

NHPC, Overland, MO—

"Jonah 1.0"

TEXT: Jonah 3: 1-10

Who is Jonah and why is he important? Most people probably know that Jonah was eaten by whale and survived. Other than that most people probably don't know much about him. Today I will share with you the basics of the Jonah story, Jonah 1.0

According to the ancient traditions, Jonah was a prophet, so the Book of Jonah is in the section of the Bible called the "Minor Prophets." But, Jonah was not really a prophet and the Book of Jonah does not contain any prophecy. Rather, it is a short story about a "reluctant missionary" sent by God to Nineveh to announce its destruction. I call Jonah "the reluctant missionary" because when he was told by God to go on a missionary journey he refused. Eventually, Jonah completed his God given task. When he went to Nineveh to announce its destruction, they repented and believed in God.

I am racing ahead to the end of the story. Why was Jonah eaten by a big fish, often assumed to be a whale? It all began when Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. He thought that he could avoid God's command by taking a boat to Tarshish.

However, the ship encountered a violent storm. When the crew found out Jonah was fleeing from God, they threw him overboard. In the most well-known part of the story, Jonah was swallowed by a "**large fish.**" For three days and nights, Jonah lived in the belly of the fish. While in the fish, Jonah offered a prayer to God for

"deliverance." God then instructed the fish to spew Jonah out on dry ground.

Today's scripture lesson, the third chapter of Jonah, picks up the story at this point. Once again, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys and he goes to Nineveh and announces God's message: **"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** (Jonah 3: 4b.) Please note: the only purpose of Jonah's visit to Nineveh was to make this announcement.

God did not instruct Jonah to tell the Ninevites to repent. Rather, Jonah's only task was to announce Nineveh's certain destruction. With a message like this from God, we can understand why Jonah was so reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place.

However, Jonah's message had a positive effect. The people of Nineveh believed in God. The king issued a decree proclaiming a fast. The people then put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. These actions traditionally signify repentance. However, the Biblical text never claims that the Ninevites actually repented. They embraced the outward symbols of repentance, but did they truly repent?

Cynics would suggest that outward symbols of repentance are meaningless. They may be only been a ploy to forestall God's anger.

Indeed, the king defended his decision to proclaim the fast with this observation: **"Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."** (Jonah 3: 9.)

The Ninevites were pushed backed into a corner and knew they faced certain destruction.

They were willing play out one more gambit: They would change their evil ways, or least their outward appearance, in a last ditch effort to convince God to relent from promised destruction. We might call this a “just in case theology.” Just in case God changes his mind, we will live!

What is true repentance? This question strikes at the very heart of the story of Jonah. God desires that we repent of our evil ways and then serve the divine purpose here on earth. How can we measure repentance? Do religious rituals like fasting or wearing sackcloth signify true repentance? Or, are they cynical attempts to manipulate God for our own benefit?

The same can even be said for acts of charity, compassion, and justice. Are these good works sincere attempts to serve God? Or, are they part of a plot to earn God's favor? Needless to say, only God knows for sure. This observation may strike at the heart of our problem. We want to know something only what God knows. We want to make judgments about other people.

And yet, we have tremendous difficulty judging the motives of others, let alone ourselves. How can we be really certain about the motives for any human action? Do we do good works only to serve God? Or, do we also serve ourselves, even as we also serve God?

There is another question equally important: Do we believe in a God who manipulates us into repentance by threatening to destroy us?

Surely threats of destruction cannot be the basis of true repentance. This also cannot be the basis of a true relationship with the God of love.

If God really loves us, God will not manipulate us into repentance by threatening to destroy us if we don't follow all the rules. Instead, our relationship with God is very much like human love relationships. You cannot force another person to love you by threatening to destroy them if they don't. This would not be true love.

As important as all this is, the Book of Jonah avoids questions about the true nature of human repentance by proclaiming that it is who God repents.

The RSV translation makes this point very clear: *"When God saw what [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented from the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."* (Jonah 3: 10.)

To say that God repented is very startling. Most people assume the point of the story is that the Ninevites repented. Furthermore, it goes against the very nature of God to say that God changed God's mind and relented. After all, God is not a wimp! If God says Nineveh will be destroyed, by God it will be destroyed! And yet, as the NRSV translation of this passage says, *"God changed his mind."* (Jonah 3: 10.)

Oddly enough, this puts the burden of repentance on God, not Nineveh. All of our questions about the true nature of Nineveh's conversion are pushed aside. because God repented. God *"changed his mind."* God

decided to turn away from the promised destruction of Nineveh.

We can only assume God's desire to love human beings is more important than divine consistency or projection of power. God is more inclined to save us than to destroy us. God does not manipulate us by promising to save us only if we repent. Rather, God repents and changes the divine mind because God loves us. God loves us even if it means that God appears weak and inconsistent by relenting from decisions already made.

This message is at the very heart of the Book of Jonah. Ironically, Jonah resisted this message which is at the center of the book which is named after him. In the fourth chapter, which we did not read this morning, Jonah became angry when God decided to spare Nineveh.

Why was Jonah so angry? It's hard to say for sure. Maybe he felt betrayed because he had risked so much to do what God wanted, but then God turned the tables on him. God tried to reason with Jonah, but without apparent success. From God's point of view, love of Nineveh was more important than divine destruction. From Jonah's point of view, this failure to destroy Nineveh revealed God's weakness and inconsistency. He did not agree with God's choice to make love more important than destruction.

Jonah was "the reluctant missionary." Even after his mission was accomplished, he was still reluctant. He did not accept God's decision concerning Nineveh. He thought he knew better than God. Throughout this story, Jonah resisted the will of God. He refused to accept God's decisions for his life.

He was a reluctant missionary to the very end.

Are we reluctant missionaries? This is an obvious question.

Most of us believe it is important to spread the good news of God's love throughout the world.

As Christians, we believe God's love was revealed perfectly through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, our duty is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. This is our calling, but many of us resist.

I am not suggesting more of us should be working in the foreign mission fields, although that might be a good idea. More overseas missions is not really the point.

Rather, we could do more to spread the good news of God's love right here where we are. But, like Jonah, we resist. We think we know better. We resist doing what God wants us to do here and now. Furthermore, we fail to support God when God decides that love is more important than destruction. We decide that certain people, or nations, are unredeemable and deserve destruction.

When God decides otherwise, we are angry because we cannot accept God's love for our enemies. Yet, there will be peace in the world only when we accept God's decision that love is more important than destruction.

We will live better and more peaceful lives when we embrace God's love for all people and accept God's decision that love is more important than judgment and destruction. Now more than ever, our world needs people who are willing to go into the

world to announce God's love. This is our responsibility in the world, to both proclaim God's love and do God's will. Let us pray.

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever."

AMEN.