PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
"A STUBBORN PROPHET"
Jonah 3:1-5; 10
January 25, 2009
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

A Sunday school teacher was proud of her lesson for the day. She thought she had presented the material quite nicely. Summing up, she asked the class, **"And what do we learn from the story of Jonah and the big fish?"**

Eight-year-old Suzy thought for a moment and answered, **"Always travel by air."**

Well, I hope that's not the only thing we learn from the story of Jonah.

Most of you know at least part of the story of the prophet Jonah. It is one of the most colorful and memorable stories in the Bible. Jonah, of course, was the man who got swallowed by a big fish. As hard as it is for some to swallow the story of Jonah, just remember that it is a parable of God's amazing grace.

God came to a man named Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and ***"cry against it."*** But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. As a matter of fact, Jonah hated the people of Nineveh. He felt about the Ninevites much like some people feel toward Muslims or illegal immigrants. William Neil, one Bible scholar writing in the **Harper's Bible Commentary**, (p. 294) describes Jonah as **"a man who is the embodiment of intolerance, bigotry and lack of human sympathy."**

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, so he went in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, which was as far from Nineveh as

you could go in the ancient world. His idea was to escape ***"the presence of the Lord."*** What a bright idea for a preacher? He would run away from the presence of God.

Jonah did not understand the universality of God. Apparently he was not a very good student of scripture. Otherwise he would have been familiar with Psalm 139:7-8, where the writer says, ***"How can I get away from your Spirit? Where can I go to escape from you? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the deepest parts of the earth, you are also there."*** We cannot hide from God anymore than we can hide anything from God.

Jonah thought he could. At least, he thought he could tune God out. Isn't that what we do when we ignore the voice of God? We do it with our minds and hearts. We simply ignore the voice of God calling us to serve; to do his will, to stay faithful to our calling.

Jonah tried what many of us try; to ignore the call to come before the presence of God in worship. He just wanted to flee! But look at what happened. The ship that he was on encountered a vicious storm, and was tossed about on the waves like a toy. The wind and the waves were so fierce that seasoned sailors prayed for mercy. Finally they cast lots in order to determine with whom the gods were angry. The lot fell upon Jonah. They asked him, ***"What is it that you have done, that this evil has come upon us?"*** Jonah confessed that he had displeased his God by seeking to flee from His presence.

"What shall we do with you?" the sailors asked, for the storm was growing ever more fierce.

"Throw me overboard," Jonah declared, ***"then the sea will calm down."*** So they threw him over the side of the ship into the raging sea. And the Bible tells us that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights.

It is the point at which Jonah is out of the fish that our text begins. The Lord came to Jonah a second time and told him again to go preach to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeyed! He went to Nineveh and preached like he had never preached before. ***"Forty days,"*** he cried, ***"and the Lord will destroy this city. Forty days is all you have to repent."***

Jesus reminds us in the 11th chapter of Luke, verse 11, that ***"The men of Nineveh turned away from their sins when Jonah preached to them."*** Even the king of Nineveh repented. He dressed in sackcloth and issued a decree of total surrender to the will of God. That's impressive. Every heart was changed. There was total surrender to the will of God. But Jonah was not pleased! The Bible says he ***"became angry"***. He was angry because God did not destroy the people he did not like.

As a matter of fact, Jonah went out on a hill overlooking the city, and got a front row seat, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh when God destroyed the city. It seems that Jonah didn't have very much faith in his preaching either. He wanted to die when he learned that God did not hate the people he hated. Why is it that we want God to hate our enemies? Our enemies are not God's enemies! As a matter of fact, there is no one whom God hates. **God's love is a universal love**. God loves diversity; otherwise he would not have created a rainbow of different people. Just look around you. What you are seeing is what God prefers! Do you know anyone like Jonah? Do we have any Jonahs here this morning?

Some people feel threatened by those who are different. Whether the pigmentation in their skin is different or their ideas run counter to our own or their outlook on life is just plain strange, diversity is not everyone's cup of tea. Jonah had to learn that the reach of God's love went far beyond the boundaries of his prejudices. He learned that God loves everybody: Jews and Gentiles, Iraqis and Russians, the people of Nineveh, Israel and Hamas.

We all belong to one great family here at Park Hill. We are one people on one earth with one God. Christ died for your sins and mine. Perhaps there is some Jonah in each of us. But remember, God loves Jonah as well as Ninevites. God's amazing grace is sufficient for each of us. Jesus said; ***"The men of Nineveh turned away from their sins when Jonah preached to them. And now one who is more important than Jonah is here."*** The people of Nineveh surrendered their all to God.

Let us surrender our all; all our problems, all our hatreds, all our prejudices, all our shortcomings, all our doubts and all our fears. Whether you are a Jonah or a Ninevite, I would love to be your pastor, to invite you into a place where there are no boundaries dividing peoples. I would for this to be your church.