

Mission Festival

October 29, 2017

Jonah 3:1-10 (CSB) – ¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you.” ³ Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the LORD’s command. Now Nineveh was an extremely great city, a three-day walk. ⁴ Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, “In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!” ⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. ⁶ When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: Everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent; he may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish. ¹⁰ God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

Introduction

The word “go” often carries a negative connotation. If someone’s been a little too sassy for their own good, they might hear mom or dad say, “That’s enough! Go to your room!” The dog that just can’t get it through his head that he isn’t allowed to beg at the table is told in no uncertain terms to “Go!” usually accompanied by a pointed finger. When Jesus addresses all mankind in Matthew 24, he tells believers to “**Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance,**” but tells unbelievers to, “**Go! Depart from me, you who are cursed.**” The word “go” carries a negative connotation because a separation is usually involved between the speaker and the listener.

Theme: Go with God!

In the Gospels, Jesus calls disciples to “**Come**” and follow him, but then after some training, he’ll tell them to “**Go**” and head out into the world’s harvest fields to gather disciples by preaching the good news. In today’s First Lesson, the LORD told Jonah to “**Go to... Nineveh.**” But in those instances, there aren’t any negative connotations. In the Great Commission, Jesus ended by saying “**Go... And surely I am with you always until the end of the age.**” Jonah also knew that if and when he went to Nineveh, he wouldn’t go all by himself. In fact, in the first chapter of the book, he fled *from* God by heading in the *opposite* direction.

The task of mission work doesn’t just belong to certain pastors who work among other cultures. The task belongs to each and every one of you, along with all believers. God calls you to be missionaries. As we carry out that task of going into the world’s harvest fields and gathering disciples by sharing the good news of Jesus, we have the encouraging command to **GO WITH GOD!** The text from Jonah 3 gives us three promises as we go with God. **He’ll provide the audience. He’ll provide the words. He’ll provide the results.**

Part I: He’ll provide the audience.

For many, the book of Jonah is nothing more than the story about a guy in a fish. But Jonah is more than a fish story. It’s actually God’s story of grace to his prophet and to a heathen people. God called a man named Jonah to proclaim the gospel to the no-good, bloodthirsty arch-enemies of Israel, the Assyrians. The first part of the story is familiar. God calls Jonah to preach, but Jonah turns tail and flees in the opposite direction. The ship on which he’d booked passage is almost capsized in a storm, and Jonah is thrown overboard at his own recommendation. A large fish swallows him and he’s inside its belly for three days and nights before being vomited back onto dry land.

It’s at that point that our text begins: “**The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh...’**” One of the hardest things about doing mission work is determining where to start. This first verse reminds us that God himself will provide the audience.

We all know the audience Jesus designated in his commissioning statements in the Gospels – “**all nations... all creation... to the ends of the earth**” – but that’s a bit overwhelming, don’t you think? The scope is too broad for our minds to comprehend. Jesus actually did break it down into more manageable chunks: *first* city, *then* region, *then* ends of the earth.

But that's still a daunting task. Could the members of St. John realistically knock on the door of every single home in what I'd probably consider our church's target area to be: probably a radius of 5 or so miles, including all or portions of Wrightstown, Greenleaf, Holland-town, Kaukauna, and De Pere? Better yet, do the members of our congregation even *want* to reach out to all those people? If not, shame on us! But in any case, Jesus says, "**Go!**" We don't get to pick and choose those with whom God wants to share his gospel message. It's universal in its nature.

I believe that those who say they don't know where to start just aren't paying close enough attention to the people around them. I shudder to think of all the opportunities to witness that you and I miss each and every day because we're too self-absorbed, too preoccupied, too busy to notice. It really requires a complete reprogramming of our minds to view every soul as a precious one to be saved from hell and won for Jesus. But then, God does that for us, doesn't he? In his gospel, he reminds us of the lengths to which he went to make us his very own. Now he gently and patiently leads us to look at other people as objects of his love rather than objects to exploit for our own advantage. Jesus had to say to his disciples, "**Open your eyes and look to the fields! They're ripe for harvest.**"

Because Scripture backs it up, I can guarantee that the fields are no less ripe for harvest today than at Jesus' time. If you'll just take the time to look closely at people, you'll see that many of them are burdened with guilt and worry about a great many things in their lives. Even though Jesus says "**Go,**" you won't have to go very far before you find yourself an audience that God has placed smack dab right there in front of you.

Transition

Go with God, trusting that he'll provide you with an audience. Trust also that he'll provide you with the words to say.

Part II: He'll provide the words.

For most people, this is the hardest part of sharing the gospel with others. Really, recognizing the many opportunities is easy. Making the most of them is the hard part. Sometimes there's just the tiniest window before the opportunity is gone. We need to train ourselves to always go about life with the gospel on the tips of our tongues, ready to let it out at a moment's notice.

Fortunately, that too is something God gives us. The apostle Peter wrote, "**Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you.**" And Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "**What we received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we might know the blessings freely given to us by God. We also speak about these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual truths with spiritual words.**"

It's almost scary how simple it really is! None of you has to spend a lot of time memorizing some canned speech. Once you've observed people who are spiritually hurting – in other words, once you've recognized the audience God provides for you – just talk to them from your heart. Tell them how all earthly problems find their source in one great spiritual problem – sin. And you all know the solution to that problem, don't you? The reason for the hope that we have is in Jesus, the Savior of all sin – past, present, and future. Don't conduct a doctrine class, but just use your own words to tell them what Jesus has done for you and for them and how that's personally changed your life and outlook on things. Tell them how your own earthly problems have become manageable, no matter how severe, because you have the sure and certain hope of heaven.

There may be times when you have to preface the gospel message with the preaching of the law. The person may not recognize their own sinfulness or need for a Savior. The LORD supplied those words to Jonah as he walked through Nineveh, too: "**Go and preach the message that I tell you: In forty days, Nineveh will be demolished.**" That's something you also already know from God's Word. "**The wages of sin is death.**" "**Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.**" But instead of worrying about teaching it like a Bible class, talk from your heart. You all know what it's like to not be perfect, even though that's what God demands of you. You all know what it's like to be burdened with the guilt of sin. One of my goals in each sermon I deliver is to preach you right into the pits of hell. When I study the text during the week, God's law brings me there, too. Today, for example, we've seen how we so easily fail in sharing the gospel. For our Jonah-like attitude that would withhold the gospel from certain unlikable people, for our

disinterest in being – or outright refusal to be – God’s missionaries, and for our failure to speak the Word or to trust it’s power, we do deserve God’s condemnation. Don’t be shy in telling people what *they* deserve as sinners, just like *you* deserve. You all can witness from your own personal experience with God’s hatred of sin.

But like I said, that’s a preliminary message. The law is a preface to the gospel. My other goal in every sermon is to preach you right back out of hell and into heaven through the redeeming blood of your Savior. He’s washed you clean of all your sins. Actually, he’s the atoning sacrifice for the whole world. The law and gospel message is so powerful and yet so simple. We deserve one thing. We get the opposite.

Transition

Go with God. He’ll provide an audience. He’ll provide the words. He’ll also provide the results.

Part III: He’ll provide the results.

The third greatest fear of those who share the gospel (after not knowing what to say and not knowing where to start) is the idea that it all depends on us. But that’s a false premise. God has reserved for himself just how his Word will work at any given time in any given place. Article V of the Augsburg Confession states, **“Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news...”** Our job is simply to sow the seed; we leave the sprouting to the Holy Spirit. Like Isaiah says, the word that goes out accomplishes what *God* desires.

At many times in the Bible, the gospel message only served to harden people in their unbelief. The message of the prophets almost always fell on deaf ears. Of course, it’s much more exciting when the gospel bears the fruit of faith, as it did in Jonah’s case. **“The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth... The king issued a decree: Everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing... God saw their actions – that they had turned from their evil ways – so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.”**

That wasn’t Jonah’s doing. In fact, that’s the exact opposite of what Jonah wanted to happen. He originally ran away because he knew God’s Word was going to work on the hearts of those wretched Assyrians. And work it did! God’s Word brought the entire city of Nineveh, from king to peasant, oldest to youngest, to faith! And their newborn faith led them immediately into fruits of repentance.

Doesn’t that make it easy? The burden of convincing someone else of the truth of the gospel is lifted from your shoulders, even though it was never really your burden to begin with. The Holy Spirit works through law and gospel to bring about the turnaround we call repentance. That’s why we can say, with Paul, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation...”** I pray that you may see those results when you sow the seeds of the gospel as you have the opportunity!

Conclusion

In just a bit, I’ll invite you to **“Go,”** as we close the service. But don’t read any negative connotations into that dismissal. Go with God! Watch for God-given opportunities. Speak with God-given confidence. And leave the results up **“to him, who is able, according to the power that is at work within us, to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”** Amen.