

## IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH –

*“But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And Jonah said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ The Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’” (Jonah 4:9-11)*

The story of Jonah is not the most known in the scriptures. It’s one of the shortest books in the bible, only a few pages. Many know that in the story Jonah is swallowed by a whale (technically a “big fish,” but I think it’s fine to imagine it as a whale even if a whale is a mammal as some have pointed out). Sadly, what is not as familiar with this story is the larger point – the overall message in this moving tale of redemption, compassion, and truth. Jonah is commanded by God to go forth to Nineveh, a wicked place, and call them to repent and return to the Lord. Jonah instead jumps the first ship he can find – in the opposite direction. Jonah’s running from God’s call leads to his being tossed into the sea and the fish is then sent as a means of rescue, and to provide a time to reflect, reconsider, and repent. Jonah ultimately goes to Nineveh, brings them God’s Word, and sees them turn from their destructive ways to embrace the God of Israel. At this point Jonah admits that this is EXACTLY why he ran from God’s command in the first place. Jonah was so accustomed to thinking the worst of the Ninevites, so certain that they were a “lost cause,” that he’d long since perished the thought of any relationship with them being possible. In the end, God sends a plant to bring shelter and shade to Jonah only to see it taken away to drive home the point – that God will show mercy where God chooses, not always where and how we expect.

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to the mission fields around us. Part of that calling us to bring good news and bring the invitation to come and be changed even among those that we might think of as beyond help. Like Jonah, we’d be much happier and feel a lot more certain keeping our distance from those who are at best indifferent and often even hostile to the life that we confess as disciples of Christ Jesus. And so we come each week to find ourselves in the “belly of the fish,” in a sanctuary set apart from the waves and storms that swell about us, where just like Jonah we are reminded of the saving acts of our God, the Lord’s faithfulness and love for us. But that “belly” of solace and salvation is only a “way-station,” We can’t stay there forever. And so, we here the compelling call “You don’t have to go home, but you aren’t meant to stay here, “or as we say it, “Go in peace and serve the Lord.” And like Jonah, we are shaped to serve and minister to the Ninevites or the Oklahoma fans or the gossips or the cynics or the racists or whatever that community might be for us. We go because our God calls us to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him, knowing that God goes before us, with us, behind us, now and forever.

Pastor Bill