

It is always my joy and delight to be with you, and I'm so glad to see you all. It's wonderful to see you. For those of you who don't know me, as Pastor Dan said, I am Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee. I'm the Bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod, of which Queen Anne Lutheran Church is part of; we are all the Synod together. And so, with the other 112 congregations, I am so glad to be here with you. Sometimes I get introduced as the guest, which is true, but also I am a part of you, and you are a part of the Synod. So, it's always good that we can praise God together, worship God together, pray to God together and be in holy community with one another. So again, it's wonderful to be here. And it is my honor and my joy to be your bishop.

Grace and peace to you, from God our creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So let me just say: Jonah is no Peter, Andrew, James, or John. He doesn't leave what he's doing, and immediately follow God's calling. No, Jonah jumps into the first boat going in the *opposite* direction from Nineveh; he gets in that boat that's heading to Tarshish. Now Tarshish, in case you don't know, was kind of like the Las Vegas of antiquity. It was a favorite vacation spot for Israelites, let's say, with money. So perhaps Jonah thought, "Well, God will never be found in a place like Tarshish; I can be safe there and not be forced to do something that I don't want to do."

So anyway, Jonah jumps into this boat heading towards Tarshish. And he's hiding in the hold of the ship, hoping that maybe somehow God will just leave him alone.

Think how the Gospels would be different if Peter, Andrew, James and John, who upon encountering Jesus, rather than leaving their fishing nets and boats behind and followed him, instead, jumped into their fishing boats, and rode as fast as they could towards the opposite shore, away from that dangerous, itinerant preacher who's asking them to do something they don't want to do. Would've made pretty short gospels, right?

Well, that didn't happen. They all left everything that they had; their fishing boats, their families, their livelihoods, everything, and they followed Jesus. But Jonah, who we're talking about today – Jonah fled.

He tried to get as far away from God, and from God's instructions that he didn't want to do, as he could. Go to Nineveh?! The capital of the Assyrian Empire?! That destroyer of Israel, that brutal occupying force?! Jonah thinks, "No, no!"

And let me just say, Nineveh *was* evil. They did horrible things. They weren't just "somewhat misguided." They tortured people. They enslaved people. They were the terrorists of the ancient world. Nineveh was a symbol of everything that opposed God and God's people. It's quite understandable that a prophet who followed God would be reluctant to accept a mission to that city. In the eyes of humanity, there wasn't much good coming from Nineveh. Nineveh was the enemy. And Jonah knows it.

So, Jonah, as we said, hides in this ship. Well, what does God do?

He sends a storm. A huge storm.

And the ship is rocking and tipping in that storm, and the sailors start praying to their gods, and they're praying and they're praying to their gods, but the storm just gets bigger and bigger, and the boat is tossing and turning, and finally they see this man that's in the hull of the boat and they wake him up. And they ask him, "Do you know what's going on?"

Well, let me just read a portion of Jonah chapter 1, on what happens:

"The sailors said to one another, come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country and of what people are you?' Jonah says, 'Well, I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

And then the men were even more afraid.

And they said to him, 'What is it that you have done?' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so."

Do you notice how these men, we might call them pagans, that these men seem to respect God more than Jonah, a prophet of the Lord?

Well, let me read on. What happens?

"So then the sailor said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea, then the sea will quiet down for you. For I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.'

Now the men, the men hear this, and it says in Scripture, "Nevertheless, the men rowed back hard to get the ship to land. But they couldn't make it to the land, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. And then they cried to the Lord God himself, they cried, 'Please,'" these pagans, these men who didn't even worship God, they prayed to God, 'please, oh, Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. And do not make us guilty of innocent blood for you, oh, Lord, have done as it pleased you.'

So after they prayed this, picked Jonah up, and they threw him into the sea. And the sea ceased its raging.

Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

And Jonah, in the belly of the fish, immersed in seawater and blubber, well, he begins to pray like those sailors on the ship. "I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me out of the belly of Sheol."

"I cried and you heard my voice, you cast me into the deep into the heart of the sea, and the flood surrounded me, all your waves and your billows passed over me, the deep surrounded me, weeds were wrapped around my head, oh Lord, my God, as my life was ebbing away. I remembered the Lord."

We would all remember the Lord at this point, right?

"I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you; deliverance belongs to the Lord."

Now, as you might know, the sea, in Scripture, is a symbol of chaos, of danger of wildness, it's still – I mean, I think we all see the sea in that way also. But even as Jonah flees, even as Jonah despairs, even as Jonah lives in the heart of chaos and danger and the sea, even as Jonah flounders in the belly of a fish, Jonah prays – and God hears Jonah's prayer.

Jonah, who ran away, Jonah, who didn't want to do God's business, Jonah, who wanted to get the heck as far away from Nineveh as he could, Jonah finally prays, and God hears his prayer, and God speaks to the great fish.

And what does the fish do? Vomits Jonah right out onto dry land. And that's where we begin our Scripture today. We just heard, in the First Reading which Pastor Dan just read: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah." You remember when it said – "a *second* time."

"Get up. Get all that seaweed off of you. Get up, and go to Nineveh, that great city." And this time, Jonah obeys. Jonah, bleached white after three days in the belly of a fish, all that stuff from the fish dangling from his arms and his legs, he goes to the city of Nineveh.

So let's say the gate of Nineveh is right here, right? Well, just like many of us sometimes don't do exactly what we are asked to do, because we really don't want to do it – as an aside, this is what I used to do when my mother asked me to vacuum and she was at work and she'd say, "Girls (I have two sisters) – Girls, make sure that you vacuum before I come home." We literally would get the vacuum out of the closet and not plug it in, but run just like a couple things, so it *looks* like we vacuumed, but we really didn't vacuum. Because we didn't plug it in. It was the same amount of work as if we had plugged it in; I don't know. That is just what we did. So that's my aside.

Here's Jonah... Here's the gate of Nineveh... And just like sometimes we don't do exactly what we are asked to do, because we just don't want to do it, Jonah does the same, even though God just saved him; God heard his prayers from the belly of a whale!

God just saved him, but Jonah does the bare minimum of what's required. As it says in Scripture, this city was so large "it would take three days' journey to walk across it." This is what Jonah does.

Jonah preaches the shortest sermon in the history of sermons:

"40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

That's it. That's all he does.

And suddenly, Jonah becomes the most successful prophet in the whole history of prophets. Every inhabitant in the city, human and animal alike, believes what he has said. 100% of the Ninevites repent, from the King to the poorest citizen there. Even the cattle and the sheep wear sackcloth.

Is Jonah happy with his success? Does he rejoice? No! He is so angry. He is so mad. He sulks and he mopes, he feels sorry for himself, and he's livid with God.

As we hear in the Scripture today, he rails against God. He prays, "Oh Lord, is this not what I said would happen, when I was still in my own territory? That's why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, because I know that you are a God, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

We all know those words, right? Because a lot of times we sing those words, we say those words, they always sound so beautiful, but man, they were not said in any sort of graciousness, right? The words are beautiful, but in Jonah's mouth, an accusation.

"You God, you are gracious and merciful. I *knew* this would happen! I declared your judgment on this sinful city, and you – you changed your mind! 'Abounding in steadfast love,' I knew it! You forgave my enemies!"

And that is what happened. Jonah is absolutely right when he says to God, as it says in chapter three, verse 10, "When God saw what they the Ninevites did, and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring up on them the destruction He had threatened."

Here's the thing, you see.

It was petty anger and foolishness that landed Jonah in the belly of the fish. God wanted to use Jonah to bring about repentance to the people of Nineveh, and really, to the whole world. These people, that Jonah hated, God loved. But Jonah couldn't see beyond his own prejudice, his own hatred, his own revulsion at these people, to see that God was bringing about a new day for these people.

You know, we love a grace-filled, forgiveness-filled, love-filled God when it comes to us. But even throughout scriptures, we see how those who are so graced, turn *ungracious* when it's their enemy's turn.

Think about Sarah.

When Sarah finally received that child that she had desperately prayed for, Isaac, what does she do next? She throws out her husband's *other* child, Ishmael, and his mother, into the wilderness to die. Because that child was not hers.

Think about the prophet Elijah. Elijah had great success against the prophets of Ba'al. They couldn't get a fire going, they couldn't do anything. Elijah was amazing. He could get fire, even though there was all this water around, it was – everybody was amazed at his God.

And what does Elijah do next? He kills all 450 prophets of Ba'al!

Peter, you think of Peter, he was in the Gospel today, as Simon but, Simon Peter.

Peter, at the end of the Gospels, what does Peter do when he's approached by a little girl around a fire? What does he say? "I don't know who this man is. I don't know who you're talking about." Right?

Peter totally denies ever knowing Jesus, ever knowing the man that he left his fishing boat for, leaving everything to follow him, Peter's now like, "Who? What? Say that name again? I've never heard of him."

Jesus, of course, after the resurrection, comes and makes peace with Peter, calls him out to do more good things, even after this rejection, after this denial. And what does Peter do in the book of Acts, at the beginning of Acts, he says, "Any of you who are not Jews, any of you Gentiles, let me name 472 things that you need to do before you become a Christian." All of the rules.

And it's not just in Scripture that people who have received this amazing grace, turn, and don't give any grace at all, to anybody else. All of us here, me included, all of us here, we all have people and groups that we love to hate. We can all name those groups, right? Some of us, maybe all of us, agree on one or two groups that we all hate together. But maybe there's some disagreement on other groups that we hate. There's groups out there that we just despise.

And we have people closer to home, that we just don't have good feelings about. Think about Thanksgiving or Christmas, when one of your relatives says, "Oh, I'm sorry, I just can't make it" and we go, "Oh, thank God."

I think of this person that I've known my whole life, I grew up with this person. And in third grade we had an altercation because he pushed my best friend off a swing. Later we were in band together I played trumpet, he played trombone, and he used to, he used to empty his spit-valve on me all the time. And later, after I became bishop, he actually sent me like this three-page email about the evils of women in ministry and how awful I am that I'm in this. This person has been a thorn in my side my entire life. And I know when I get to that great banquet in heaven, I'm going to sit down, and he is going to be sitting – right there.

And that makes me so mad! I don't want him to be anywhere around me. I've tried. I really tried... We all have people and groups that we love to hate.

And by the way, you will notice that this story in Jonah is not about justice. Because if it was about justice, it would be a completely different story. Nineveh would get what it deserves, because it was a horrible, horrible place.

But this story is not about justice. This story is about God's amazing grace.

So in this book of Jonah, we are faced with these questions. Who do I love to hate? Who would I be horrified to discover that God has forgiven? When would I rather be dumped in the ocean and swallowed by a fish than accept that this person, or this group, or this country, is also receiving God's grace, like me?

I don't like it either, I'll tell you.

But in the end, the story in the book of Jonah is not about Jonah at all. Instead, it's about God, and God's amazing grace. Grace that is so amazing that we can't even comprehend or understand it, or even, sometimes, like it. It's a grace that seems scandalous and wrong.

But it's God's grace to give and not ours.

And my friends, this grace, comes to us, even holding those grudges and that hatred, the grace still comes to us; to us, in the midst of our pettiness and our wanting to be right, or wanting another person or country to just get what they deserve. The overwhelming promise is that wherever we are – here at home, in the depths of Sheol, in the belly of a fish – God is there, loving us, nurturing us, and drawing us into the joy of God's life and love. Even when we want to run away, even when we go towards Tarshish, even when we don't want to step one foot into Nineveh, God still is there.

And my friends, this wonderful good news, it's not just for us.

This news is not good news for us to hoard. It's a message that applies to all people, everywhere. Even those people that we love to hate, especially those for whom we cherish a terrible love of hatred.

No one, no one is so far gone that God's Spirit cannot bring them to repentance. No one is beyond the scope of God's mercy, and love.

So, who do you find it difficult to love?

God loves them. As much as God loves you and me.

The same God who gave Jonah a second chance, gives the people of Nineveh a second chance. And we can't begrudge that kind of mercy. This is a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. A God we know most fully in our Savior, Jesus Christ, who called those men away from the fishing boats, and who continues to call us today. May this grace come to us, and surround us, and may we say, swallow us up, so that we might, in turn, shout the good news of God's grace to our friends and our enemies alike.

Amen.