuss being made and I am already **vain** about my receding hairline, the monk spot in the back, and all this white stuff where there used to be a really, really nice dark BROWN beard (which went white when I started studying to become a pastor). I am not saying that I haven't been looking forward to saying that I am fifty (now this is where I need to stop and point out that my wife Marianne is significantly younger than I am. Some of you know that LAST January, of '08, there was a big celebration for her fortieth birthday. So, please don't call her fifty, I'll be in real big trouble. She was gracious enough to marry an old guy like me).

So anyway, finally I told her that, 'well I'd like to do well pretty much what we have been doing every January for the last several years, which is to go down to Florida to visit my folks (just outside of Tampa) and then to go across the other side of Florida and go visit The Mouse. But what I would like to do differently is to spend maybe a couple of extra days with my parents and maybe a day or two longer over at Disney World. And, that's what we did. Kind of. I said this at the end of the summer, and a few weeks later Marianne called me in my office all excited: "Okay, my parents and my sister are all on board and I've booked us a non-stop flight to Orlando. I've got our reservations for the entire week at Disney. I'm wondering though, since we are not going to go over to Tampa to see your parents, maybe we should invite them over to Disney World to be with us there?" Not exactly what I had expected for the big celebration of my birthday. But life doesn't necessarily go as we expect it to, does it? In our lesson tonight we've got a story about another guy for whom things did not go quite as he expected.

Our story of Jonah - and I mean by that, it's a story. It doesn't matter to me if it's a literal story or if it's an allegorical story. It's like saying "The story of the presidency of George W. Bush." It's the story of the prophet of Jonah. He's a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. (Just to remind you really quickly, when King Solomon dies, the nation of Israel divides in two. The much larger portion is the northern kingdom of Israel and it borders Phoenicia and Aram - which today we would know as Lebanon and Syria. But the much smaller kingdom in the south is Judah, and that's where Jerusalem is.) Okay so, Jonah comes from the northern kingdom of Israel so he's already got this chip on his shoulder because those northerners, they don't have the Temple of Solomon to worship in. They had to build themselves their own temple, so they're considered to be "pretenders" to Judaism. He's already got a chip on his shoulder.

When he finally does get a message from the Lord God Almighty, it's not the usual message that God gives to the prophets of, "Tell the people to straighten up. They have to turn around and

come back and follow me again because they have turned away.” No, he doesn’t get that kind of a message. What he gets instead is a message, Chapter 1 verse 2, (no we didn’t hear it tonight), “Go at once to Nineveh, this great city, and cry out against it; for its wickedness has come up before me.” He’s called to go tell the Ninevehites that God’s going to wipe them off the face of the earth. Normally that’s not the message that a prophet from the Lord God Almighty would get. But, Jonah, what does Jonah do? Jonah GETS this great message and hops the next boat going. . . West, which might indeed sound great, except Nineveh is over here to the East. Jonah hightails it to Tarsish. We’re not exactly sure which country Tarsish was in. It could be a city in Spain, it could have been a city over in Northern Africa; either way it’s **not** the way to Nineveh. Not exactly what we would expect a prophet of the Lord God Almighty to do.

On his way there they encounter a super-natural storm. A storm SO bad that the experienced sailors are chucking the cargo overboard to lighten the weight on the ship. Jonah, though, Jonah - this prophet of the Lord God Almighty, who’s running away from God - is ASLEEP down in the hold of the boat. Let me repeat that: the non-believing sailors recognize that a divine being is behind this proverbial “perfect storm,” they are scared for their lives and working frantically, *all the while* the prophet of the Lord God Almighty is asleep. Not exactly behavior that we might expect for someone who claims to be a servant of God.

The sailors FINALLY wake him up and give him an update on the situation at hand, and his response is, ‘well you know what you have to do.’ What would you think Jonah might do? He might say “Oh oh, God, of course I am sorry for running away. Turn the ship around, take me over to Nineveh.” No, his response is “Oh, well if you guys want to save your lives, you have to chuck me overboard, and that’s just fine, let’s do that. Throw me overboard.” The sailors, these non-believing sailors, they don’t want to do that. They work at trying to save Jonah. They throw more stuff overboard, but they realize this storm is so horrendous, that there is nothing that they can do short of tossing Jonah into the drink. Before they do this, though, they do ask God’s forgiveness.

Now it is at this point that I have to correct many people because most folks get it wrong: it’s NOT a whale. Jonah is swallowed by a Very Large Fish. Well how can this be? I don’t know how it can be, but God made this very large fish, it came up, swallowed Jonah up whole. So while there in the belly of the beast Jonah has this epiphany. (Oh, isn’t that great, we’re in the season of Epiphany. Jonah has an epiphany.) Jonah’s in the belly of the beast and he has this epiphany. He realizes that, ‘God I deserve everything that you throw at me, but I am praying now Lord, while I am here in this place of the dead (in the belly of Sheol, as he calls it).’ He’s praying “with the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay for deliverance belongs to you oh Lord!” (Jonah 2:9 NRS) That’s the end of Chapter 2. In other words, Jonah does finally what we think someone might do: Jonah repents.

But meanwhile, this denizen of the deep is directed by the divine presence to regurgitate the recalcitrant representative of the Lord God Almighty onto the shores of the Tigris, just outside of Nineveh, which is where our reading picks up tonight. We don’t know exactly WHAT Jonah looked like after his three day, two night all expense paid cruise on the Leviathan, but I am guessing that this guy came out smelling like fish guts and looking rather bleached. So he walks to the center of the bustling city of Nineveh, this ghostly white, stinking prophet of the Most

High, and he delivers his message: “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Then he heads to the outskirts of town to watch the show. Not exactly what one might expect. We might expect for Jonah to call like you would be calling the people of Israel or the people of Judah, to a time of repentance. No, he is going to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians. The Assyrians are these all consuming conquerors, these 1950's science fiction picture “The Blob”, that’s what the Assyrians are; or like in Star Trek theology, they are the Borg, they’re assimilating everybody. They just come and they gather up everybody and, bang, you’re Assyrian whether you like it or not. He goes to the capital city of the Assyrians. He delivers not a message to them repent, but it’s “you’re gonna get it!” And then he goes to sit down to watch the show.

But most of the story, I think, of Jonah is not what we might expect. In the four short chapters of the Book of Jonah, (which by the way I checked in five different versions of my Bibles and at the most it was four pages long and in many of it, it was only TWO pages long. Go home tonight, open up your Bible, look in the index and find out where Jonah is. It’s between Obadiah and Micah you don’t need to worry about that, most Lutheran pastors don’t remember that. But find the book of Jonah, four pages. You can read four pages without falling asleep before you go to bed tonight and then you can say, ‘I’ve read a book in the Bible.’ Go home and do that, it’s a fun story.) In these four short chapters in the book of Jonah so much is not what we would expect. For one thing Jonah comes off kind of as a bigot. He really wants to see the Assyrians dead. For him the only good Assyrian is a dead Assyrian. So when they **do** repent, as we heard tonight, when they do repent, it’s not at all what he expects. If you want to find out his reaction, go home and read chapter 4.

So what is it in your life that God is a part of that isn’t going the way you might expect? I read an article today about the survivors of US Airways Flight 1549, the Hudson River Miracle Flight, how now, many of those folks are having trouble coping because they’re still alive. They survive this experience and they are glad to be alive, but it wasn’t at all what they expected when they got up that morning and got on a plane just to fly down to Charlotte. How often in our lives do we have experiences that we don’t expect, but we know God is a part of? Maybe it’s a visit to the doctor. For many of us it is a visit to our investment account that is no longer. But still, does that mean God is not part of those things that we don’t expect?

Now, my birthday party, the great celebration at the land of the Mouse. It was the coldest week in Florida that they experienced in five years. On Wednesday, the 21st of January, my birthday, it reached a whopping 45f. Now I know that was warmer then what it was here, but not a whole lot. But we had four Brocks, we had two Blatchleys, my in-laws, we had my sister-in-law, my sister and her husband came in from Wisconsin, my parents and my mom’s sister Ida came in from Chicago. It was a much bigger group then what I had asked for or anticipated or expected, but we still had a good time. It was nice that they came. That we gathered together and celebrated, the fact that they put up with me, some of them for 50 years. God is not a big candy store, handing out only what we want or demand or insist upon. We don’t always get what we want or expect. And often times, we’re asked to do that which we don’t expect to be asked to do at all: To talk to a stranger; to pray - out loud, in front of people; Sometimes God calls us to love those whom we would really rather not associate with; Sometimes God calls us to do the unexpected of being gracious even when we are being put upon. But we are always called to be that witness of Christ’s love to others, just as Christ is a witness to us.

They are not lessons that are very easily learned. At some point each of us either have been or will be in the proverbial 'belly of the beast,' because we're human and we mess up. But the great news is that God continues to love us, regardless of how many times we don't do what we're asked, how many times we turn away, how many times we don't do what is expected of us. God continues to call us to live out our faith. To live out the promises of our baptism. To live out the witness of Christ as we celebrate it in the bread and the wine. It is part of who we are as Christians, and sometimes, whether we expect it or not, living out that faith is even better than anything we can ever imagine.

Amen.