

Epiphany 3—January 24, 2021
Text: Jonah 3:1-5,10
Theme: Be Their Whale

Last week we heard the call of the Apostle Nathaniel aka Bartholomew. This week we hear the calls of Jonah in the Old Testament and Peter, Andrew, John and James in the Gospel. They would have known the story of Jonah. I imagine that when they heard Jesus' call to them and then later learned what was expected of them when he sent them out to proclaim the Gospel, the story of Jonah might have been upper most in their thoughts. They knew that Jonah had been sent to a heathen land to tell the Ninevites that they were sinning. You and I remember that Jonah did not think this a very good idea, so he took off for Tarshish. When I am faced with the Lord's bidding and it seems uninviting, I often say "Tarshish is awfully nice this time of year." As you recall, the Lord sent a huge storm upon the sea that ravaged the ship upon which Jonah was sailing. Jonah was thrown overboard when the sailors discovered that he was the reason God had sent the violent storm. Jonah would surely have drown had God not sent a whale to swallow him, carry him around for three days, and spit him up on shore. The moral of the story is that it is better for us to go the first time God calls us because the invitation will not get any more inviting the second time. Jonah went. He did not require a third invitation. We see in the Old Testament reading that the people of Nineveh believed in

God and repented. So, God relented of the disaster he had said he would bring on the heathen land. When we repent, God relents. Repentance is not just the escape hatch from Hell. Repentance is the gift God gives us for living a life that is more joyful and peaceful. When we are walking on the wrong path, God sends rescuers for us to encourage us to stop, turn around and follow him. We never have to follow those rescuers because we have free will, also a gift from God, but we would be wise to do so and avoid three days of sitting inside a great fish.

We all have Ninevites in our lives. There are people who seem to turn their backs on God no matter how often we invite them to come and know Jesus. They are happy with their gods. What need have they of ours? Their kids are healthy. Their investments are doing well. They have a nice life and a good job. They are rewarded in this life for following the gods of this world. They live by sight and we can provide them with nothing more to see. Why would they believe us? It's not rational. That is likely what Jonah was thinking as well. The Ninevites were powerful and prosperous. What would they want to hear from Jonah? God had not given him any cool marketing plan. He did not have a program to offer them for their teens or seniors. He did not even offer them greater riches or power and Nineveh already had a highly complex religious system! The last

thing they wanted was another god demanding yet more from them. And Jonah! Who was he? He was a nobody from an insignificant country compared to the great and mighty Assyria. Why would they listen to him? There is not one solitary reason for anyone to listen to Jonah or us.

But then, we don't rely on reason, do we? We know that our God is the God of all, and Almighty is he. Just as he sent the storm into Jonah's life, he will bring things into the lives of those who have drifted away from him. They may be little or great. Only God knows what it takes to get someone to turn back from Tarshish and heed his call, but when it happens, we need to be there. We are Jonah for those who do not know God. But we are the whale for those who know God but have been summering in Tarshish. What do we do about them? While we usually focus our attention on the Ninevites with this text, today I want to think about being that whale who swallowed Jonah. That whale too was serving his creator.

God sent that whale to rescue Jonah and bring him back to take another run at his calling. He had failed to do God's will and been cast into the sea for his effort. He was drowning because of his disobedience but God sent a whale. Be God's whale. Find that person who says that they are Christian but seems to be drifting away from God instead of towards God and be their whale. Find that person

who has become mired in the seaweed of this world and swallow them up with your love and carry them to safety.

Never give up! Never quit praying for those people in your lives who have drifted or are drifting away from God. Never stop proclaiming God's Word to people who have become weighed down by sin. Never stop inviting them to join you here in his house to hear his Word and receive His true body and blood. The day will come when they find themselves sinking down in the sea with seaweed wrapped around their necks and they will know and admit that they need to be rescued. At that moment, repentance is possible, maybe even likely, and God sends you as he sent that whale to Jonah to rescue his people and carry them to shore, because remember, they are always his people. Even if they have wandered away from him, even if they have cursed his name, they are still his people, even as the heathen of Nineveh were still his people. He loves them every bit as much as he loves you and wants them to receive the gift of salvation just as you did. Never give up. You are their whale. You are the hands and feet of Jesus to rescue them.