

**Jonah 3:1-5,10**January 22, 2006 – 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- **more than a gripe (vv.1-4)**
- **repentant realities (vv.5,10)**

In the name of Jesus, our compassionate Epiphany Lord, dear shining children of repentance:

It takes only about seven minutes to read all forty-eight verses of Jonah's four short chapters. The work of this Minor Prophet with a major message could stand all by itself as some of the finest literature for it's clear, succinct style that captivates the reader from the first verse to the very last. There simply are no wasted words; each does its part to drive home the point.

But the point of the prophecy is not the stuff of myth and legend. Rather than glorifying some earthly king or exaggerating the literary skill and expertise of the prophetic writer, this short work of art drives to its knees the greatest world power of the day and exposes the main character's most condemning weaknesses. Not only Jonah's flight to escape the LORD's command to preach to Nineveh in the first place, but also his anger at the success of his own preaching – what propaganda purpose could this possibly serve to support the view of negative critics denying again the miraculous work of God? The creating-redeeming-sanctifying Trinity controls nature itself in order to bring sinners to repentance and grant His grace in place of much deserved judgment. God uses fish and plants at will to teach us to **Get a Grip** which in the case of Jonah is...

- **more than a gripe (vv.1-4)**

As foretold by the LORD through Jonah, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was riding the wave of conquest by Jeroboam II who extended her borders past Assyrian-destroyed Damascus, *“from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah.”* (2 Kings 14:23-25) Now Nineveh was in a weakened state, right where her victims in Israel and the surrounding nations expected her to stay. Jonah did not want to preach to the cruel Assyrian capital because he was confident the Word works. He was so trusting in the LORD that he could sleep in the middle of a terrifying storm at sea (1:5). And when God's Word did accomplish its saving purpose among the wicked sinners of Israel's ancient enemy, Jonah was deeply disappointed.

Can you imagine that? *“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’”*

If you understand anything about these ancient soldiers of terror, you can understand why this is exactly what Jonah was hoping would happen. The Assyrians stormed out of their capital city of Nineveh and swept across the ancient world. When they ran into a city that refused to surrender, they made a public example of it by ripping open the pregnant women and piling the heads of the city elders in two heaps on either side of the city gate. Anyone coming or going would get a lesson in “surrender – or else.” Jonah could not know unless God told him that the worst was yet to come. At this point in Israel's history, Nineveh was too weak to keep Damascus in its empire. This enabled Israel's King Jeroboam II to extend her borders to their farthest extent. To Jonah and the Israelites everything was going right when everything went wrong for Nineveh. The last thing Jonah wanted was for Nineveh to turn to the LORD. That's why he took a ship to Spain (Tarshish) the first time the word of the LORD came to him. If it hadn't

been for the huge fish God sent to rescue Jonah, he would have drowned in the stormy seas when the terrified sailors threw him overboard for running away from his God. But this time Jonah went.

Does it just make you shake your head at this reluctant prophet of the LORD? Maybe you react the same as when religious leaders pop up in the news for swindling their churches and TV audiences. But God wants each of us to **Get a Grip** on that old self-righteous nature that condemns the sins of others and blindly misses our own. God had **more than a gripe** not just against Nineveh, but even against Jonah His own prophet. And if tradition is right that Jonah is the God-inspired author of this prophecy, it's a clear confession, and honest admission of his sin. He knew that when he ran away from the will of the LORD, he deserved to be thrown overboard. Do we? When Jonah felt the seaweed wrapped around his neck as he sank into the depths of the sea, he understood that this was his just punishment for rebellion against God? Have we got **a Grip** on that? How many times have we been like church members who throw their offerings in the plate, then disappear for a week or two as if to say, "Don't bother me, God. I'm busy making money"? God commands us to love our neighbor as ourself, but would we take a cruise first before giving to the poor? Cruel people and dictatorships we rightly condemn. But do we realize how cruel we are to watch the souls of men, women and children dying all around us while we excuse ourselves for not knowing what to say? "*The word of the LORD*" has come to us too. Do we understand the torment we deserve from God for running the other way?

- **repentant realities (vv.5,10)**

How deeply disappointing for Jonah! "*The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*" His actions would show that he really wanted them to rebel all the more for God to let them have the destruction they so richly deserved for their national sins and unprecedented cruelty. But "*when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*"

If you take the seven-minute challenge to read Jonah today, you'll see him in his observation post outside the city waiting for God's hammer to come down and destroy them. You may find yourself shaking your head again at Jonah's anger when God takes away the shade He provided his prophet in that fast growing vine. You'll read how this prophecy ends with God saying to Jonah: "*You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?*"

Does that help you **Get a Grip** on **repentant realities**? The lesson was unpopular to God's chosen people in ancient times. Centuries later rioting Jews threw temple dust in the air at the Gospel-to-the-Gentiles preaching of Paul. (Acts 22:21ff) It is a sad fact of our sinful human condition that we who have received God's grace through faith, constantly try to pervert it into a self-righteous condemnation of those who have yet to repent. By default we credit ourselves with changes in our attitude and circumstances, then want to withhold forgiveness from those who have wronged us. By nature we are the unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable (Matthew 18:21-35) far more than we could ever realize on our own. Even those who support missions and personally proclaim the Gospel to others must confess our own pride in the grudges we hold against those who have hurt us, too often first and worst in our own families.

God truly accomplishes His saving purpose in spite of us sinners. Contrary to our own stubborn rebellion He has hammered our hearts with His law, then soothed and healed them with His Gospel kindness in the Christ of Israel. With His own blood He washed away our stubborn rebellion and self-righteous pride. Heaping grace on top of grace, He chooses to use us sinners as His servants to proclaim His all-forgiving love to fellow sinners still stuck in the sadness and grief of unbelief. God desires every Jonah today to gladly answer God's call and clearly proclaim His saving grace – first at home and then to the full extent of Christ's kingdom. And when sinners repent, our gracious God wants us to rejoice with the angels in heaven over every single one. Shine in our hearts, O Epiphany Lord! Amen.

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