

RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

Jonah 2:2-9; Matthew 28:1-10

“Be not afraid. He is risen! Go and tell.”

[Congregation reads Jonah 1 together before the sermon]

God’s chosen have a way of ending up in tight spots.

Moses call began in a basket on the River Nile.

Noah’s cruise on the ark was hardly a vacation.

Joseph was tossed down a well and then thrown into prison.

Job lost all he had save his nagging wife, the one thing he was probably ready to lose at the time, and was covered with festering boils.

David faced down the ancient version of Andre the Giant, only bigger and badder, with no armor and a slingshot his only weapon, and then spent a chunk of his life in the desert, hiding in caves and running from Saul.

Isaiah was told to walk naked and barefoot before the people for three years as a sign of how Israel would be carried away into exile. Makes you appreciate this alb and stole a lot more, doesn’t it?

Hosea was told married a prostitute, and one named Gomer at that, as a picture of how Israel had been unfaithful to the Lord and prostituted herself before idols. On top of that, the names of his children were preachments of the law to Israel. Imagine saying to your kids, “Come here, No Mercy. It’s bedtime, Not My People.

Daniel survived the fiery furnace only to end up in a lion’s den.

And then there’s **Jonah**, the reluctant prophet, not because he had a problem preaching and teaching, but because he didn’t like the call he’d received on assignment day. Not all of us can end up in Shields, you know. Ohio needs pastors too, as much as it might pain us to think that there might be Buckeyes in heaven.

Jonah was called to Nineveh. Big deal, you might think. But Nineveh was Israel’s biggest enemy and most real threat at the time. It was like receiving a call to be missionary to Al Queda. Anyone lining up for that one?

So Jonah had a simple plan, he did. He figured he’d run as far in the other direction as he could, away from the presence of the Lord. He boarded a ship to Tarshish. Problem is, the Lord isn’t so easy to run away from. **All running away from God accomplishes is tiring you out.**

Sometimes God wants His chosen in tight spots. **He wants their faith to be tested, to be refined in fire. He wants them to face their temptation and fight, to throw themselves at His feet in prayer for help and to receive strength for the battle through His words, to have His unchanging promises as their only weapon.** Whatever you’ve wrestled with lately, whatever trial has consumed you, whatever temptation has convinced you it cannot be overcome, you are not alone in the lion’s den. There is a way you can walk out, and that’s with God.

God was insistent. Jonah was going to Nineveh to preach law and gospel, sin and grace, in the hope that Nineveh would repent and be saved. And that was exactly what Jonah feared: Ninevites in heaven, Ninevites with God's favor.

The plan seemed to be going well for a while. Jonah was having a lovely time at sea, until, that is, a mighty tempest kicked up. The sailors were terrified. They did their best to weather the storm. And, while they did, Jonah went below deck and took a nap, as if he knew how this was going to turn out, as if he figured he might as well get some rest before his big preaching tour.

Finally, the captain came to get him. Much like the prayer services so common as of late in America after a natural disaster or terrorist attack, it was time for what I like to call prayer missiles. "Everyone call on your god and hope one hits." "*Arise, call to your god,*" the captain urged Jonah. "My God, all right," Jonah might have mumbled. "My God calling me on this stupid trip to Nineveh to preach to my stupid enemies. My God, all right."

Jonah didn't have to pray with the sailors. In fact, Jonah didn't even need to pray. He knew what was going on. He was hardly surprised when the lot fell on him. "*I am a Hebrew and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" In other words, his God, the God from whom he was fleeing, was the only true God. He in essence tells them, "*Forget calling on the god of the sea and the god of the land and the god of the air and the god of whatever else you can think of that I heard you calling out to a while ago. There is one God, My God, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" And we must say the same in a pluralistic and relativistic world where popular opinion holds that **believing makes things true instead of truth making things worth believing**. The God with pierced hands and feet is the only one with ears.

And what comes next? "*Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.*" And he was right, although the sailors were reluctant. "*O LORD,*" and they used the Hebrew name for the one true God—this was no generic prayer, "*let us not perish for this mans life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.*" And they did throw him over, and he did survive, although it meant a few days in the belly of a giant fish, hardly a Holiday Inn Express.

Jonah's clear confession of the faith and his seeming willingness to die on account of it made an impact. **Speaking the truth clearly and accepting the burden of it is a rare bird in a world that often stumbles upon the truth just to pick itself back up, dust off its trousers, and move on** (paraphrase of a Churchill quote). Jonah knew that. That was why he was running, after all. He was afraid that the same thing might happen in Nineveh. Were these sailors Christians yet? **Who knows, but they were willing to listen, precisely because Jonah had something to say, something radically different than the fleshly messages of worldly faiths they had heard all their lives, and not just that, but something that could save them.**

And still today the church is that boat. It is not a theatre. **It is a ship on a turbulent sea with weary passengers struck with terror by the law.** And the only chance of calming them, of being saved, of making it safely to our heavenly port, is throwing the Prophet overboard, as Jonah himself says must happen.

One day some of the scribes and Pharisees got up, and, as was their habit, brushed their teeth, ate a little hummus, and went to mess with Jesus. *“Give us a sign,”* they said, as have we more often than we’d like to admit, forgetting that the crucifix is all the sign we need. Jesus answered them, *“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

Christ was thrown overboard on Good Friday. He who calmed the storm with his disciples was thrown into the grave to calm the turbulent seas on which the ark of the Church so often wavers. His, unlike Jonah’s, was innocent Blood, but it’s precisely the Blood we want upon us. He is our Anchor. He is our Captain. And it’s with the wood of His cross that our ark, the Church, is built. Having spoken the truth clearly, Jesus was willing to die for the Faith.

Jonah ended up vomited onto shore so he could carry out the ministry of the Word in Nineveh. After a shower—at least I hope—he did just that, the lingering stink of fish vomit an ever-present reminder of where he’d been, even as the lingering stink, the inevitable earthly consequences of our sins, remind us where we’ve been. But he’d gotten the point. He was the Lord’s chosen, and the Lord’s chosen do what the Lord chooses for them to do.

And what has the Lord chosen for you to do? He tells the women: *“Be not afraid. He is risen! Go and tell.”* Fish food though you may be, having run away from God’s presence so often and in such manifold ways, God still has use for you. By your Baptism, He washes the vomit away. You no longer stink. Together with your prayers that rise as incense before Him, you are the sweet aroma of love. Because His Chosen, the Christ, was placed into the tightest spot of all, you have a strong tower when you are placed into the same.

Jonah’s prayer has become Christ’s, *“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.”* Because God’s Chosen, the Christ, was thrown overboard, you can be sure you will always have a place on the ship. And because He is risen and riding with you, you can be sure that there is no storm that can drag this ship, the Holy Christian Church, under the waves that beat its bow and stern. It may not always be sunny sailing, but there is no way we’re not making it to port. No, Jesus has made sure of that, and will continue to make sure of that, and has gone to heaven to prepare a place for us upon arrival. The only way we can miss out is if we jump off the boat ourselves. So, *“Be not afraid. He is risen! Go and tell.”* Amen.