Sunday, August 29, 1993
JONAH
Jonah (Selected verses)

Before I read some selected verses from the book of Jonah in the Old Testament and later on from the Gospel of John in the New Testament, I want to make a few comments about the Bible, which is the foundation of our faith and practice.

First, the Bible is not a single book but a library — a collection of sixty-six writings, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. This collection of sixty-six "books" contains a variety of types of literature — history, short stories like Jonah, Ruth, and Esther; poetry, prophecy, sermons, wise sayings or proverbs, hymns, letters, and the four Gospels.

Some of these so-called "books" are very short; for example, Jonah is only three pages long, and some of the letters are one-half page in length. Other "books" were originally too long to put on one hand-written scroll, so they were continued on a second scroll. Thus we have 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Old Testament.

The book of Jonah is a good example of a short story included in the Old Testament because of what it teaches. It was not remembered or written down as history. It is a story constructed and included in the Old Testament because of what it teaches. Therefore, in reading or hearing such a story, the right question to ask is: What does it mean? rather than, How did it happen? To put it another way, it doesn't help to ask, "Do you believe Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and then three days later spewed out on the land?" The important question is: "Do you accept and believe what the book of Jonah tells us about God and ourselves?"

The book of Jonah is a carefully written protest against the Hebrews' religious pride following the canonizing of the Law of Moses, which took place around 400 B.C. It is a rebuke against their exclusiveness and ours — against their belief and ours that God belonged to them and to us alone. It goes even further than that. It reminds them that they have a responsibility to spread and practice the love of God to all people, even people they detest. It is written in the form of a story because people then, and now, are much more ready to listen to a story than to a rebuke.

(Selected verses from the book of Jonah)

"Now the word of God came to Jonah, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh and preach; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee from the presence of God. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he could go away from the presence of God. But God hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up."

Jonah was convinced that God had caused the storm because he was trying to run away from God. So he told the sailors to throw him overboard. Not only would that calm the storm, but also Jonah could continue his running from God and from what God wanted him to do.

"But God provided a great fish, a sea monster, to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And God spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."

And where do you suppose Jonah found himself? Right close to Nineveh, the very place he was trying to avoid. “Then God came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’”

So even though Jonah did not want to preach to the people of Nineveh what God had told him, now he did so. And wonder of wonders, the people listened, repented, and accepted the love of God into their lives. Nobody was more surprised and upset than Jonah.

“But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to God and said, ‘O God, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That’s why I ran away in the beginning. I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.’”

In other words, “God, why can’t you hate sinners and people who are not like us in the same way that we do?” Like many of us today, Jonah believed that there are people in this world who don’t deserve to be forgiven or included in God’s love.

But that’s not what the Old Testament or the New Testament of the Bible says. Remember those beautiful verses from the Gospel of John:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

How then does this story of Jonah speak to us today?

First of all, it reminds us that we can run from God, but we can’t hide. Remember what the Psalmist wrote:
“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.”

That’s what Jonah discovered. He could do what he willed, even down to the bottom of the sea, but God was also there. God would not let him end it all.

God gives us the freedom to run. God respects our will even when it is contrary to God’s will. But God will not let us sink away into utter chaos.

God has a goal in mind that will not ultimately be frustrated. We may give up because we don’t really take God’s great love seriously. We may even betray our commission. But I honestly believe that God, nevertheless, will and can make even our inadequacy serve God’s end. Isn’t this the lesson of the cross? Both Jews and Gentiles crucified Jesus. But God sealed the act with love, and behold, the evil act became the source of good.

You can run from God, but you cannot hide from God. God never gives up on you.

You can also run from yourself, but you cannot hide from yourself. No matter where you run or how far you run, you always take yourself along. And in the end, you have to face up to yourself in the same way as you have to face up to God.

Secondly, the story of Jonah reminds all of us that God gives everyone a second chance, and more. When Jonah was in the belly of the fish, he was sure that now he would not have to carry out the assignment God had given him. He was not counting on a second chance. He didn't want another chance.
In my imagination, I can almost see the twinkle in the eye of the one who told this story as he described the size of the sea monster that swallowed Jonah. Again, the storyteller was not relating history but was trying to make a point. The sea monster stands for the incalculable possibilities God has for accomplishing what God intends. In the story, God uses remarkable means to get Jonah where God wants him to be. So it is also with our second and third chances. What incredible means God sometimes employs to give us our second and third and even more opportunities. It's certainly not always what we would choose, and sometimes the lessons are difficult ones because some of us are hard learners.

I know individuals who have had to lose everything before they were even open to seeing a second chance. Can you see what good news this is? A bad decision need not be the end of everything. A big mistake in life does not mean it's all over. God is always waiting to give us a second or third opportunity. God even causes these opportunities to appear, sometimes in surprising ways.

After quite a detour, Jonah has been spewed out of the giant fish on the shores of Nineveh, a place he had been doing his best to avoid. Now, once again, God tells Jonah to preach to the people of that city. Acting on the second chance that God has given him, Jonah learns in the process the most important lesson of his life, and that's the third lesson this story of Jonah teaches.

The story of Jonah reminds us all that God loves everyone, and so should we. And that was the hardest lesson of all for Jonah to understand and accept.
The reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place was not because he thought he couldn't do the job. He didn't want to go to Nineveh because he thought the job shouldn't be done. Jonah thought that God was foolish in wanting anyone to waste his or her time on these detestable people. They didn't deserve to hear of God's love and mercy. They didn't know the law of Moses. They were sinners. They weren't worth it.

Jonah was not rebelling against the difficulty of the task that God wanted him to do but against the foolishness of God, who would want such a thing done. He had decided, like many people today, that he knew more about what God ought to do and think than God himself. If he were in charge of dispensing God's love and forgiveness, he certainly would not spend it so wastefully.

Don't we also find ourselves thinking that God is foolish for loving the down and out, those on welfare, the poor, those who have AIDS, the losers, the criminals? The people of Nineveh are still among us today.

Isn't that exactly what the critics of Jesus said? They were angry that he spent so much time with the sinners, the lepers, the outcasts. He should leave them to their misguided ways and spend more time with the good people, with people like us.

Some people don't deserve to be the recipients of God's love. That was Jonah's point of view, and unfortunately, it's the point of view of too many good church people today. Chaplains in prison? What a waste of time and money!

It's a constant temptation for church people to be like Jonah and come to believe that there are those who do not deserve to know of God's love. Thank God for Mother Teresa and countless others like her who, through their ministry, extend the love of God to those who need it most. I believe that's what we in this congregation are continually trying to do. The main reason we spend all the money that we do in our television outreach is for reaching people who may not be hearing the message of God's love and mercy in any other way.

God is open-hearted. God looks at the people of Nineveh with love. God is not willing that any should perish. Jonah had to learn the hard lesson that all human beings belong to God's family, no matter who they are or what their condition.

The story of Jonah has a strange ending. When Jonah finally took on the assignment that God had given him and preached to the Ninevites, he was successful beyond his wildest dreams. They repented. They accepted God's love. They changed their ways. And what was Jonah's response? He was disappointed and angry.

Can you imagine? Disappointed with success? There is joy in heaven. God is delighted, but Jonah is upset and filled with grievances.

But Jonah is not alone. Many of us have our gardens of grievances that we cultivate. Think of some of the ways in which we are sometimes disappointed with success. We complain to someone about his or her mistakes or lack of attention, and the person surprises us and says, "You're right, I have failed, but I'm going to change my ways and turn my life around." And he or she does just that. Now we have nothing to complain about, and we don't like it. But God goes on forgiving and loving people anyway. Amen.