

From the Raging Sea...

Take a closer look. At the boat. At the waves. This painting of a boat tossed on the waves, this is a picture of life. The waves are caused by a storm, a change in the atmosphere, and it is tossing the boat around like a two-year-old's toy at bath time. (motioning waves, 'vroom, vroom'.) It's fun to play boats riding the waves, and it's fun for some to ride the pretend waves of roller-coasters. But, if you are in the middle of the sea it doesn't matter how big the boat is, when the waves are roiling, even the atheists will start praying 'just in case.'

For the last five Sundays we talked about how life is a journey through the wilderness on our way home. Today we take that journey to a new setting, over the waves of a raging sea, but we are still on our way home, on our way to the dry land, which is our Easter destination. Sometimes life is like being lost in wilderness and we need to know that God will bring us safely through it. But sometimes life is like riding in a storm that is so strong that we think we are going to certainly die, and we cry out, how can we get this storm to stop; how do we get back to the shore? (And for those of you who are wondering what in the world this has to do with Palm Branches and Holy Week, well, I was wondering the same thing. But, stay with me here, folks. Give me 15 minutes.)

So, what about this storm? Our storm begins with a dramatic opening (SLIDE, Jonah 1:1) “The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai”. This is a real person. This is about the LORD, Yahweh. Remember that key principle as we listen to this story for the next four Sundays: the ancient story of Jonah is about God. God is the main character in the Bible, and in this story too. It is about God’s relationship with God’s people in various settings so that we can understand how God relates to us when we confront similar settings in our lives. That, my friends, is why it is worth your time to read the Bible. It is about God and God’s relationship with you.

This is a story about God’s unrelenting acts of salvation, of saving people from storms and bringing them to dry land. Jonah’s story is our story. And, most importantly today, that makes it the story of Jesus’ life too. (I told you this had to do with palm branches...we are getting there.)

So, YAHWEH, the one true God of the Bible, tells Jonah son of Amittai, (SLIDE, v.2): “Go the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” Let me tell you about Nineveh. It is located in what is now called Iraq. You’ve heard of it. Well, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrian army is likened by some to the Nazi storm-troopers,

about as evil and ruthless as an army can be. Nineveh represented the enemy of Israel, Jonah' people and land. You can pick whomever you think is our enemy today and well, that's what Nineveh represented to Jonah. So, when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach it is an absurd mission: preaching God to the enemy?

Who is your Nineveh? Who are the people that you would never want to preach God's forgiveness to? Where is the place that you just don't want to go, physically or emotionally or relationally? What is the change that God wants you to bring about in your life or someone's life, and when you hear God call you to do that, you say, "You can't be serious, God?"

Well, if you have that place in your mind you will understand why Jonah responded as he did. (SLIDE, v.3) Jonah ran away. What? I thought this was a prophet of God. And he ran away; he didn't just run away, he ran away from YAWHEH! He found a way to get on a boat to take him to a place called Tarshish, which is about 2500 miles away from Nineveh. It represents in the world at that time the place which is as far away as Jonah could try to get, a place where it would be impossible, he thought, for God to ever make him go to Nineveh. It was

like Jonah saying, ‘You know what God, I am taking early retirement. Find some young, eager unsuspecting prophet. I quit.’”

Where is your Tarshish? Are you trying to run away from God to your own Tarshish, getting as far from God as you can, hoping you can hide? Millions are. They haven’t moved 2500 miles physically, just mentally. They have pushed God as far as they can out of their lives. They have hopped to last boat from the Joppa and headed out to sea. The word of the LORD’s forgiveness of sin comes to them and rather than receive it and allow it to change them, they run away. “I don’t need the LORD if I have my addiction.” “I don’t need the LORD if I stay so busy that I have no time to think about God.” “I don’t need to the LORD if I put God last on my list of priorities...I will just go to Tarshish and figure God will let me alone there.”

(SLIDE, v. 4) That’s not how it works, folks. God isn’t letting Jonah get away! Now, you need to understand why. God isn’t chasing Jonah to punish him. What fun would that story be to tell? No, Jonah is pursued by God because God loves him, and because God chose Jonah for a mission. God’s love is going to win, folks, count on it. You can run, buddy, but you can’t hide. Not from God.

So what does the LORD do? He sends a great wind on the sea? Why, well, what is needed to stop this ship from sailing? A storm. God raises up a storm. Sometimes God is behind the storm in your life. God is always in the storm and in the boat, and sometimes, not always, God is behind the storm too. If God needs a storm to turn you around, God is sending a big one. Turning around is of course the meaning of 'repent', right? God is going to help us see that we need to get our lives going in another direction.

(SLIDE v. 11) The sailors on the boat are panicked. The captain of the ship is ready to give up. The storm is too much. So they find out that Jonah is the problem and they ask him what needs to happen so the seas will calm down.

Then Jonah says what is a sure sign that he never stopped believing in God. He knows he is the problem, that his decision to run was foolish, because you cannot run fast enough or sail far enough to escape the loving arms of God Almighty. That's supposed to sound like good news by the way. You want me to say it again: Here the good news! You cannot run fast enough or sail far enough to escape the loving arms of God.

(SLIDE v. 12) So Jonah tells them to throw him overboard, and that this will calm the waters. This is the Palm Sunday message now. Jesus, on Palm Sunday, while

the crowd was cheering, knew that the world was riding out a storm, and there was only one way to calm the waters, to save the boat full of people. Throw me into the waters. And Holy Week is Jesus falling from the top deck and descending into the roiling waters of the seas of life. Why? To save the people on the boat. That's you and me, friends. That's what happens today in Jesus' life: the crowd is throwing Jesus overboard. By calling him 'king' they are setting him up for the very criminal charge that will get him killed. And Jesus, this time, doesn't stop them.

(SLIDE vv. 15b-16) And that is just what the sailors do. Jonah goes overboard, the sea grows calm. And, at this, the men greatly feared the LORD. God stops the storm. Never forget that this is part of God's story too. God can and does stop storms. Not because of the goodness of the people on the boat; they worshipped other gods. No, God stops the storm because of the one who believes God is a God who saves. That is Jonah. That is Jesus. We, the people in the boat, are saved not because we are good people, but because Jesus willingly entered the storm to stop it, so that we could be saved from the storms of life's destructive powers.

What happens next? Imagine you are a child hearing this for the first time. A prophet of God is thrown overboard because he wouldn't preach to Nineveh?

Whaaat? (SLIDE v. 17) Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Say whaaat? And Jonah was in that belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

If you feel like you are about to drown in life's storm, start looking for a fish, friends. God always sends a great fish.

Here is the sign. That's what Jesus called it. (SLIDE Matt. 12:39-41) "(A)s Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, so the Son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." The fish is about the Great Rescue Mission of God. On Good Friday we think, how could God let his Son die, and let the story of salvation end in a tomb? And that is just what we wonder about Jonah, if we were hearing it for the first time, right? God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah? God put his one and only Son in a tomb?

For today, remember this (SLIDE) as YAHWEH protected Jonah in the midst of the storm by sending great fish, so the Father protected the Son as he was thrown into the 'sea' of the Passion we follow this Holy Week, and so God protects us, with storms and great fish.

Still we say, The raging sea is stilled, yes, but, God, we want a different ending. We need a different ending.

Well, we have to save something for Easter, right?

