

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's- Lafayette Hill, PA.
January 25, 2009
Congregational Meeting

“Apologizing to God”

Jonah - Jonah - Jonah. When are you going to learn that God always gets what God wants? If you paid attention to today's Gospel reading, you would notice that it says: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a Second time.” Well - what did God say to Jonah the FIRST time?!? Most of us know the story about Jonah getting swallowed up by a Whale - but WHY?

Let's look back at the beginning of the story. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Now a little aside here. Nineveh didn't have the best reputation. Last week we heard “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Well they wouldn't even ask that about Nineveh. You mess with the people there, and you're dead meat. So when God asks, or rather tells Jonah "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." He was pretty certain that the people of Nineveh would not take kindly to the message he was bringing.

So we continue with the reading: But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord (and NOT to Nineveh.) But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them.

Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on *your* god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." This was a sort of “Spin-the-Bottle” type game to determine who was responsible for this calamity. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Hmmm... maybe that's more accurate than we would have thought. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

Jonah said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish - three days and three nights.

Now the story continues with all the things that were going through Jonah's head while he was inside the big fish for 3 days and 3 nights until eventually, the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. And guess where it decided to "spew" Jonah? Ninevah! Of all places - - - the place where God wanted Jonah to go all along.

God *always* gets what God wants! So why didn't Jonah just go there in the first place? Because it was going to be rough. Jonah was scared. He lacked the faith that God would protect him. He was suppose to tell them that God was not pleased with them. He went to all of this trouble to avoid doing what God wanted. He tried to run. He endangered others. In the midst of the deadly storm, he tried to ignore God by sleeping. He was confronted by his peers and eventually he simply said to them, "Throw me overboard! End it all! I was going to be dead if I went to Nineveh anyway. Save yourselves!"

So what happens after Jonah tries to avoid doing what God wanted him to do but ends up in Nineveh anyway? Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh *believed* God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, *God changed his mind* about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. And they lived happily ever after! Amen!

Now I know you'd be happy to have the sermon end right there, but how can we apply this to our lives? Wouldn't Jonah have saved himself and a lot of other people a lot of trouble if he would have just trusted God and did what God wanted done, all along? Don't we think Jonah owes God an apology? Shouldn't Jonah give God an apology for not trusting him? Shouldn't Jonah give God an apology for disobeying him? Shouldn't Jonah give God an apology for not having Faith? Do you really want to know what Jonah did? Well I'm not going to make it that easy for you. **READ YOUR BIBLE!**

The point that I'm really hoping we get out of this story, is that we all have our Ninevehs. We all have places God wants us to go - places we'd rather not go - so we run the other way. God wants us to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy" and "to worship the Lord your

God.” But like Jonah, we want to ignore God so we sleep - LITERALLY - we Sleep In. We treat the Sabbath like any other day. No. We treat it worse than most days. We’ll *get up* for work - to make MONEY! We’ll fight the cold weather to get to a Sporting Event, a fine Restaurant, a Movie Theater. But it’s often too cold to come to church to worship God. Shouldn’t we be apologizing to God?

God gave Jonah a message to tell! A message that made Jonah uncomfortable to tell. So rather than tell it, Jonah runs away. We have a message to tell. A message of Salvation -God’s Grace and Love - of Eternal Life - a message that can save people. But like Jonah, we’re afraid people won’t take hearing that message kindly. They might think we’re a religious fanatic or they may have to change their way of living. They might avoid us and stop inviting us to their parties.

Shouldn’t we be apologizing to God? Oh! Now here’s a good one - taking care of the things God has given us. The way we treat the planet - the way we use the resources - the way we share the food - and dare we even talk about that Biblical 10% tithe? At last year’s congregational Meeting we said we’d give about \$351,000 to God’s ministry here at St. Peter’s. Talk about asking people to go to Nineveh - we only received about \$340,000 of the \$351,000. Shouldn’t *we* be apologizing to God?

But God always gets what God wants. And God wants ministry to happen in this place. So even though only about a third of our congregation comes to worship on any given Sunday - Ministry happens. Although very few of us feel comfortable talking about our faith with our family and friends, our love in action gets the message across and Ministry Happens. Even though the Bible says we should give 10% of what we have to God’s ministry and our average is more like 2.3% - Ministry still happens.

How can this be possible when we hesitate to be as faithful as God would like us to be? Because God always gets what God wants. We may have to weather some violent storms at times. We may get thrown overboard by people who don’t agree with us. We may have a lack of faith as we enter into new areas of ministry - but God always gets what God wants.

If we keep that in mind as we go forward in ministry, as we prepare to accept a new budget and accept some new challenges - it will make it possible to avoid some of those storms and possibly being thrown overboard.

So yes - we do need to apologize to God. Apologize for not trusting as much as we should. Apologize for not being as faithful in the use of our resources. Apologize for doubting - like Thomas - but that’s *another* sermon. But most of all, I stand here with Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving that God is patient with us. And we are honored that through us God ALWAYS gets what God wants. I pray that that continues to be the case for many more years to come. If God calls us to go to Nineveh - then that’s where we’ll go! But instead of being like Jonah, let’s make that our primary destination un-apologetically! Amen.