

## God's Footprints in History

### Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week after Trinity

Sermon Text: Jonah 3:1-10



*Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on*

*sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. <sup>6</sup>The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup>but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” <sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said he would do to them, and He did not do it.*

A whale washed ashore and 115 plastic bowls, 25 plastic bags, 1 nylon sack, and 2 flip flops were found in its stomach. In regard to the flip flops, the question is asked – who once stood in them. Was it a person who was swallowed by the whale? Was he, like Jonah, spit out somewhere? And what traces does this person leave behind today? Jonah the prophet left behind footprints in the sand too. His sandy tracks led directly to Nineveh. There, he finally proclaimed God’s message to the people of Nineveh after much reluctance and long detours. But from the report in the Bible, it is already clear that Jonah truly was and remained an extremely reluctant prophet. His entire message was: *“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* That was it! Jonah’s whole proclamation is a single sentence! His entire legacy as a prophet and the footprints he left behind as a prophet – it all came down to a single sentence! Imagine if your pastor preached one sentence on Sunday and then ended it with Amen! Done and done! That was it! Goodbye! And even this sentence is said so insensitively and begrudgingly that you can literally sense that the prophet had absolutely no interest whether or not the Ninevites repented. He is actually against it because he knows one thing very well – if the Ninevites repent, God will be merciful. That’s something he wants to avoid at all costs. The footprints that the prophet Jonah leaves behind are certainly not glorious footprints. And he is certainly not a good example as a proclaimer of the Gospel. Yet, God used him. That’s amazing! Even after Jonah ran away and after he spent so much time in the whale, God gives him a second chance. What’s more, when Jonah sets out on his way to Nineveh for the second time and spoke that sentence to the Ninevites, God blessed these words with unique and huge success. These words are comforting! They are comforting words for us who are in the Church and work. Yes, even we leave behind footprints. The things that we do are not always glorious. Often, we fail. We often don’t recognize God’s voice. We often don’t know how to get along with our fellow human beings and we also don’t know, like them, how to bring God’s Word closer. Above all, we have little empathy for our fellow humans. Sometimes, we have little empathy for ourselves and that’s why we recognize all these phases Jonah went through. Sometimes, we find ourselves in the depths of the

ocean and in the dark where we must give up hope. Our work isn't going as it should. And we know that! Yet God uses us. He uses us when we don't realize it and sometimes even when we don't want to. Jonah's steps lead from the mouth of the whale to the Ninevites. Where would our steps lead? Where do we see that we listened to God's voice and then run in the other direction? Where are there also situations when we have recognized God's voice but just didn't want what God had expected of us? And despite this, something happened! It happened because God wanted it! In our story today, we see an example of how God's Word works. The Ninevites were not God's people. They didn't know the Bible. They had no idea about God. And yet, when they heard this sentence from Jonah, they repented. All of them – from the king of Nineveh to the lowest commoner. They all repented. They wept over their sins and repented. Even the animals participated by fasting and wearing sackcloth. That's how it is when God's Spirit works!

The story of Jonah is not a coincidence. Here, in the middle of the Old Testament, God shows us how He deals with us humans. God shows Jonah that He doesn't want to be there just for the people of Israel, but for all people. He shows the Ninevites that He is the Creator of the World and the Source of all Life so that they turn from their evil ways. And He shows us all that He works through weak people, like you and me. Jonah's footprints went from the mouth of the whale to Nineveh eventually ending under a withered plant where Jonah struggled with knowing that God is merciful. Jonah would much rather have God be just. He would much rather have died in the depths himself for his sin. That would have satisfied his sense of justice. But God isn't like that. In the end, God is merciful. God is also merciful when it makes absolutely no sense. And the way of God has continued like that until the present. The sandal prints of the 12 disciples went out from Jerusalem, they went out into the world. Human feet, like yours and mine, were within these sandals, as well as human weaknesses. The disciples continually strayed, they constantly made the wrong decisions, and yet, God built the Church. There are signs of God's Works since the beginning of history and these signs of God are recognizable to this day! Even today, we still face many human mistakes in the Church. Sometimes we are shocked. Sometimes, we get really annoyed about the things that happen in the Church. But mostly, we are extremely disappointed, even depressed, about the things that happened and still happen. We ask ourselves where has faith gone? All that we see among people is nothing new. Next to the plastic garbage that was taken out of the whale on the island are all our human mistakes. If we are judged by that, we would be doomed. And if we had to be judged by what footprints we leave behind, we are dead.

Jonah is a prophet. He is a prophet because despite his many mistakes, he knows one thing very clearly. Which is that God is merciful. Jonah knows that in the belly of the fish, and he also knows that when he preached to the Ninevites. Jonah also knows that without this grace from God, we couldn't stay alive. When Jonah was in the belly of the fish, he was dead because he was separated from God's grace. He was dead even when his body remained living. We humans are dead and we die. We don't die from old age, cancer, or heart attacks. Instead, we die because we are separated from God. And we, in turn, live because God doesn't separate Himself from us. That's the only reason why Jonah was allowed to live. He was allowed to dig his sandals out of the sand and go on his way. Maybe he did all this unknowingly. It was incomprehensible to Jonah that God is merciful. The miracle that God did through the whale was just a sideshow. The actual miracle was that God is merciful. And Jonah couldn't understand that. He also didn't know that another would come after him but Who was also already before him from eternity, Who would go down this exact path of death and life. That was Jesus Christ. Jesus was also in the belly of death for three days and He brought life back. In doing so, He ultimately sealed it so that we can take from His life and from His grace.

We no longer live alone. Instead, we live from Him and we live in Him. Our life is hidden within Him. And that is true even when you can't see anything good about us! Amen.