Lent 2010: Jonah Sermon 2 – Our Providing God

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Based on Jonah 1 and Matthew 14:14-21

For the last two weeks we have been on a journey with Jonah. Jonah was called by God to go to the city of Nineveh and announce the Lord's judgment against the people for their evil ways. God's hope was that the Ninevites would repent and experience the mercy and grace of God's forgiving love.

But Jonah had other plans. Instead of following God's commands, Jonah's rebellion and stubbornness led him to hop on a ship headed for Tarshish. *(motioning with hands)* Nineveh here; Tarshish way over here.

The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to think about times in our lives when we have acted contrary to God's commands. We know what God's Word says. We hear God call us to obey his commands and to live holy lives. But all too often we choose to disregard what God says and live life by our own rules. Like Jonah, we have our own agenda, and God just showing up unannounced puts a crimp into our plans.

And so off we go, soon forgetting that God even made his will known to us. When we gather to worship, we hear and understand how God wants us to live. But then when we leave this place and go about our everyday routines, how often do we honor the words God spoke to us? How often do we choose our own desires over the ways of God?

Taking an honest look at our lives is what Lent is about all. We are sinners, yes. We do not always put God first in our lives. But God, because of his great love for us, will not just let us be. Because all too soon we realize that our own plans aren't as wonderful as we envisioned they would be. Although we are doing exactly what we wanted to do, we are left feeling lonely, unfulfilled, empty, without purpose. Tarshish isn't all it's cracked up to be.

So what is God's response to stubborn people like us? We discovered last week that when we run God comes looking for us – not to judge or punish us, but to makes sure we are safe, and to remind us of how much he loves us. It's the enduring message of the Prodigal Son story that Jesus tells. God comes looking for us in order to keep his promise to always watch over us and to provide for our every need.

Throughout the story of Jonah, God provides. At the end of chapter 1, the Lord provides the swallowing fish that safely harbors Jonah from the storm that rages around him. In Chapter 2, which we will cover next week, God will provide Jonah with some quiet time for reflection and confession. In Chapter 3, God will provide Jonah with the right words which will bring the people of Nineveh to repent of their sins. Finally, in chapter 4, God will provide a shady vine, then a hungry worm and some withering wind.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. It's safe to say that throughout Jonah's life, God was a providing God. Despite the sinfulness of Nineveh, despite the stubbornness of Jonah, God continued to be faithful to them and to graciously provide for their every need. God's love and forgiving spirit is not dependent upon their obedience. Quite the contrary, the more that Jonah dug in his heels and disobeyed the Lord, the more determined God became to bring Jonah back into his saving arms.

One of the blessings of being theologically educated is my ability to dig deep into a biblical text and uncover many different layers of meaning. But one of the problems with all of my theology degrees is that often times I thrust my theological shovel into the text immediately without taking a moment to discover what is on the surface of the text.
If we simply look at the words in the story of Jonah, something fascinating emerges. Just about everything in the story is "great" – the *great* city of Nineveh, the *great* windstorm, the sailor's *great* fear.

When Jonah finally arrives in the city of Nineveh in the third chapter, the Bible says that it took Jonah three days to see it all. In biblical times, a day's journey was between 20 and 25 miles. That means that Nineveh was about 60-75 miles in diameter. That's enormous! Just to give you some perspective, the city of Sherman has a total of 38 square miles. Waco is 84 square miles.

And it doesn't stop there. When Nineveh is translated as begin a "wicked" city, that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of their evilness. Nineveh was the gathering grounds of the Assyrians, known as the most savage and bloodthirsty race ever. I always think of the Assyrians as the ancient equivalent of Darth Vader's empire!

Also, during the storm, Jonah doesn't just take a nap. The language used is similar to someone going into a coma. The verb used for Jonah's sleep is the same one used to describe the "deep sleep" that God anesthetized Adam with when he removed his rib to create Eve.

Perhaps you also noticed that God isn't planning to destroy just *some* of the people in Nineveh. God's plan is to destroy the *entire* city.

The point is, EVERYTHING in Jonah is extreme: not just a city, but an *enormous* city; not just wicked people, but *bloodthirsty* people; not just a nap, but a *coma*.

In Jonah, everything is blown out of proportion, including God's grace. Not only do we experience a great storm, but we experience a great God who chooses to love and save Jonah despite his rebellion. We experience a God whose mercy is so great that he is willing to forgive the most wicked sinners one could ever imagine. We encounter a God who will go to extraordinary measures to provide for his people – even if it takes a big fish gulping down one of his lost children. Our God will stop at nothing to provide for us.

Stop and think for a moment. What has God provided you? Sure, there's all of the obvious things. But consider the things that we take for granted each day –like having a car to drive, air to breathe, and family and friends to love.

The feeding of the 5000 story from Matthew's gospel reminds us that God will abundantly provide us with our daily bread. In the *Small Catechism* Martin Luther teaches that our daily bread is not just about having food on the table, but it encompasses everything that God our Father provides us – clothing, money, a devoted family, good weather, good government, the list goes on and on. Just as in the story of Jonah, Martin Luther blows out of proportion what "daily bread" means because he knows that's just the way God works. Our God is a providing God.

We don't deserve such goodness. But how deserving we are is never part of the equation when God determines provision. That's the nature of grace. That's why we call it *amazing* grace. God gives even when we don't deserve it.

That's the message of the cross. God will stop at nothing to love, to forgive and to save his people. God will even go so far as to provide his only Son as the sacrificial Lamb upon the cross of Calvary in order to save all of humanity.

Knowing that we will more often than not choose our own way, knowing that we will always set our eyes on Tarshish when God calls us to journey to Nineveh, God takes matters into his own hands. God offers his sinless Son upon the cross to forgive all of the sins of humanity. Through the death of Jesus, our strained relationship with God is once and for all mended. The cross will show us that God's forgiveness is more powerful than our rebellion; God's salvation will triumph over judgment and death.

May our hearts overflow with gratitude for all God has provided. And may our words echo the words of St. Paul found in the 4th chapter of Philippians: "At the moment I have all I need – and more! I am generously supplied with many things. And this same God who takes care of me will supply all of your needs from his glorious riches, which has been given to us in Christ Jesus."

No matter what it takes, God will provide for you and for me – even if it means giving his own Son upon the cross.

Thanks be to God!