

## **SERIES: “Incredible Heroes of the Bible”**

Jonah 1:1-10; 2:10-3:10

Kicking and scratching and clawing – that’s how Jonah went to the big city of Nineveh. God had commanded him to go. “Tell the people that judgment is coming,” said God. The only thing between the Ninevites and judgment was this reluctant prophet.

Now Nineveh was a powerful city, but it was also a very wicked city. It was the Assyrian capital – and these guys were mortal enemies of the Israelites. Partly because of this, Jonah didn’t really want to go to help the Ninevites escape God’s judgment. You see, there was no love lost between Jonah and his Assyrian neighbors.

And so what does Jonah do? He ran in the opposite direction that God told him to go. He literally caught a ship going the other way - west - after God had told him to go east. Jonah quickly found out that there’s no winning percentage in running away from God. God caused a huge storm to come upon the ship. The sailors figured out that it was Jonah who had gotten them into the big mess. And so they threw him overboard – and the seas calmed.

Now listen – if you thought that all this was just a bit far out – hang on, because the story really gets weird now. The Scripture says that God sent a big fish to swallow Jonah. It ate him whole. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. And you thought that coming to church for one hour was rugged – huh?

While Jonah was in the fish – he had a time to think things over. He had a change of heart - to reorder his priorities. After a few days of living in fish bile, he was ready to listen to God. And so, with new attitude, God prepares to send him on his mission. Let me read you what the Scriptures say about how God sent him to Nineveh: “The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” (Jonah 2:10) Not quite first class passage, but for sure an incredible sight to behold!

All of this had happened prior to our text for today. Let’s read the text together now: [Pew Bible – page 983 – Jonah 3:1-5, 10]

Now the problem posed to us by this lesson is very contemporary. You see it begs the question: To what extent would you go to help somebody that you love? If someone that we really cared about were in mortal danger – to what extent would we go to save him or her?

The easy and glib answer is, “Well – I’d do anything to help somebody that I cared about. I’d do the “three Ds” to help them out. I’d give up my ‘D’ollars - my wealth, position and possessions. I’d be willing to look ‘D’umb - even make a fool of myself to help somebody that I really cared about. Why - I’d even ‘D’ie - for somebody that I really cared about - I’d do the ultimate – I’d give my life for them.”

Would we – really? Perhaps – if we were all self-sacrificing, self-abasing, altruistic people. But let me change the question up just a bit: Would you do all of these same things for an enemy – for Vladimir Putin or Kim Jong-un? Would you do the three Ds for an evil person – would you give up your ‘D’ollars?; Would you look ‘D’umb? Would you ‘D’ie for them? I’m really pushing it now – aren’t I? You see, the obvious answer to these questions is, "No: I’m not about to make the ultimate sacrifice for an enemy – that’s absolutely crazy."

You see, it's easy to think of Jonah as just a heartless snob. He ran the other way instead of going to help the Ninevites. But did you notice that God had asked him to do the Ds. To go to Nineveh, Jonah would have to leave behind all that he owned and valued – his dollars. He would have to worry about looking dumb – because you see – if the people repented and God didn't destroy them, Jonah – the prophet – would look like a fool. And can you imagine what they would say about that in-the-belly-of-the-fish-thing? And finally, Jonah would be risking his life – you see, he might die. And all this for sworn enemies of his people – the Assyrians.

When we consider all of this, maybe it's not all that weird that it took a storm; and three days in the belly of a huge fish; and being regurgitated on a beach – to finally convince Jonah to obey God and do the three Ds - to go to Nineveh.

But go he did. And when Jonah told people what was coming - the people of Nineveh listened. And they repented and fasted and asked God for forgiveness. Even the king of Nineveh got into the act. He reasoned: "Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish." (Jonah 2:9) Indeed! The last verse of our lesson says, "When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it." (Jonah 2:10)

God forgave them. He was merciful to them. That's just like God, isn't it? It's always been that way. Through the prophet Isaiah God says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." (Isaiah 1:18) And through the prophet Daniel God tells his people, "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him." (Daniel 9:9) And so what happened after Jonah's preaching – why it's just another example of God being God. As the Psalmist wrote, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love." (Psalm 103:8)

Brothers and sisters, did you know that we are living in Nineveh today? Did you know that the Scriptures teach that this world is passing away? That is a powerfully consistent theme in all of Scripture. Not one thing in this world will be left standing. St. Paul tells us that "...The time has been shortened... it is clear," says Paul, "That the world in its present form is passing away." Jesus shared exactly the same imperative – "The time has come, and the kingdom of God is near. Change the way you think and act, and believe the Good News."

Have you ever thought of what God's judgment might yield? It's incomprehensible to think of that day. Scripture talks about that day and time as a fearful and dreadful day. Listen to St. Peter's words: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat." (2 Peter 3:10, 12b)

Nineveh, brothers and sisters, is not out there somewhere – it's here! And we are called to be the modern day Jonah's. We stand as heralds between many who don't know of God's mercy and love and certain judgment. We are called to carry the message of repentance and salvation to the whole world – because the time is short.

Listen to these questions carefully: Are those that you know ready to face eternity? Are your neighbors and co-workers ready to meet the Lord? Are you ready to see the present world dissolve into nothingness? If your answer to any of these three questions was no, I have something I want to tell you. Someone has already done the Ds for us – and it is God Himself.

In Philippians we read: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:5-7) Jesus was fully God – and He gave it all up. He left his throne in heaven to come into the world to be born in a stable. Our Lord walked upon the earth as a poor man. Jesus once met a man and said to him: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20) Living in poverty is a pretty incredible condition for very God of very God. To do the three Ds, Jesus had to leave the wonder and glory of heaven for a life of servitude.

And then Jesus willingly chose to come into the world knowing that many would call his work foolish - dumb. Jesus was mocked as He was being crucified. The sign on the Cross and the purple robe and the crown of thorns were meant to mock Jesus – the people who killed Him thought that He was a fool. Jesus knew that all this would happen.

Paul is very direct about this truth. He writes: “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:21b) Even today, the message of the Christian faith is referred to as the “scandal of the Cross.” In this world, the name, ‘Jesus Christ,’ is used more often than not as a curse or in mocking. And when people hear accounts of how God chooses to save – like in our Old Testament Lesson - a big fish that swallowed a prophet – well we’re more likely to elicit giggles than to be taken seriously. And yet, God was willing to do the second ‘D’ – to appear dumb - in order to save us.

And the third ‘D’ – Jesus willingly gave his life for us. Paul writes: “And being found in appearance as a man, he [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8) The central teaching of the Christian faith is that Jesus came, that He suffered and died on the cross for our sins, and that on the third day He rose from the dead.

Jesus did the three Ds. We have hope for life eternal because of this. But the real wonder, the incredible thing – what is really hard to believe is this: Jesus did the three Ds not for good folks – not for sweet and perfect people – Jesus did the Ds for his enemies. The Word says: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:9) And again Paul writes: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

Did you catch the end of that last verse? Listen to it again: “And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” We are the Jonah’s today. We have a message of hope for a world that is passing away. It is an urgent message because the time is now. Take that message out, sisters and brothers. The power of that message comes not from our eloquence, but from the fact that Jesus already did the three Ds. Tell somebody about it. Amen!