

Holy Mackerel!

^{NIV} **Luke 11:27** As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."²⁸ He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."²⁹ As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah."³⁰ For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.³¹ The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.³² 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.

Holy Mackerel!

In recognition of 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, the adult Sunday School Class has just completed a few weeks of study about Calvin. There is a wonderful story about Calvin. He was a Protestant refugee from France. When he got to Geneva, he was pushed into being the minister of a congregation of other Protestant French refugees. The printing press had been invented but books were still quite expensive. The Bible was in the process of being translated into the common languages, but literacy was not universal by any means. People were hungry to hear the message of the Bible in their own language and sermons were very long in those days. Calvin would preach his way through a book of the Bible, a process that would usually take several months. But Calvin got crossways with the local authorities about the powers of church and state, an issue that we still struggle with today. Things got so bad that he had to leave town. Three years later, the political situation in Geneva had changed and he was invited back. He returned, and on the first Sunday after arriving back in Geneva, the church was filled. People were eager to hear what Calvin would say about the politicians who had run him out of town - and about the ones who had invited him back. He stepped up into the pulpit, opened the Bible, and said, "I believe we left off at the 12th verse in the ninth chapter. The text reads . . ." and thus he picked up the scripture where he had left off three years earlier. It shows his high regard for scripture and the importance of studying the Word.

Fast forward to our current day. A few years ago, I was privileged to hear Reverend Peter Gomes speak. He's the minister of the chapel at Harvard University. One might expect a dull lecture by some highly educated New Englander talking about minute theological details. What I heard was a man who was a preacher and a communicator, a man proclaiming the Word clearly. One statement he made is burned into my mind. He said that for many people, their Christian education stopped at about the fifth grade. We learned the simplified Bible stories that we heard in Sunday School as children, but we never got around to studying the Bible in greater depth. Many of us learned to add and subtract, so to speak, but we didn't go on to learn about percentages or interest rates or algebra. We learned the dates of the beginning and end of World War II, but not the causes of the war, or the consequences of the war. I think Reverend Gomes is right. I remember being a little surprised, when, long after I was an adult, I heard a sermon about the last chapter of Jonah. I remembered the story of "Jonah and the Whale" as we usually call it, but I didn't know that there was more to the story.

Just as Calvin would preach his way through a book of the Bible, today I intend to begin a series in the same fashion. I picked Jonah for several reasons. As our gospel lesson this morning pointed out, Jesus thinks Jonah is important. In addition, it's short, so this experiment will be short, too. After all, at this point in the church year, we need to get Jonah to Ninevah before Jesus gets to Bethlehem. Jonah's story is familiar, but it has more depth than we usually know or think about. I'm going to ask you to join in this effort with me. I'm asking you to read the book of Jonah this week. "Oh, no!" you say. "I'm not reading a whole book this week!" Well, book sounds like a lot, but in this case, it isn't. The book of Jonah is only four

chapters long. It's only 48 verses long. Depending on the page size and type size, it's somewhere between two and four pages long. It'll take you less than 15 minutes to do this, probably less than ten minutes.

Jonah is one of the so called minor prophets. The term minor has to do with the length of the work, not its importance. The nice thing that you'll notice is that Jonah is a narrative, a story. The other books of the prophets are filled with sermons and sayings and predictions and poetry and pronouncements beginning with the words, "Thus says the Lord . . ." But Jonah is a story and there's a lot less sermonizing in it, but there is a piece of poetry, as we will see. It's a book that's not so much about the message that the prophet declares to others, but more about the message of the prophet's actions.

"Jonah and the Whale" That's the name we give this story. I can vaguely remember some sermons about this when I was a boy. Maybe it's all that I remember, but it seems like the point of the sermon was always that there wasn't any whale! Whales eat krill, little tiny sea creatures about the size of shrimp. There's no way that a whale could swallow a man. And besides, the Bible clearly says fish, not whale. Whales are mammals, not fish. And we would go home after the sermon, thinking about how some people will just believe anything that a preacher says, even if the preacher says "whale." And we'd be a little smug and self righteous, because we knew our Bible, instead of swallowing some corrupted version of the scriptures. I think, as we look at this book, we'll find more important things than fish and whales to think about!

The book of Jonah jumps right into the story. **Jonah 1:1-2 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai [uh-mitt-eye]: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (NIV)**

We know how a person's name was of great significance in biblical times. His name, Jonah ben Amittai [uh-mitt-eye], means Dove, son of my truth. It's interesting to note that elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word dove is used to refer to the people of Israel. The Prophet Hosea does this twice. (Hosea 7:11 and 11:11) and the psalmist uses the same image in Psalm 74 where it says, "Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts; do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever." (Psalm 74:19, NIV) So, is this a book about a man named Jonah - or is the dove here an expression meaning the children of Israel? For this reason, it's been suggested that the book of Jonah might be an allegory, a story filled with metaphors. Some people suggest that the book of Jonah is a long parable. Curtis Patterson tells how the wise old Native American elder would gather the children around him and say, "Now, I don't know if this actually happened, but I know that it is true." In a very important way, it doesn't matter whether this little book is a factual event or a parable making a point, because it doesn't change the message of the book. It doesn't change the point that is being made, as we will see. So, the first verse says that God's message came to Jonah, son of Amittai, or Dove, son of my truth, or the Israelites, the children of my truth and way.

Continuing with the text: **"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (NIV)** Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and it was located on the Tigris River in what is present day Iraq. The Israelites had no love for Nineveh. Instead, they had much to fear from them. The Assyrians were a constant threat from the north. Over the history of Israel, Nineveh was Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian, but it was always the enemy and the oppressor of Israel. Nineveh was enemy territory. In addition, making the trip itself was no small undertaking. Nineveh was about 450 miles to the northeast, a major journey.

Translations don't really convey the strength of this verse. In the original Hebrew there are three strong commands. The original language makes it clear that this is not a matter of, "Jonah, there's something I'd like for you to do for me." No, there are three sharp commands from God. **Get up! Go! Proclaim!** These aren't requests, but commands. Get up! Go to this hated and feared city. Preach my Word to them. No ifs, ands, or buts, just do it!

Why? "Because its wickedness has come up before me." The original language says it even more forcefully. It could be translated, "Because its evil is in my face!" One is reminded of another occasion when the wickedness of a city had come to God's attention. When the three strangers visited Abraham, one stayed behind after the others left. It was the Lord, who said to Abraham, **Genesis 18:20-21** "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me." This passage in Jonah sounds very similar. Are we

about to see some more celestial fireworks, some more divine fire and brimstone? God has said that the wickedness of Nineveh is known and Jonah is to go there and preach.

^{NIV} **Jonah 1:3** ³ **But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.**

Jonah ran away from the Lord. That's not the sort of behavior we expect from God's prophets. Many of those who were called by God to be prophets were reluctant, especially at first, but the expression "running away from God" is a way of saying that Jonah told God "No!" Instead of heading northeast to Nineveh, he headed southwest to Joppa. There he payed his fare and headed for Tarshish, a port in Spain. Tarshish is further away than Nineveh. Jonah is, in effect, doing just the opposite of what God sent him to do. By his physical travel, Jonah is telling God "No" in big capital letters. Twice in this verse we're told about Jonah's intent. It says Jonah ran away from the Lord and he sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

So far, God has commanded and Jonah has, by his actions, shouted "No!" in reply. I'm afraid we all do that pretty frequently. Often, we know what God requires of us. Micah says that it is essentially to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Sometimes we just simply go and do the opposite of what God tells us to do. Paul said that he had this problem. He admitted to the Romans, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19, NIV) How many times have you said to yourself, "I knew better than to do that. I don't know why I was so stupid and went ahead and did it." More often, we decide on inaction. It isn't that we're committing some hurtful and evil act. It's more that we just aren't doing something that we should. We don't get around to it, somehow. We keep forgetting, we say. James said, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." (James 4:17, NIV) We all do that, too. And that is what Jonah has done here. He has failed to do the good that he knows to do. We'll pick up here next Sunday and see how that works out for Jonah. Amen!