

An Unwilling Prophet

Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: Jonah 1:1-2, 2:1-10



1:1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. 3 For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves and Your billows passed over me. 4 Then I said, I am driven away from Your sight; yet I shall again look upon Your holy temple. 5 The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. 7 When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. 8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" 10 And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

By definition, a prophet must say and do the right thing! This is as certain as the bride and groom having to say, "I do!" rather than "I don't!" at the wedding. The prophet must be right. That is as certain as water flowing downstream and not upstream! But in the Bible, there is a prophet's story that

is different. To tell the truth, everything in the story of Jonah is the other way around. Jonah the prophet plays the leading role in this Bible story. From beginning to end, he does everything wrong. And yet he is and remains a prophet. Why he nevertheless remains a prophet, I will explain at the end. But first, I must tell you what happened to Jonah in the first place. In the beginning, everything went exactly as one would expect from other prophets. There was an evil people in Nineveh that had done everything wrong and there was a good prophet who did everything right. And God sent this prophet to the evil people to announce the punishment of God. But from there, everything changes. Instead of Jonah preaching God's judgement to the Ninevites as God commanded, he refuses. Instead of going up to Nineveh, he went to Joppa to flee from God to the ends of the earth. In these first verses, we already have to wonder. How could a prophet, who is privy to all the divine mysteries of God, imagine that one could flee from God? But that's only the beginning. The story of Jonah becomes more interesting and as of now, everything is turned upside down. When God sends a storm and the boat is about to sink, the heathen sailors pray for salvation, but not Jonah. Instead, he hides himself in the very bottom of the boat. And the story becomes even more interesting. Usually, it's the prophet who reveals the sins of the people. But on this boat it goes the other way around. It's the heathen who reveal Jonah's sin. Because he fled from God, they are now in danger. And now, one would expect that the heathen sailors would simply throw Jonah into the water without hesitation because he was the guilty one. But that's not what they did initially. Instead, they fought with everything they had to save their own lives and that of Jonah's. Not until they realized that there was no saving themselves, did they unwillingly throw Jonah into the sea and prayed that God would forgive them for this sin. When the sea became calm, it was they who praised and thanked God. And what happened with Jonah? He was saved by a fish! Yes, you heard that correctly. Jonah was first sent by God to go to Nineveh and preach. But he refused and didn't want to obey God. And now the fish did what Jonah couldn't. He obeyed God! And he carried out God's command exactly as God initially expected Jonah to do. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days. For three days, he had time to reflect on his life. And then he turned back to God. He confessed his sin and experienced God's salvation. The story of Jonah is truly different than all the prophets' stories. In the story of Jonah, it is the prophet who repents and eventually is saved through a great fish. Unlike Jonah, the fish was obedient and fulfilled God's commands.

The story of Jonah goes further yet and remains contradictory. Jonah eventually was obedient and went to Nineveh to preach God's judgement. But he remains unwilling. That became clear when the Ninevites repented. Then, instead of being pleased about this "*happy ending*", like one would expect from all the normal prophets, he is mad. He is disappointed. He is disappointed because what Jonah suspected from the beginning, happened. Namely, that God would be gracious. Finally, like a naughty boy, he stews under a shady plant that God had given him. He stews because he couldn't understand God's grace.

The story of Jonah is still a story that, like every prophet's story, knows the future. Yes, and it is precisely in this that the story of Jonah only much later proves itself to be a true prophet's story. When Jesus tells the story of the lost son, we see Jonah's story again. You all know the parable of the lost son: the youngest son was initially the wrongdoer, who left his father to squander all the inheritance from his father. Later, contrary to expectations, the father forgives this son. Afterwards, the older brother is mad because he begrudged his brother's forgiveness. In Jesus' parable of the lost son, the father points to God, who inexplicably forgives. In the story of Jonah, the prophet is at the same time the younger son who is disobedient toward the father and later he is also the older son who didn't understand the forgiveness of the father. The story of Jonah reveals at the same time two sides of our human

relationship to God. The first side is profound disobedience. The second side is that we don't want to allow forgiveness. Neither for ourselves nor for others! We all know profound disobedience against God. Maybe you regrettably lied to someone. And when they pointed out your lie, you came up with a second or even a third lie. You did that so that the first lie wouldn't be discovered. Or maybe you have been in the situation where you know exactly what God wants from you, but you don't have the strength to do His will? For example, someone hurt you and you're angry at them. Then this person comes to you and asks for forgiveness. You know that you must forgive but you simply can't. The hurt is too big. Anyone who experienced this, can understand the story of Jonah very well. The outcome of such Jonah-stories is always the same. A storm! Danger of death! And perhaps even shipwreck. Like the sailors on the little boat in the storm, you try to bail water and to row. You try to save what can be saved but you realize that the sin is too great. The enemies against whom you fight are overpowering. And you stand before the broken shards of your shattered life. Or maybe you can't understand God's ways in your life. You did everything right. You studied the Bible and understood it well. When the judges asked you about your reason for asylum, you answered everything correctly. They questioned you for 3-4 hours. And everything went well. But in the end, this terrible letter came: Rejected! They didn't believe you. While all this was happening, your friend received a positive answer entirely without a hearing. Then it can be that you, like Jonah, no longer understand God and you want to run away. Or like Jonah had to pray: *"All your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight!'"* I can think of many more examples, and one thing becomes clear: We can't understand God's ways! Not even when God gives grace.

The story of Jonah is written in the Old Testament. It ends with Jonah sitting under his tree and trying to fight against God's mercy so that He wouldn't forgive the Ninevites after all. But God remains gracious. The story of Jonah closes with the stewing prophet under the tree. But it actually didn't end there. It continues with Jesus. Because when the Jews demanded from Jesus that He would give them a sign of His power, He refused and gave the people, of all things, the example of Jonah as a sign. Because just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so would Jesus be under the earth for three days. That would be the sign of God. Contrary to what the Jews expected, God didn't come with power, but He revealed Himself in the depths, yes in the depths of the cross and of death! Jonah was allowed to see in the depths of the sea and in the belly of the fish that he needed God's salvation. He finally cried out there: *"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"* Salvation is our God's business. Jonah had to realize this in the belly of the fish. And yet he didn't understand this salvation as it applied to the Ninevites. But salvation is and remains God's goal. Salvation is also the name of our Lord Jesus! That is His business. Salvation even when we don't deserve it! A mercy that knows no bounds. A mercy that finds you even in the lowest point of your life. We need this merciful God. The sailors in the storm needed the merciful God. Jonah needed the merciful God. The Ninevites needed this merciful God! In the many big and small storms of life, we also need nothing else than the endless mercy of our Lord Jesus. Amen.