

In Nomine Iesu

Midweek Advent 1 2023

One greater than Jonah has come – Matthew 12:38-41
“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ Then he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold something greater than Jonah is here.’”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the One greater by far than Jonah, Solomon or the Temple in Jerusalem. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

There are many picture prophecies in the Old Testament. Joseph, for example, is a picture of the Savior who is to come. He is loved by his father Jacob, but hated and nearly killed by his brothers. Amazingly he lives, comes into great power and, with that power, saves the lives of his brothers and forgives their sins. Moses is another picture of the One who is to come. He fulfills all the roles the Messiah would have, prophesying to God’s people, interceding for them, and ruling over them in mercy; yet he is not called Prophet, Priest, and King as we do Jesus. Elijah is a picture of the coming Forerunner who will precede, proclaim, and prepare the way for, the Christ when He appears, as both Isaiah and Malachi foretell. In so doing Elijah enables God’s people in

later time to identify John the Baptist as the heaven-sent prophet who prepares the Savior's way so Israel can recognize that Jesus is the Promised One. Yes, there are many picture prophecies in the Old Testament. This Advent season we'll examine three such pictures: Jonah, Solomon, and the Jerusalem Temple. Each picture is shown us by Jesus Himself in the twelfth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Each shows us the Savior and what He would do for His people. Each emphasizes one of the Messiah's three-fold offices, prophet, priest, and king. Tonight we hear of Jonah the prophet, as he pictures for Israel and us what the Savior would do to redeem and save His people.

I

Jonah is the prophet whom God called to go to Nineveh, capital city of His people's greatest and most fearful enemy at that time, the Assyrians, and preach repentance to them. Jonah, as we know, didn't want to go. Not only was he was afraid – and he had every reason to be! - he would have far preferred they did not repent and God destroy them, as He threatened to do. So, rather than traveling overland east to Nineveh, he boarded a ship heading straight west for the furthestest point away from Assyria, the opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea. But he did not get very far.

The ship was probably owned and crewed by Phoenicians, who were the great seafarers of the age. The Phoenicians spoke the same language as Jonah, but their religion was very different. Instead of one God, they worshipped many gods and often sacrificed to them. They would have had a healthy respect for the God of the nearby Hebrews, and not wanted to offend Him. They would also have known that the Hebrews did not offer human sacrifices to their God, as they sometimes did. So, the sailors are hesitant to throw this prophet of the Hebrew God overboard, even if he told them

to do so. But, overwhelmed by their fear of death, they did. And immediately the sea stopped raging. They were saved.

Instead of drowning, Jonah would spend three days in the belly of a fish, be vomited up onto the shore, and once more hear God say to him, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” (Jonah 2:2) So, he went. For forty days Jonah walked the streets and lanes of Nineveh, proclaiming the message God had given him, probably in Aramaic, a language which had become common in Jonah’s Israel and was very widespread in Assyria, to the point that in another fifty years or so, it would become one of the official languages of the kings of Assyria. Jonah cried out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” (v. 3:4) And Jonah was believed. Nineveh repented. And God relented from destroying them.

Jonah was not happy. He would rather that the Assyrians face the wrath of God. It is not hard to understand why. The Assyrians had invaded many countries, including Jonah’s native Israel. Their tactics were brutal; any resistance was savagely punished. An Assyrian king (Aššurnasirpal), who reigned 70 or 80 years before Jonah arrived in Nineveh, had this recorded in his official records about a conquered city that had rebelled against him:

Their men young and old I took prisoners. Of some I cut off their feet and hands; of others I cut off the ears, noses, and lips; of the young men's ears I made a heap; of the old men's heads I made a tower. I exposed their heads as a trophy in front of their city. The male and female children I burned in flames. The city I destroyed, and consumed with fire.

II

It is not hard to understand Jonah's attitude toward Assyria. His attitude was very like that of the scribes and Pharisees when Jesus spoke to them. They argued with Him. They considered themselves upright. They refused to accept that He was the Savior promised by God, who He had come to call them to repentance, and to be the Lamb of God whose sacrifice for their sins would take the wrath of God away from them. He said to them, "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold something greater than Jonah is here." (Mt 12:41)

What is important to see is that sin is an offense to God, no matter whose it is nor how grievous, and that the mercy of God is much greater and deeper than we imagine. Jonah could not believe God would relent and forgive the people of Nineveh, whose kings and armies had done such terrible things. But Jonah was swift to overlook his own rebellion against God, His own disobedience, which had endangered everyone aboard the ship. Even after preaching to Nineveh, while sitting on a hill outside the city waiting for God to rain destruction on it, he excused himself that he was angry with God and more sorrowful about the plant that shaded him having died than the prospect of 120,000 Assyrians dying. He seems not to have grasped the real problem: The people of Nineveh saw their sin and repented before God. Jonah did not see his. In this Jonah was very much like Israel in the days of Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees didn't see their own unbelief and sin. They considered themselves righteous. They felt they had the right to call into question this man who had come to them, calling on them – of all people! - to repent, calling on them to believe that He was the Lamb of God, promised to

their fathers by all the prophets. They did not believe He would do what the prophets said or, in the case of Jonah, pictured for them. But again, God was more gracious and merciful than they could imagine. He would not leave them in their sin. Jesus would not walk away from them. The same God who sent Jonah to Nineveh, who insisted Jonah bring His saving truth to the men, women, and children of Nineveh, was He who so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever – whoever! – believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. He would not leave them. No, He who stood before the scribes and Pharisees that day would leave them also with the sign of Jonah, a picture that they would see and hear in their own city. He would die in their place for their sins. He would be in the heart of the earth for three days even as Jonah was in the belly of fish, then He would rise from death, so that forgiveness, life, and salvation could be proclaimed to Israel and to the world.

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In Christ One greater by far than Jonah has come into the world, for He is not merely a picture of salvation, He is salvation itself for everyone who believes in Him. Please join us next week as we look at another picture of the Old Testament that points to Jesus, the One who is greater, who came into the world to be the Savior from sin. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria