

“The Christmas Stories—A MISSION Story”

Our sermon series **theme** for this pre-Christmas **Advent** Season is “The Christmas **StorieS**”—highlighting the **BACK**stories that set the **NEED** for Christ’s arrival into our world that first **Christmas**, as **well** as on the coming **Last Day**!

During the **previous** two Sundays, Pastor Matt first explored a **WAR** Story—the great **cosmic battle** with Satanic forces in the **spiritual** realm—and then **last** Sunday, a **DARK** Story in our **earthly** realm as Herod resorts to **infanticide** to remove his “**regal rival**”...the **TRUE** “King of the Jews”. But this morning’s “**Christmas Story**” is ultimately a **MISSION** Story that most of us probably never even have **CONNECTED** with Christmas... an amazingly **true** but rather **short** story comprised of only four brief chapters that take place 800 years **BEFORE** the first Christmas...the story of a prophet of God born just **an hour’s walk** away from Nazareth where **Jesus** would one day grow up...a prophet who’s name literally means “**dove**” but who attempted to “**fly the coop**” when God called him to carry out a **mission** he wanted **no part of**...in other words, a prophet who often thought and acted...**MUCH LIKE US!**

So, forgive me for **beginning** this true story with an overused **cliché**, but it really **WAS** “*a dark and stormy night*” with lightning **flashing**, thunder **crashing**, waves ripping across the **deck**, and a **howling gale** with sideways **rain** that felt like **needles!** The **sailors** on the boat had a **white-knuckle grip** on anything battened down, but even **those things** were coming loose with boards creaking and **snapping** under the stress. The sailors knew it wouldn’t be long before the ship splintered into **pieces**, swirling downward into the depths of **Davey Jones’ Locker!**

But as with proverbial **foxholes**, there also are **no atheists** on **sinking ships!** So, the sailors were shouting out **PRAYERS** to **any god** who might listen...but the only **answer** was another **wave**, **lightning bolt**, and crack of **thunder**. “*Throw the cargo overboard!*” came a shout, “*and where’s that passenger we picked up back in Joppa?*” the captain asked. “*I think he’s still down below, deck,*” shouted the first mate. Bracing against the **tossing ship**, the captain lurched two labored steps **forward** and one step **back** toward the **hatch**. **Steadying** himself, he climbed down and found the passenger...**SLEEPING**...**snoring** as loud as the storm! The captain **roused** him. “*Wake up and start PRAYING! None of OUR gods are listening! Maybe YOUR God will listen and save us!*”

The captain knew Jonah was a **prophet** of **some** sort. When he booked **passage**, the captain had asked, *"Why would a Jew like you want to sail 2,500 miles **WEST** to a faraway place like **Tarshish**?"* *"Because it **IS** far away!"* Jonah replied. *"My God ordered me to go to **EAST** to **Nineveh** and to tell the people to **REPENT**!"* Yes, but ***Tarshish** is as far in the **opposite** direction as you can go!"* said the captain. *"That's the **point**!"* Jonah replied. *"I don't want to go **near** Nineveh. I **HATE** it as much as I **FEAR** it!"*

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria's truly "**evil empire**"...the **Hamas** of 8th century B.C. that sent chills up and down the spine of every Jew or **other** nation in the region. And by **Jonah's** time, the Assyrians already had about a **century's worth** of **atrocities** under their belts! In fact, the barbaric Assyrians **celebrated** their brutality, writing down every detailed dastardly **deed** and **etching** the images in **stone**,...even **bragging** about **live dismemberment**, which often included leaving one hand of a person **attached**, so they could **shake it** before the person died! Assyrians paraded disembodied **heads** on **poles** and stretched out their enemies on **tent stakes**, yanked out their **tongues**, and flayed them like a **fish**. King Ashurnasirpal II **bragged**: *"I burnt their boys and girls, captured troops alive & cut off their extremities...and gouged out their eyes and hung their heads on trees around the city."*

People wouldn't have questioned Jonah's sanity for staying clear of **Ninevah**; they would have questioned **God's** sanity for **SENDING** him there! Jonah's decision to flee from God's **call** made sense to **everybody** —except **God**! That's why the storm was no simple "**meteorological matter**" of a **cold air mass** slamming into a **warm air mass**. Like that famous "**Blues Brothers**" movie, Jonah was **supposed** to be on a "**Mission for God**". So, the storm was a matter of Jonah's **disobedience** slamming into God's **mission** to get the largest city in the ancient world—an estimated 600,000 to 2 million people (including the suburbs)—to **repent**! God had sent that storm to get Jonah back into the spiritual "**swim of things**", so to speak...to give him a "**second chance**".

Even though the sailors didn't **want** to toss Jonah overboard, Jonah told them it was the only way to save themselves **and** the ship. So, **reluctantly**, probably some burly sailor with a Popeye the Sailor man anchor tattooed on his forearm grabbed Jonah's **legs**, while another grabbed his **arms**, and on the count of **three**, gave Jonah the old "**heave HO**" into the **HIGH** seas. Then, as if God's **thumb** hit a **stop switch**, the wind **ceased**, the sea **calmed**, the rain **stopped**, and the bouncing boat settled back to normal. And just as the sailors had once feared the **STORM**, they now feared **GOD**...in a **GRATEFUL** way...the **TRUE** God of **Jonah**...and even offered sacrifices

and made **vows** to Him! Things were now just dandy...at **SEA** level...but not so **BELOW** sea level.

As Jonah **plunged** into the depths of the Mediterranean, **suddenly**, the gaping jaws of a **gigantic** sea creature—a specially prepared “**Leviathan from the Lord**”—opened **wide** and swallowed Jonah **whole**! Oh, it was unpleasant and **yucky**, but the creature saved Jonah's **life**, and **for three days**, the fish's belly provided a placid place to **pray** and **reconsider** the call of God and his **missionary** assignment to the Assyrians...which is what Jonah **DID**...learning (at least, for the moment), to thank God for saving his **life**, and learning from God how to **personally exhibit** the same kind of **repentance** Jonah was soon going to preach to the **Assyrians**. Jonah more or less said, *"God, if You'll give me **another chance**, I **WILL** go preach repentance to those nasty Assyrians."*

That's all our “**God of the Second Chance**” was waiting to hear, so God gave a little **ipecac** to the great fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land. No doubt, Jonah looked the **worse** for **wear** from the fish's **digestive acids** burning patches on Jonah's **skin**...his hair a tangled, bleached **mess**...and body odor akin to a three-day-old **tuna sandwich**. I wonder if he also had to fight off a few squawking, fish-loving **seagulls on the beach** until he got a good **bath** and a fresh change of **duds**!

It's then that God “lets bygones be bygones” and calls to Jonah a **SECOND time**: *"Get up and go to Nineveh. I'm going to give you a message, and I want you to preach it against Nineveh."* *"You won't have to ask me **thrice**,"* Jonah replied. *"I'm on my way."*

So, Jonah made the long walk to Nineveh with shaky **nerves** and sweaty **palms**, checking his **sermon notes**, and entering a metropolis so **massive** it would take a person walking an average pace **three full days** to see it all! But Jonah wasn't there for **tourism**; Jonah had a **job** to do...stopping at every street corner with maybe the shortest sermon in history. *"Forty days from now, Nineveh will be overthrown if you **don't REPENT!**"* The message of Nineveh's coming **demise** was all he had to say. And **then**, he turned around and left the city, hiking up to the top of a hill to the **east**, overlooking the city, where he made camp under a **lean-to** covered with large gourd or **caster bean** leaves to give Jonah pleasant **shade** from the **hot sun**.

And there he **eagerly waited** for God to **lower the boom** on those hated Ninevites. He thought to himself, *"This actually would be **worth my nearly drowning and being saturated in fish barf!**"* There, Jonah settled into his **perch**, like a **vulture** high above the city, hoping that **not one single person** that he even **PREACHED** to would escape God's wrath!

But wouldn't you **know** it? For the **first time** in history, Nineveh actually did something **right!** Even the **KING** of Nineveh got up off of his **throne**, tore off his **royal robes**, slipped into some **sackcloth**, and sat in a pile of **ashes**, because, *“Nothing says **repentance** like sackcloth and ashes!”*... and he then decreed that **ALL** of Nineveh should repent and do as **he** did...even all the **livestock** should fast and wear sackcloth!

I can't help but think, *“Boy, that Jonah must have been **some preacher!** I wonder what his **grades** were in **homiletics** and **sermon theory** classes back when he attended “the School of the Prophets”!* I mean just a **“one sentence sermon”** that spared an entire **metropolis** from a **“heavenly holocaust”**? (Man, I bet it would even take **Pastor Matt** a whole **sermon series** to accomplish that!)

But seriously, in Jesus' Great Commission, **EVERY** believer has a divine call to be “on a mission for God”—pastor **AND** parishioner. Yet often, like Jonah, **WE** want to choose the mission and message of our own calling and make it suitable only for those to whom we feel **comfortable**...or find **worthy** to hear what we have to share. But we must remember, our **OWN** message is **POWERLESS**. It may **entertain** or even **teach**, but it **cannot TRANSFORM!** However, **God's** message for **ALL** people will have God's **power** and will produce God's intended **results!** So, whether Jonah liked it or not, his **CALL** and God's **DESIRE** was still to give the Ninevites an opportunity to **turn** from their evil and place their faith in the one **true GOD**. **Sadly**, Jonah's desires for Nineveh didn't exactly reflect God's **MERCY!**

Jonah was watching all of this from a **HILL**. God was watching all of it from **heaven**. And God, *“Who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would rather them turn to Him and live”*...saw the **repentance** in Nineveh, heaved a great sigh of **relief**, and **cancelled** their impending doom. And there was great joy in heaven! Angels twirled and clapped and kicked up their heels in a “jig of joy “and praise to God.

But Jonah didn't **rejoice**, **smile** OR **clap**. Instead of kicking up his **heels**; he dug them **IN**, got **mad**, and **sulked**. *“I just **KNEW** it!”* Jonah says to God. *“This is why I didn't want to come here in the **first** place. I **know** You, God...how it takes a lot to make you angry, but You're still full of **mercy** and **love** and would rather **save** people than **destroy** them. And now, You've done it **again**, even for these degenerate **Ninevites**, no less!”*

Jonah believed the only **good** Ninevite was a **dead** one, so he moped and felt **sorry** for himself. But God loved Jonah, **TOO!** God even caused a **plant** to grow up and **shade** Jonah, making him **smile** for the first time in days. But the **NEXT** day,

God sent a worm to eat the plant and leave Jonah in the wind and sun **again** in order to teach Jonah a **valuable lesson**.

Staring at the withered vine, *"Just kill me, **now**,"* Jonah said to God. *"I'd be better off **dead**." "Really?"* responds the Lord, *"Over a silly **plant**? Let me get this **straight**. You pity a **plant** you didn't **sow**, didn't **water** or didn't help **grow** in any way...a **plant** that appeared **one** day and was gone the **next**. Should I then not pity **Nineveh all the more**...that large and bustling city in which there are more than 120,000 lost children who don't know right from wrong?"*

And **THAT**, my friends, is the way Jonah's story **ENDS**...with a **question**. God literally says to Jonah, *"Is your **eye evil**, because I am **good**?"* The ESV translates it, *"Am I not allowed to do what I **choose** with what belongs to **Me**? Or do you begrudge My **generosity**?"* To **paraphrase**, *"Should I not have compassion for the billions of lost adults and children on the earth who have yet to hear the gospel?"* And **so**, if God has compassion for **them**, shouldn't also God's **people** exhibit His compassion also?

That's **Jonah's** story, a **MISSION** story, and thus, one of the ways the Old Testament says, "**Merry Christmas**" long before the **first** Christmas ever happened! We often—and **correctly**—associate Jonah with the **EASTER** story, due to Jesus words in **Matt. 12:40**, *"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."* However, I think the Book of Jonah also has every bit as much to do with the **CHRISTMAS** story...which also is the **ultimate MISSION STORY**. Let me explain.

If you were allowed only **ONE Bible passage**...one **VERSE** with which to share the Good News about Jesus with others, which verse you would choose? Personally, I don't have to think any **further** than **John 3:16**, *"For God so loved **the whole world**, that He gave His only Son, so that **whoever** believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*

The brief story of **Jonah** is the Old Testament's **John 3:16**. In fact, the entire Book of Jonah gives us the clearest statement in the Old Testament that God loves the **whole** world, even including **THE most wicked people on earth**...and that He wants to **save** them every bit as much as anyone else. It's the story that says **Christmas** is on the way. It's the story that was echoed so many centuries later by the angels' announcement to the shepherds that first Christmas night when they said: *"Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to **ALL PEOPLE** ..."* Jonah's story declares that the "**all people**" of the angels' song includes even the **nastiest** of people...like those Ninevites.

Jonah is a **Christmas** story in which God is the **lead actor**, and God is played...well...by **God!** God **relents** at Nineveh's cry of **repentance**, and God **saves** them instead of **destroying** them. This is God doing what Christ **Himself** said, *"...coming to **seek and to save the lost**,"* ...just like the Heavenly Father did when He sent His only-begotten, through Mary's **womb**, into our **world**...just like He did when Jesus died on the **Cross** to provide forgiveness for the **sins** of the **whole world** when He died **FOR ALL**. In Jonah's **Christmas** story, the "**glad tidings**" are that...no sinner is too **vile** or too far **gone** for God's long arm of salvation to reach out to them and pull them up out of the depths of sin.

That's just who God IS—the One Who finds His greatest joy when a "lost sheep" is **found** and even when just **one** sinner **repents** and is **saved**. God even is willing to go to **extreme measures**, sending a **storm** and a **gigantic fish** to spare a rebellious **preacher** and get him to go to lost, wicked Nineveh, no matter how much trouble and danger and inconvenience it caused. **Jonah** is a **Christmas** story about **GOD'S** mission and **OUR** mission to bring glad tidings to **ALL** people!

We're not **told** in the story whether the prophet Jonah ever embraced the Law and Gospel character of God expressed in James 2:13 that says, *"For judgment is without mercy to one who has not **SHOWN** mercy. But mercy **TRIUMPHS** over judgment."* Therefore, the prophet **Jonah**, remains the **FOIL** in the story...the original **Ebenezer Scrooge**—that old miserly **skinflint** whose grasp of **money** is matched only by **Jonah's** stinginess with the **good news** that God loves us **so much that**, He'd even sacrifice Himself for that nasty Ninevite **neighbor** of yours who makes your life so miserable, **as well as** for the Ebenezer Scrooge we too often see in our **own** bathroom mirror!

CONCLUSION

Sadly, when God spared **Nineveh**, instead of breaking into a chorus of *"Joy to the World"*, Jonah said, *"Bah, Humbug!"* But you may recall that Scrooge **was a changed man** at the end of **Dicken's**, *"A Christmas Carol."* You and I **ALSO** have been **changed**—**from the day of Baptism**...to fulfill our **mission** of spreading the glad tidings of great joy that we have a **Savior** Who's come for **ALL** people! In that **Savior's Name**, Amen!