**The Resurrection of Our Lord (Easter Sunday)**

**April 17, 2022**

**Text—Jonah 1:1-2:10**

If you’ve been attending services here at Trinity during the Lenten season, you’ll know that on Wednesday evenings, I have been preaching a sermon series on the Minor Prophets. Today, Easter Sunday, we end this series with the one Minor Prophet we have not yet studied. During the series, I’ve made the comment several times that the Minor Prophets are mostly obscure books of the Bible whose contents we are largely unaware of. To us, they’re mostly a set of hard to pronounce names that we had to memorize to pass our confirmation classes however many years ago. I would imagine that before this series started, most of us here knew very little about the Minor Prophets in general.

However, there is one massive, massive exception to this rule, and it’s the one we’re going to be finishing the series with. Today, we will hear a sermon on the book of Jonah. Unlike with the other Minor Prophets, pretty much all of us have at least some familiarity with this book. Perhaps we’ve seen the Veggie Tales movie about Jonah, or maybe we went to the Sight and Sound Theater in Branson to see their Jonah production several years ago. Or perhaps it’s just a story from Sunday School that we remember well. Regardless of how we know about Jonah, though, I’d guess that the vast majority of us here today know at least the basic details of his story.

It is unknown when the prophet Jonah’s ministry took place, but it most likely happened at some point before the fall of the Assyrian Empire. The city of Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and at that time, it was one of the biggest and most powerful cities in the known world. It was also a hotbed of sin, idolatry, and evil. Assyria was a pagan empire, one that did not recognize the true God as the creator of the universe and ruler of all things. Instead, the Assyrians worshiped many gods, and lived by a code of ethics that was far different from that of the Israelites. They worshiped idols, took things from others by force, oppressed the poor, engaged in sexual immorality, and even sacrificed their children to their false gods. These were not nice people, and as such, God was not happy with them at all.

So one day, an Israelite named Jonah was sitting there minding his own business when God appeared to him and told him, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” God had noticed the evil of the Ninevites, and he was planning to destroy them for their sins. But he wanted to give them a chance to repent, an opportunity to recognize the error of their ways and turn to the true God in faith. So he told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there. This was a highly unusual for one major reason: Nineveh was a Gentile city. Normally, God commissioned his prophets to call his people Israel to repentance, but here he was telling Jonah to go and preach to pagans. This was almost unprecedented during the Old Testament era, so Jonah had the honor of being selected for something that no other Israelite had ever been commanded to do.

Jonah, however, did not see it that way. He was probably terrified to go to Nineveh, a place that he knew was evil, whose inhabitants would probably imprison and execute him immediately if he dared to come in from the outside and preach judgment to them. Plus, there was part of him that actually wanted God to smite the Ninevites and destroy their city, because he felt like they deserved what was coming to them. Whatever his motivation, Jonah decided to take off in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh, and he boarded a ship heading for the town of Tarshish. The exact location of Tarshish is unknown, but it was somewhere out on the Mediterranean Sea, far away from Nineveh. Well, God did not take too kindly to his chosen prophet refusing his orders like this, so he sent a great windstorm upon the sea that threatened to destroy Jonah’s boat. All of the sailors cried out to their gods, but Jonah was asleep below the deck. The captain woke him up and told him to pray to his god too. When that didn’t work, they cast lots to see who was responsible, and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah then admitted that he worshiped the God who created earth and heaven, and that his God was attacking their ship because he was running away from his presence. He told the sailors to throw him overboard so that God would not destroy their ship. After some protests, the sailors decided to comply with Jonah’s request, and they threw him overboard. The storm immediately died down, and the sailors began to worship the true God. But God did not allow Jonah to drown; he sent a great fish, or a whale, or some kind of giant sea animal to swallow him and keep him alive.

Jonah was inside the belly of this fish for three days and three nights, and while he was in there, he decided to compose a song. He expressed his thankfulness to the Lord that he had heard him in his distress, that he had not completely abandoned Jonah in his hour of need. He knew that it was his own fault that he was in this position, and yet God had not punished him by taking his life. Instead, God had rescued him from the waters and brought up his life from the pit. Jonah knew that because God had done this for him, he could trust in God to deliver him in any situation, including in Nineveh if he ever made it over there. Those who trusted in idols were forsaking their hope in the true God, but Jonah would not lose his faith. Instead, he would worship God and rejoice in the salvation God had brought him. And after Jonah sang this song, God saw that he was repentant, and so he directed the fish to spit Jonah back out onto dry land. At that point, Jonah headed over to Nineveh and proclaimed the coming wrath of God against its people. And, miracle of miracles, the people actually listened to him and decided to change their ways. Thus, God proved that he was indeed faithful to his promises, and that he would give his chosen servants strength and success as they preached his Word.

Well that’s all well and good, but why today? What does the story of Jonah have to do with Easter, with Jesus rising again from the dead? I’ll let Jesus himself answer that question for us. At one point during his ministry, Jesus had just cast a demon out of a possessed man, but the scribes and Pharisees accused him of only being able to do that because he himself was in league with Satan. After Jesus rebuked them for saying such ridiculous things, they told them they wanted to see a sign from him. As if casting out a demon with a word wasn’t enough! But Jesus said to them in response, “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.” There’s your connection between Jonah and Easter. Just like Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, so too was Jesus buried in his tomb for three days. And just as Jonah was spit out of the fish after three days, so too did Jesus burst from his tomb when those three days had ended. This is the sign of Jonah: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead after three days. This was the sign that Jesus gave to the people of Israel in his day, and it’s the same sign that he gives to us today, we believers who also live in the midst of an evil and adulterous generation. So many people in our world today have rejected Jesus and his Word, but the sign of Jonah cannot be so easily dismissed. Just as the Christians in Jesus’ day believed in him because of his resurrection from the dead, so too can we believe in him because of his resurrection. The resurrection is what establishes Jesus as the true Son of God and the Savior of the world. Casting out demons was great, but rising from the dead is far greater. Jesus has given us the sign of Jonah, and the only proper response to this sign is to believe and to worship him.

Jesus has promised all of the blessings of his kingdom to everyone who sees this sign and receives it in faith. He has promised that everyone who believes that he is the Son of God and trusts in him for salvation will receive exactly that. Death was not strong enough to hold Jesus in the grave; it is not strong enough to hold any of his faithful people in the grave either. When we die, we will not be dead forever, but our souls will go to be with Jesus in heaven, where he is now seated at the right hand of God. And on the last day when Jesus returns to earth, he will raise all of us from the dead as well, reuniting our bodies and souls and restoring us to the physical life that we were always meant to have. Then we will live forever with him in his kingdom, with none of the sins, sorrows, or sufferings of this life to plague us ever again. The sign that he gave us by rising again from the dead after three days is proof that he is capable of accomplishing these things for us. Trust in his promises to you, and you will see their fulfillment for you on the last day.

When Jesus was speaking with the scribes and Pharisees about the sign of Jonah, he also made this comment: “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.” Jesus was saying that the Ninevites, those terrible pagans whom the Israelites considered to be the scum of the earth, would be the ones who would receive God’s blessings. They would be blessed by him because they repented of their sin and believed the Word that Jonah preached to them. The scribes and Pharisees, by contrast, were part of that evil and adulterous generation that rejected Jesus and refused to listen to him. They, who thought themselves so righteous and pure, would actually be condemned by the people of Nineveh! The Ninevites heard Jonah’s words and believed, while the scribes and Pharisees would be given the sign of Jonah by Jesus, and yet they would not believe. There’s a lesson in this for us here today. Some of us may wish that God were more active in showing us signs of his power. Maybe we feel like if we could see Jesus do something, we’d be more likely to believe that he is God’s Son. But that is to forget about the only sign that we really need, the sign of Jonah, the sign of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. If we believe in this sign, we will rise along with the people of Nineveh to stand with Jesus during the judgment. But if we reject this sign as untrue or unimportant, then we will be judged by the Ninevites just as the scribes and Pharisees will be. We will only live forever in God’s kingdom if we acknowledge Jesus to be his Son and trust in him for salvation. Believe in him, then, believe in the sign of his resurrection, and you will indeed see the blessings of eternal life in his name.

Thus we, like the prophet Jonah, can rejoice in the salvation that God has granted to us. Jonah sang his thankfulness to God for rescuing him from drowning, and we sing our thankfulness to him for the forgiveness, life, and salvation he has granted to us through his Son Jesus Christ. We have received the sign of Jesus’ resurrection, and so we know that he is indeed the Son of God who is powerful enough to save us from all of our spiritual enemies. We have called out to the Lord in our distress, and he has answered us, just as he did Jonah. Therefore, like Jonah, we will boldly proclaim that salvation belongs to the Lord. And on the last day, just as Jonah came out of the belly of the fish and just as Jesus came out of his tomb, so will we come out of our graves to eternal life in the kingdom of God. The same Jesus who gave us the sign of Jonah will be faithful to all of his promises to us. Let us, then, joyfully proclaim the message that the church has been preaching ever since Jesus gave his people the sign of Jonah: “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” Amen.