

## From Oxford to Baghdad

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Epiphany, January 27, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I. This morning, I'd like to take you with me on an imaginative trip from Oxford to Baghdad where we explore the nearby ruins of the city of Babylon, the capital of the ancient Babylonian Empire. From Baghdad we follow the valley of the Tigris River Northwest to the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. As we approach the city our Arab tour guide points to two large earthen mounds covering many acres on the east bank of the Tigris. These are the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh. There, legend has it, the prophet Jonah is buried.

Our guide speaks with pride. He tells us, "Modern day Iraqis are descendants of the Assyrians and Babylonians, two of the greatest empires of the ancient world." He looks at me and continues, "When your illiterate ancestors were living in caves in Northern Europe, unable to read or write, dependent upon hunting and gathering, my ancestors had already created a great civilization, discovered agricultural techniques, invented writing, and built architectural monuments that have lasted to this day."

The Arab continues, "When this ruined city of Nineveh was in its glory, my ancestors had built up the most powerful military machine the world had yet seen. Our armies were led into battle by some of the most brilliant generals the world has ever known. We invented siege artillery. No fortified city could withstand our assaults. We had the most advanced weapons of the day but we relied on cunning as much as weapons."

He does not say so but I already know that the Assyrian empire was built on militarism and cruelty. Jonah would have been well aware of Assyria's reputation for terror tactics. All of Israel would have known of the cruelty of Ashurnasirpal II who punished his enemies by flaying them alive and nailing their skins up along the highways. He'd place the severed heads of his enemies on his city gates. It was his practice to destroy a captured city by fire. He was merciless towards the inhabitants, cutting off the hands and ears of the men, putting out their eyes, stacking them up in rows- like cordwood- to die. The children were burned alive (Scramuzza, The Ancient World). "In the gratification of my wrath I find contentment", he wrote.

It's within this historical context that God called Jonah to go to Nineveh. Let's briefly review the contents of the book of Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah disobeys and goes, by ship, in the opposite direction. A terrible storm threatens the lives of all on board. Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard and the storm will cease. A huge fish swallows Jonah. After three days and nights, the fish spews him out and God calls Jonah once more to go to Nineveh. He repents and obeys and goes. He walks through the streets ~~of~~ crying, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Now a lot of people find this book hard to believe. Most of the attention is focused on Jonah and the whale. To be truthful ~~with you~~, that's not what I find hard to believe ~~about the book of Jonah~~. What I find hard to believe is this. It's hard to believe that Jonah could get away with preaching his message of doom without being tortured and killed. It's hard to believe that ~~people so~~ wicked as ~~the Ninevites~~ <sup>The King of Nineveh as he was</sup> could repent. It's hard to believe that God would forgive such wickedness and not utterly destroy the city and its king.

The book of Jonah was written to challenge this kind of unbelief. As God's people, we're called to believe that no one, no nation, no leader, is so wicked that they're beyond repentance. We're called by God to believe that the mercy of God always seeks to turn aside evil and offer mercy to those who repent.

II. The experience of Jonah has been repeated in the history of the Christian church in Iraq. The Bible tells us that on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection, Peter preached a sermon in Jerusalem. Among those people who heard, we're told, were residents of Mesopotamia and Arabs. They believed the gospel and returned to their homes where they shared it with their friends and neighbors. Within three hundred years the majority of the people of Iraq were professing Christians. No less than four Arabian bishops travelled to the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

The majority of Iraqis remained Christian for hundreds of years after the rise of Islam. A Moslem writer at the beginning of the 11th century declared that Christians formed the majority of the population of Iraq. Not until the 13th and 14th century, after 200 years of bloody war with Christian Europe during the Crusades, did Islam finally become the predominant religion of Iraq.

Several years ago I went to Synod School at Wilson College. One of the speakers was an Arab Christian by the name of Fuad. I had dinner with him one evening. I knew that the Presbyterian Church began sending missionaries to the Arab world in the early 1800s so I asked him, "Were you converted to Christianity by our missionaries or were your parents Christians?" He answered with a look of irritation, if not anger, "My parents were Christians, my grandparents were Christians, and my ancestors have been Christians since the day of Pentecost. When your ancestors were

1 out of 36  
2 out of 72  
3 out of 108

worshipping trees in Northern Europe my Arab ancestors were worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ." He put me in my place!

Today, in Iraq, Christians are a minority. Only about a half a million of the 18 million Iraqis are Christians. A thousand years ago the majority of the people of Iraq were Christians, but today ~~less than 2%~~ <sup>only about 2%</sup> ~~less than 3%~~ <sup>less than 3%</sup>.

What happened to all those Christians? To answer that question we have to learn a little something about Mohammed. Mohammed was born in AD 570 and came in contact with many Arab Christians. He had a deep appreciation for Jesus as the greatest of prophets. He believed in the Virgin Birth of Jesus. He believed that Jesus performed miracles. He believed that Jesus was the greatest prophet and messenger of the one God. He believed in the Ascension of Jesus. The Koran calls Jesus the "word" of God and the bearer of the "gospel". Although Mohammed had the utmost respect for Jesus, he found most Arabian Christians to be idolaters at heart.

You see, the same thing that happened to Jonah when God first called him to go to Nineveh, had happened to these Arab Christians. The Church was called by God to preach God's word and point people to the Lord Jesus Christ but they disobeyed and like Jonah they were swallowed. They became indistinguishable from their idolatrous culture.

The Yale historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, writes, "More and more the church became assimilated and conformed to the world, church discipline grew lax, and moral decay made rapid progress."

Samuel Zwemer, one of the foremost missionaries to the Moslems of the Arab peninsula wrote, "Had that early Christianity been gold instead of glitter it would not have perished so easily in the furnace of persecution or disappeared so utterly before the tornado-blast of Islam."



Herein lies a lesson and a warning for us American Christians. Before we can hope for Saddam Hussein and Iraq to repent of their wickedness and violence, we the church need to repent. The book of Jonah is the story of repentance. Before Nineveh and its king repented Jonah had to repent. Repentance isn't simply feeling bad about what we've done or failed to do. Repentance involves a change of mind. Repentance involves obedience. Repentance isn't simply confessing our sins and shortcomings to God and going on our way. Repentance means turning around, changing, obeying and believing God. When Jonah repented and obeyed God, he undertook the dangerous task of going to Nineveh to preach God's word and Nineveh and its king repented.

We Christians in America need to repent. We need to understand what we've done and what we've failed to do in the Middle East over the years to earn such animosity from the Arab world. When Arabs think of Christian America they think of a greedy, decadent people. They think of Christian America as the pornography capital of the world, the crime capital of the world. They see us as a nation of sots, a people obsessed with drugs, alcohol and power.

We are Jonah and we've been swallowed up by our culture. Many Christians are indistinguishable from our culture. Our lifestyles, our values are no different.<sup>And if a Yu does adopt a distinctive life-style we think they're weird.</sup> What distinguishes us as Christians? If we were arrested for being Christians would there be enough evidence to convict us? Are our aspirations as Christians any different from non-churched people? Do we think of our jobs as simply ways of making money or do we think of them as places where God has placed us to bring God glory? Are our priorities any different from our non-churched neighbors? Can we honestly say, in the

words of the Shorter Catechism, that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever?

Many Christians don't know the Bible any better than unchurched neighbors. The Christian disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, family devotions, tithing, and regular and disciplined attendance at worship have all but disappeared. Have we been swallowed up by our affluent, materialistic, pleasure seeking, instant gratification, consumer oriented culture, like Jonah swallowed by the fish?

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Like Jonah, we need to repent and believe the Gospel that we profess and into which we've been baptized. We need to believe that the Gospel is the most powerful force in the world, that the message of the Cross of Christ is the wisdom of God and the power of God. We need to believe that the most wicked and violent of nations and peoples can sincerely repent and change by God's grace. We need to believe that God, the God whom we know through Jesus Christ, will forgive the most wicked people and their leaders upon their repentance. To believe in the good news simply means to take Jesus at his word, to believe that God is the kind of God that Jesus has told us about, to believe that God so loves the world that he will make any sacrifice to bring nations and peoples and leaders to himself.

"Follow me," Jesus says. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." We have a choice. We can be swallowed by a fish or we can become fishers. If we repent and pray from the belly of the fish and obey the call of Christ to follow him the Lord God has promised to deliver us and, like Jesus, raise us from the dead and make us fishers of men and women and children and

Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that this violent world does not perish.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily The call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people The Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive The glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and The Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.