

An Unwilling Prophet
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Jonah 3:10 & 4:1-11



3:10 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. 4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?" 5 Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. 6 Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." 10 And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

The story of Jonah – now finally we have a story with a happy ending. Yes, there are even more than one happy endings in this story. We know the story of Jonah from Sunday School where it is sometimes used to show that one shouldn't be afraid to be a missionary of God. Because Jonah is incorrectly summarized as having fled from God's assignment for him out of fear or laziness. Jonah didn't want to go to the front lines, to the enemy city of Nineveh, that's why he went in the other direction – away from Nineveh, away from his assignment from God, and towards a long vacation on a cruise ship. After this, Jonah's great adventure began. Twice he got into life-threatening situations. First when the ship on which he fled sailed into a life-threatening storm and the second time was when Jonah was eaten by a great fish. When the water calmed down again and Jonah plunged into the deep with the fish, any reasonable person would have thought that it was all over for him. But the story of Jonah is a story with a happy ending, and it all turned out quite differently. Jonah repents of his actions in the depths of the fish. God had mercy on him, and the fish vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Jonah could continue living! What a miracle! But the story has another happy ending because Jonah learns obedience. He fulfilled his assignment from God and proclaimed God's judgment on the city of Nineveh, at which point they all repented. So not only Jonah but also the entire city together with all living creatures were saved from certain death. The story of Jonah therefore has three happy endings: First, Jonah was saved, second, he repented, and third, he finally fulfilled his assignment and saved the whole city of Nineveh. The story of Jonah though, doesn't really have a happy ending. If you continue reading the book of Jonah in chapters 3-4, the most interesting part actually happens! In these chapters, it becomes clear what it's all about. Jonah actually didn't run away because he was scared or lazy. No, Jonah fled because he was completely against God showing mercy to the city of Nineveh with all his might. From the very beginning, Jonah knew how this story was going to end. That's why he resisted. Jonah fought against God's mercy until his last breath. When he learned that God had actually forgiven the city of Nineveh, he literally said: "Over my dead body." Jonah didn't understand his God and told God so to His face. In the previous verses, all of this is expressed with the words: "Evil overwhelmed him." In other words, one could say that the evil, which was in the city of Nineveh before, had switched places – it left Nineveh and implanted itself in Jonah's heart. Defiantly, he went to a high outlook from which he could keep an eye on the city of Nineveh. Even though God had already forgiven the Ninevites, Jonah hoped without reason and without evidence that God would still destroy the city. He longed for the moment that God's justice triumphed over His mercy and God's wrath would destroy the whole city like fire. But this moment didn't come. Instead, God remained merciful. When that happened, Jonah fell into a deep depression and self-

pity. He built a booth and wanted to die there. Yet God didn't give up and wanted to show Jonah how absurd his actions were through the mercy he experienced to his own body. That's why God allowed a plant to grow. As it provided shade in the hot midday sun, Jonah rejoiced at this undeserved grace that came from nothing. But when God let this plant die and sent a scorching wind from the east, Jonah raised his fist again in self-righteous anger and disappointment. Finally, the story ends with a question because Jonah only wished for death. God admonished Jonah and shows him how absurd his actions were, because Jonah is saddened by the death of a single plant while wishing for the destruction of an entire city! The question we are asked throughout the story of Jonah is this: How can it be that a prophet, who is supposed to be the voice of God, is so wrong? From the story of Jonah, we learn that he not only misunderstood God, but above all, he was unwilling! The conversation with God clearly shows that Jonah was disobedient precisely because he had understood God very well. From the beginning, he knew that God wanted to be merciful. Yet that's exactly what the rebellious Prophet Jonah didn't want! His will was contrary to God's Will. That's why he wanted God's judgment and not God's grace. Jonah's story repeats itself countless times in the Bible and also in our time. Jonah as the unwilling prophet is just one example of many because Israel at that time drew a sharp line between itself and the rest of the world. According to their understanding, God's grace was only for the people of Israel and not for the whole world. Yet God looked at it differently!

Even the contemporaries of Jesus were confronted with this lesson. They were angry when Jesus sat at a table with sinners. The same happened to the brother of the prodigal son who was full of bitterness because his disobedient brother received forgiveness. They didn't comprehend that God was gracious. It must be said that in Jonah's time, the radical nature of God's grace was not yet fully known. It was Jesus who first brought about this radicality. Jesus couldn't have been more blatantly different from Jonah. While Jonah sat on his mountain and longed for God's righteous judgment, Jesus stood on a mountain outside Jerusalem longing for mercy! That's why He cried. Where Jonah's desire for justice angered him, Jesus' longing for mercy put Him on the cross.

Therefore, Jonah's story is not an adventurous story with a happy ending. No, it asks us this question: Do we want God's grace? Do we want people to know Christ? Or do we not care if millions of people go to their doom? Is God's grace and mercy just for the community of insiders and pious people? Do we keep God's grace just for ourselves? Do we have room for sinners in our church? Do we have room for those distant from God, even for the enemy?

Jonah is a prophet. Despite all his mistakes, he knows one thing very clearly: God is merciful. Jonah knew that when he fled from God's assignment. He knew that in the belly of the great fish and when he preached to the Ninevites too. Jonah also knew that people can't survive without this grace from God. Humans are dead and are dying. We don't die from old age, cancer, or heart failure but we die because we are separated from God. And we live again because God is gracious to us. It's only for this reason that Jonah may live. It was incomprehensible for Jonah that God is merciful. The miracle that happened through the whale was just a side show. The actual miracle is that God is merciful. Yes, actually God is only merciful because there is no one who can come before God without any sin. Jonah certainly couldn't grasp this yet.

Interestingly enough, Jesus uses the example of this unruly prophet of all people to explain His path of resurrection through the cross and death – just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, so Jesus was in the grave for three days before He rose from the dead.

If that isn't a strong testament to a rebellious prophet! When Jesus gives such prominence to the prophet Jonah, He seems to be deliberately saying: "Look, God loves him anyway. Look, God can also bring good out of even the most rebellious prophet." This gives me hope. There is hope for the church which is often at a loss when faced with missionary work. It gives me hope for myself because I often can't find the right words to reach my fellow man. It gives me hope because God's grace is unlimited. And it gives me hope because we are still learning about this grace. So I'm all ears to what God is going to put at our feet next. And if we don't like everything God does, we should ask ourselves if this isn't the very moment of His grace. Amen.