

THE STORY OF JONAH

THE STORY

Jonah was in something of a predicament. He had been given an appointment which he did not care to keep. His appointment was in Nineveh, a city which at that time was on its way to becoming quite rapidly a city of adult delinquents and switch blade gangs. God had asked Jonah to get over there quickly and to warn the people of Nineveh that they were travelling the road to ruin.

Jonah was an excellent choice for this particular mission for several reasons. First of all, he was a Jew and the Jews always seemed to have a much better understanding of God's will and ways than their spiritually undernourished people who were their neighbors. And this too, Jonah was a prophet - a man set apart because of his ability to discern the ways of God and to speak of such matters with a degree of eloquence and authority. He was the ideal man for this important assignment to the people of Nineveh.

Only one thing was wrong. Jonah wasn't at all enthusiastic about this appointment. As a matter of fact, he didn't want to go at all. Most of the time Jonah and God saw eye to eye, but on this occasion they were far apart. Jonah probably thought to himself "Why should God be taking such an interest in these people of Nineveh? After all, they're little more than ignorant peasants who for the most part don't know their right hand from their left. Why no decent Jew, seeking the best interests of his children, would have anything to do with the Ninevites. Why no loyal Jew, concerned about his community and his nation, would give a second thought to the welfare of this group of people. Let them stay in their place. This troublesome minority group has already caused us enough trouble." I'm sure that Jonah could have drawn up a rather impressive list of things to point out to God in the event that God had forgotten. Yes, they were ignorant peasants. Yes, they were a constant threat to the peace, economy and security of the Jewish community. And they were probably mentally and culturally inferior to the Jews, at least if you had asked the opinion of a good Jew like Jonah. And so you see Jonah couldn't understand why God should be so interested in these people of Nineveh. He and God were in great conflict on this point. What would his fellow patriots, those who were loyal to Jewish blood first and foremost, what would they think of him if he should accept this appointment in Nineveh. I'm sure that Jonah would have been glad, like any of the rest of his loyal countrymen, to have seen these people erased from the face of the earth.

Jonah was in a real predicament. He probably knew what God would do. He probably knew that if he went over to Nineveh with the word of the Lord, that God would get soft and spare them all and he didn't want to be part of any program that would save the likes of them. So Jonah decided to dodge this appointment in Nineveh. He decided to flee to the little town of Tarshish, a Jewish colony safely located in Spain. On the trip to Tarshish all was going well and Jonah was thoroughly enjoying his voyage on the beautiful blue Mediterranean until God came after him in the form of a great storm. God had not changed his mind one bit! He still wanted Jonah to keep that appointment in Nineveh. And as you will recall, God provided Jonah with some rather special transportation to take him back to where he was supposed to be going.

That ride inside a great whale, according to the records, was a three day trip that Jonah never forgot. And when this sea-going

Cadillac finally parked him on a beach, Jonah decided that if God was going to be that persistent about it, he would accept the appointment in Nineveh. But mind you, he would go only on a minimum basis. He would not tell them that God loved them. He would not tell them that God was gracious toward them. He would not tell them that God looked upon them as equals of the Jews. He would not tell them that God was their Father just as he was the Father of the Jews. Jonah didn't want to go that far. I think he cleared suspected that God was just that, but this you see was a secret that could do an awful lot of damage to the status quo if it ever got out.

And so Jonah decided to keep this appointment in Nineveh on a minimum basis. His sermon to the Ninevites is just about the shortest sermon that was ever preached. It was only eight words long: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown". And believe me Jonah hoped that this would happen, too. But from the King down, the whole population in this ancient town were so overwhelmed by this overpowering message from the lips of Jonah that they repented. Then God showed mercy upon them, just as Jonah had suspected he would. And Jonah, still the Jew, first and foremost, was heartbroken because God had not destroyed the people of Nineveh. Like a sulking child, he wanted to curl up and die. And so as this assignment in Nineveh comes to a close, there is Jonah - a pathetic figure whose sense of values have been all but shattered.

This story of Jonah, of course, is not actual history. The story is something of a parable and this gives it unusual power and a sharp cutting edge. What was the writer of this brief story trying to do? What was he trying to say? For the most part, I think we could say that he was trying to open the eyes of the Jews to their ungodly attitude toward those who were non-Jews. You might put it this way; he was as though he was holding a large mirror in his hand and holding it before his fellow countrymen so that they might see their own attitudes, their own personal relationships, their own feelings and they relate to those outside their own Jewish circle. This, I think, is what the author was trying to do.

AN APPOINTMENT IN NINEVEH

So much for the story of Jonah. It seems to me that America for some time has had an appointment in Nineveh. It has been an appointment that few of us have desparately and urgently wanted to keep. Like Jonah, we have historically pretty much looked the other way. As a nation founded upon Christian principles and beliefs, we have pledged our allegiance to the ideal of certain inalienable rights and liberty for all of our citizens. But by and large, Americans have narrowed down the meaning of this. The ideal may sound good from the pulpit, but it makes for bad business. And so in order to escape this appointment in Nineveh and to control a religious idea that would do a lot of damage to the status quo if it ever got out of hand, our prophets who claim to know what is best for America began many years ago heading for Tarshish.

I think we started heading for Tarshish years ago when as a nation we purchased a ticket on that luxury liner, EQUAL but SEPARATE. It seemed like a wonderful ship at the time, but it was steaming off in the wrong direction. Then perhaps it was God (at least I would like to think it was God working through the hearts and minds of people) who let the storm clouds begin to appear. Some of these things began to threaten from the horizon: laws the effect that employers could neither hire nor fire on the basis of race and creed; labor unions opening to men without discrimination; business and professional people discovering

that talents and abilities depend on what was inside the human brain package, not on the color it was wrapped in. The storm warnings became even clearer when the armed forces made an effort to break down segregation back in the early forties, when the blood banks had just one place for storing blood, no matter who the donor was, when negroes were permitted to compete on the athletic field with white men. These were just some of the warning clouds that appeared before the great storm broke. The trip to Tarshish came to an abrupt end when the Supreme Court said in effect in 1954: "This has gone far enough. America has an appointment in Nineveh that must be kept". And like the huge fish in the story of Jonah, the court was the vehicle that made us face up to one of life's greatest present day issues: what is the proper relationship between one man and another.

To be sure, there are many Americans still suffering from this ancient conflict of Jonah - this struggle between the way they want it to be and the way that God wants it to be. Nowhere is the conflict more sensitive and more apparent than in the public school system of our country, and that is why, on the more positive side I would just take a moment to reflect upon something that took place here in our own Yorkville community two weeks ago, namely the transfer without incident or bitterness of 340 young pupils from the Harlem section of Manhattan to the Yorkville section. As you know, the reason for the shift was the same as that which underlay a recent similar transfer in the Glendale section of Queens. The Harlem schools, almost entirely Negro and Puerto Rican were overcrowded. The Yorkville schools, almost entirely white were under-used. So this shift was ordered. Everything was handled with the utmost skill, taste and tact. As a result everything went smoothly. The Board of Education of our City, the parents, and the children are all to be commended for this rather encouraging performance. It's always headline news of course whenever there is racial tension or trouble in a New York City School and this news travels far and wide. I think that this performance of two weeks ago demonstrates that our city is a city, if given a chance, can face its racial problems with maturity and responsibility.

As I said a moment ago, there are still many Americans suffering from this ancient conflict of Jonah - this struggle between the way they want it to be and the way that God wants it to be. This conflict, I am sorry to say, is taking place even within the broad expanse of our own Methodist Church. Some of you may have noticed an article that appeared on the front page of the New York Times on the 7th of January and also in Time magazine a week later, an article which unfortunately received wide coverage, an article which publicized a Methodist Commission's nationwide study and which in turn recommended the continuance of the church's racially segregated Central Jurisdiction. The Methodist Church, for those of you who are not too familiar with its organizational structure, maintains five geographic jurisdictions that are predominantly white and one overlapping all Negro Central Jurisdiction. In one way, I hesitate to say anything concerning the report because of my own unfamiliarity with all of the administrative details involved that the men of this Commission had to take into consideration. (But speaking for myself, I can only say how keenly disappointed and deeply saddened I was by the Commission's Report. No matter how you try to look at it, no matter how many allowances you make, no matter how you try to understand and evaluate the issues that are at stake within the structure of the Methodist Church, no matter how familiar you are with the administrative difficulties involved, you are still faced with the fact that in light of the divine mind of

Jesus Christ, a segregated church is wrong. And a church that denies in practice its own stated beliefs concerning the sacredness of human personality abdicates its moral leadership and is branding itself incompetent to deal with the great issues that challenge mankind in this century. It is my hope that the General Conference of the Church which shall be meeting later on this spring in Denver, Colorado will be prevailed upon not to accept this report and in turn will lend great encouragement to the complete and immediate elimination of the Negro jurisdiction of the church. Perhaps no man is wise enough to have all of the answers, but the Christian is confident about the direction that he must take to find those answers. It is our conviction that we have in our religion the basic truth about man, the basic truth about man's relationship to God, and the truth about man's relationship to this neighbor. And here at this point we would take our stand concerning our appointment in Nineveh and accept no answer as final if it cuts across these underlying truths of our faith. This Christianity that we profess to believe in is not something that is irrelevant to life, but rather something that is central. All of this and much more is on the agenda for our appointment in Nineveh.

As I said in a sermon three weeks ago, our world is being broken into pieces and it may ultimately be destroyed simply because we have not yet learned how to handle our human relationships creatively and with Christian maturity. We have not yet learned how to approach another person as a person regardless of his relationship to us, regardless of his creed and color. Either we must hurry up and learn how to love another and live together, or else we shall destroy each other. It's as simple as that. We do not do it; we cannot do it; and yet deep down in our hearts we know that we must. This is our predicament. Just as Jonah had a dilemma, so do we. And if in our time together here this morning I could bring some of you to the place where you could see this in the Christian perspective, then I would feel that we would have made some progress. We must learn to love our neighbors as ourselves and to be as concerned about their total welfare as we are about our own. Jonah in a dismal failure in Nineveh. But in light of what Christ has said and done, we should be able to do a bit better.

Two weeks ago I saw a movie that has been receiving a great deal of publicity. The picture I refer to is "On The Beach". Some of you may have already seen it; others of you may have read the book. It is really a movie sermon in the best sense of the word. The scene is laid in Australia in the year 1964. The northern hemisphere has been laid waste by an atomic war between the great powers started ostensibly by a mistake. The only part of the world where people are still living is Australia and the winds within several months will bring the radioactive clouds to this part of the world and wipe out all life there. Everyone knows this including the crew of an American atomic submarine which escaped the atomic poisoning and berthed in Australia. I recommend that you see the picture as soon as possible. It is an experience that you may never have again, and may never want to have again and you will perhaps feel very often during the picture the way I felt: how trivial is so much of our living, and to what better uses we ought to be putting our energies.

The picture ends rather significantly I would say with a banner put up by the Salvation Army shown in a close up on the screen. Earlier we had seen this banner when the SA Captain was preaching to a large crowd as a revival. The sign says "There is still time, brother"

"There's still time, brother". Perhaps the movie and the sign are not as fantastic as we might think. There is still time, but perhaps not as much as some of us might think there is.

"Turn back, O Man, forswear thy foolish ways,
Old now is Earth and none may count her days.
Yet thou, her child, whose head is crowned with flame
Still will not hear thine inner God proclaim
Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways!"

Earth shall be fair and all her people one
Nor till that hour shall God's whole will be done
Now, even now, once more from earth to sky
Peals forth in joy man's old undaunted cry.
Earth shall be fair and all her folk be one!"

LET US PRAY

God, Our Father, help us while there is still time to accept the appointments that we as Christians have not only here in our own beloved land, but also in the far off reaches of thy world. Help us to grow more and more in our love for thee that our love for thee may more and more be reflected in a greater concern for all men. We ask this in the name of him whose concern for all mankind was so great that he was even willing to go to the cross in order to die for it. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen