

The Incredible Edible

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Epiphany, January 24, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Jonah 3:1-5; Psalm 62:5-12; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mk 1:14-20.

God wants to bless all nations through his people, the church. He wants to bless, not curse the world. God pities nations that don't know him. That's what the book of Jonah shows us. God told Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh, the capital of the evil Assyrian empire. Now, the people of Nineveh were pagans. They were cruel. They were the Nazi's or the communists of the ancient world. Ninevite soldiers had sacked Israeli cities and raped their women. But God pitied Nineveh because they didn't know him. They didn't know his laws. They didn't know his love. God wanted Jonah to go and preach against Nineveh so that they'd repent and be saved.

When Jonah heard God calling him he headed for Tarshish. Nineveh was to the *east* of Israel but Tarshish was on the extreme *western* shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, Jonah went in the very opposite direction God told him to go. Why did he disobey? Well, *Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed. He didn't want Nineveh to repent because he hated them and feared that the unique status of Israel would be threatened.* No other nation knew God like Israel. No other nation knew the law of God. Jonah knew that if other nations came to know God, Israel's unique status would be challenged and the influence of his nation would decline.

So often Christians share Jonah's attitude toward missions. We don't care about people across the world who don't share our values and who are our enemies. We don't care what happens to them. So often we want our enemies destroyed rather than saved. As Christians do we pray for peace in Nicaragua? Do we pray for the conversion of Gorbachev or the

Ayatollah? Are we concerned about poor Christians in Africa or even poor communists in China?

And, like Jonah, we've discovered that when other nations turn to God our own unique status as a Christian nation is challenged. Four hundred years ago Christianity was basically the religion of white Europeans. Europe was unique. *(It was at least nominally Christian.)* The Americas were inhabited by heathen Indians. To the East of Europe were the Moslem turks. To the south lay pagan Africa. To the far East was Asia with its many strange gods. But men and women began to hear God tell them to go and preach to these heathen nations. I'm proud of the part Presbyterians played in the great missionary movement of the 19th and 20th century. Scottish and American Presbyterians went into all the world telling people that God loves them and that Christ died for them. David Livingstone explored darkest Africa, preached the Gospel and stood up against slavery. Africa and Asia heard the Gospel and many responded. Today there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the US. The church is growing faster in Africa than in the U.S. The last two hundred years has seen Christianity grow from a European religion to a world-wide faith.

But look what's happened! The influence of the American church has wained. No longer can the America church tell the younger churches what to do and how to do it. A hundred years ago, like Jonah, we went and preached against heathen cities. We told them that polygamy was wrong and that Christians ought to wear clothes. We told them to destroy their idols and stop worshipping ancestors. Now these churches are preaching against us. They're telling us to repent. They're telling us what we're doing wrong as a nation and as a church. The shoe's on the other foot and we don't like it. These younger churches have a mind of their own. They

believe in the authority of scriptures but they don't always interpret it the way we do. They see things in the Bible that we can't see and perhaps don't want to see. So, it's a dangerous thing to send out missionaries to convert the heathen. They might repent and get saved and start preaching against us.

But if it's dangerous to send out missionaries, it's more dangerous to disobey God and ignore the rest of the world. Jonah ended up in the belly of a whale. Now you might find that hard to believe but time and time again we see that churches that turn inward and become concerned only about themselves get swallowed up. I've heard that the Oxford church use to contribute one third of our entire budget to the mission of the church beyond Oxford. At the present time we give probably no more than 10%.

God has called us to be a missionary people. He calls us to minister to our own people, young and old. He calls us to go to the unchurched people right around us. But he also calls us to see beyond the borders of Oxford, to people in Africa, Asia, and Central America. The failure to obey is not due to lack of money, but lack of will.

I once heard a missionary speaker ask, "What would you do if you saw ten people carrying a heavy log? Nine are holding up the front with relative ease while one struggles by herself to lift the back off the ground." Obviously we'd go help the one person struggling with the burden of the weight and we'd also encourage everybody to distribute themselves evenly around the log so that each would carry the same weight. That's a parable for us. Oxford has many churches and social agencies to care for the lost, the lonely, the distressed and the friendless. But in some parts of the world there are no churches, no doctors, no agriculturalists, no Sunday school teachers and no Sunday schools. Maybe God is calling some

of you to go help. Maybe God is telling us as a church to give help. The book of Jonah tells us that God loves these people and wants us to see beyond our own local needs and concerns. Charity begins at home but it mustn't end there.

Finally, the book of Jonah shows us that the heathen nations aren't the only people who need to repent. We need to repent! Jonah needed to repent every bit as much as Nineveh. The United States needs to repent every bit as much as South Africa. In our Gospel lesson we see Jesus coming to his own people and calling them to repent. "The right time has come and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!" The time is always right for God's people to repent and *the Kingdom of God is always as near as our willingness to turn away from our disobedience and believe the Good News.*

On the seal of the Presbyterian church is a bush that burns but isn't consumed. When our church *obeys* God we'll burn with the power of the Spirit but we won't be consumed. But too often the more appropriate symbol of the church is Jonah in the belly of the whale, the fire is extinguished and the church is consumed because we've disobeyed. Which will it be for us? The burning bush that isn't consumed or Jonah, consumed by the whale?

Let us pray: O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you, bring the nations into your fold, pour out your Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.