

JONAH
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Just before the start of the season of Lent, the Church usually reads a passage from the book of the Prophet Jonah. There is no known author for the writing; the date of authorship is between 400 B.C. and 200 B.C. [this is not certain] The book is not historically accurate, but was written as a parable. [a teaching device; a story with a moral point] This literary device was used by Jesus many times to get His message to the people. It has the appearance of history, but is actually a satire with a religious message. When the name Jonah is mentioned, many focus on the whale and miss the subtleties in the story.

The city of Nineveh is land locked hundreds of miles from any large body of water. Located northeast of the present day city of Mosul in Iraq. It was a pagan city devoted to idolatry and the Goddess Ishtar. Nineveh was a principal city of Assyria which invaded and destroyed Israel in the year 721 B.C. There was much hatred for Assyria on the part of Israel. The Israelites were more inclined to the destruction of Assyria than their salvation. This is the background by which Jonah refused God's call to go to Nineveh. Jonah tried to escape God's call by taking a ship in the opposite direction headed for Tarshish, a city at the farthest end of the known world.

While under sail God caused a great storm to erupt, to the point that the ship threatened to sink. The sailors all prayed to their gods to be saved but to no avail. The seamen were exceedingly afraid. They asked Jonah why he didn't pray to his God? He told them he was fleeing from the presence of God; the God of the Hebrews. They asked, "What shall we do with you that the sea will be quiet?" They beseeched the Hebrew God; let us not perish for this man's sins. Jonah replied, "I know it is because of me that this storm has come upon you." So they took Jonah and threw him into the sea. At once the sea calmed which indicated Jonah's guilt. The sailors made

sacrifice and vows to the Hebrew God who saved them. They were converted to the worship of the true God. This is the first miracle in this parable.

God then went about saving Jonah from death in the sea. The use of the belly of the whale is a literary device indicating the pit of death. [in Hebrew, sheol] Israel described its oppressor as a great monster, thus the use of a whale which was considered as a monster of the deep. Jonah prayed for deliverance. Deliverance comes in the form of being vomited from the whale. What is significant here is that Jonah is back where he started from. Having been rescued by the merciful God, Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach the message of repentance, but he still begrudges the message he was sent to preach. Nineveh was a very large city and it took three days to pass through it; thus three days in the belly of the city. The city was symbolized by the whale. This is the second miracle; God saved His disobedient servant who repented. He was saved from death in the sea.

Deliverance is in the name of the Lord. Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed! Jonah left the city and went to reside on a hilltop to await the destruction of the city. However, the Ninevites heeded the warning of doom and repented of their idolatry. Word got to the king who ordered the entire kingdom to wear sackcloth [put away their reline wardrobe] and cover themselves in ashes [humility]. Maybe the God of Jonah will relent and refrain from destroying the city and it's people. The central issue of the Jonah's prophesy is not the destruction of Nineveh but whether the Lord's mercy extends even to the pagans if they repent. The second miracle of this story shows that God's mercy extends to all repentant people. [Nineveh was eventually destroyed by Babylon and the Medes in the year 612 B.C.]

Jonah's motivation for sitting on the hill top was to see if God would keep His words of destruction. He originally fled his call from God because he anticipated God's mercy on the Ninevites whom the Israelites hated. While sitting in the hot sun, God caused a great plant to grow overnight to give Jonah shade. The next day, God

seeing Jonah sulking in the shade of the plant, caused the plant to wither placing Jonah in the heat of day again. God asked Jonah, "Have you reason to be angry because I removed the shade of the plant?" How can one who received divine mercy begrudge it to others? Jonah is made to experience something of the destruction that he wished for the Ninevites. The Lord demands that Jonah examine the motive for his anger and bitterness linked to his own rebellion. [self examination] This story shows that God's mercy extends beyond Israel. We cannot rebel against God when His mercy extends even to our enemy. The third miracle of the story, God's mercy is universal as well as individual for those who repent. God even forgave the sulking Jonah.

Idolatry is the first command given to Moses and the Hebrews - "Thou shall not have strange gods before you." What strange gods do we have before us? Idols are not just stone or wooden objects to which we offer the sacrifice of ourselves. They are those things to which we attach supreme importance; money, fame, fortune, science, technology, beauty, selfishness, etc. Those things which we place before God in our lives. The idolatry of the Ninevites could have been any or all of those things. Are we the modern Ninevites? Have we the courage to repent and wear ashes to attest to the truth of our intentions?