

A Great City, A Great Wind, A Great Fish - Evening

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[0 : 00] At least we ought to be very much aware that the word of the Lord has come among us as well.

And it is our business to learn how to respond. We ask that you will give us grace to do that. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. It's somewhat of a shock to come to church here these nights in the good old days. The pattern on Sunday evenings was that the choir and the choir leader, the minister and the seismic and all the congregation, at the end of the service, got into a Volkswagen and went for coffee.

So it's nice to see you all. You are, as it happens, it may not have occurred to you, you are a miracle.

And the reason you are a miracle is because a miracle is something that happens once, has never happened before, and will never happen again.

[1 : 27] And you qualify under all those heads. And you may be an ordinary miracle, or you may be a rather tragic miracle, or you may be a very happy miracle, or you may be a very problematical miracle, but you are a miracle.

And you have that in common with Jonah, who was a miracle, and the circumstances of his life are very peculiar.

And at the heart of the circumstances of his life, you will see the, well, you will see what happened.

The story starts, if you look at chapter 1, verse 1, with the word of the Lord came.

Now, the word of the Lord didn't come at all. It was there, right in the midst of all that was. And the Hebrew, apparently, is best translated by saying, the word of the Lord is.

[2 : 48] And that's the danger of coming to church on Sunday night, that you will encounter, in some measure, the word of the Lord.

Now, you have to distinguish carefully between the word of the Lord and the word of the preacher. The word of the preacher is just so much hot air.

But the word of the Lord has the unique capacity to do exactly what it says. When God said, by his word, let there be light, there was light.

And when God said, by his word, let this happen, it happened. So that what you get at the beginning of John's gospel is that the core reality is the word.

In the beginning was the word. And the word was God. It goes back and go on to say, the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

[4 : 05] So that there is, right at the heart of our miraculous individual existence and our corporate gathering, there is the fact of the word of the Lord.

And you will find your heart is already wonderfully prepared in the same way that Jonah's was.

So that when you encounter with some measure of reality the word of the Lord, and the word of the Lord says, go there, you're prepared to head off in that direction right away.

That's what it means to be human. That's the singular and unique characteristic of our humanity. The word of the Lord is not unclear to us, and the direction that it wants us to go is not unclear to us.

But everything in us, as everything in Jonah, goes that direction. It's helpful if you understand that about yourself. Now, what happens from here on is that you are programmed as a human to go west when the word of God calls you to go east.

[5 : 32] We live in a wonderfully complex world. The gay lobby, the big city, wrecked beach, Hollywood North, west coast culture, and the academy, and the politics.

I mean, it's a wonderfully complex mix of things, and all happening, and quite dynamic, some of them, and all going on. And in the confusion of all that, you wonder what it all means.

Well, what Jonah was told to do when he was told to go to Nineveh was that he was to go to a huge, powerful, wealthy, ancient city, ancient by our standards.

A city which was of vast importance, way up on the Tigris River, in what is now the country of Iraq, north of Baghdad, and there was Nineveh.

And Nineveh was a city that had come to God's attention. Because you know what a city is, and you can thank, I think, Jacques A. Lowell for this.

[7 : 07] A city is a counter-creation. You know, God made the world, we made the city. And in the city, you try not to let God interfere.

And Nineveh had been exceedingly successful in not letting God interfere with their life. And Vancouver's not doing badly. They, this strange phenomena, the city becomes autonomous, it creates its own values.

That's why I was suspicious when the bishop heard a protest about his latest move from the, from 11 or 13 bishops in Canada.

And instead of them, they're all rural bishops. Well, I guess he's part of the city.

And that's a powerful place to be. But it, this city came, came into some difficulty.

[8 : 29] And so Jonah was sent to it, and Jonah went down to Joppa from Jerusalem and then took the boat from there to maybe it was Spain, you know, about as far away in the opposite direction as he could go.

Now, I want you to know that when you encounter the word as it is presented to us, the, the really normal reaction is to do what Jonah did.

And most people do. But the, the result of Jonah having done that was that a great storm came up.

Jonah paid his fare. He had to pay his own way because he wasn't on an expense account this time. He paid his fare. He got on the boat.

The boat took off. The storm came. Jonah went down into the belly of the ship. By the way, you know what this is down here, down in the center?

[9 : 42] This is the nave of the church. It's called the nave because churches are looked upon as kind of folks en route to a better destination than Jonah had.

but he went on a boat that was going in the opposite direction. And in this boat that was going in the opposite direction, the storm came and Jonah went and slept in the, way down in the middle of the boat, in the bowels of the boat.

the result was that the storm became very violent and Jonah was asleep. And Jonah was asleep because he got himself into the place that many of us get into when we go the opposite direction from the direction the word of God has clearly spoken to us to go.

when you do that you need some kind of anesthetic. You know, you may take it by the glass or you may take it by the needle but you need some kind of anesthetic to cope with what you're doing spiritually.

And Jonah's anesthetic was to go into a deep sleep and forget everything around him as far as it was possible. But the rest of the people on the ship were very much against that happening.

[11 : 14] They and this is a wonderful picture of two religions if you want. The one a pagan religion and as a result of the storm it created great fear among the sailors and fear is a wonderful stimulus to religion.

Most people if you scare them bad enough they get religious and these people were badly scared and they got very religious and you may know from having heard the story just now that as a result of their religiosity they began to pray each to his God and the they each had their own God and the it didn't matter much which God it was as long as they prayed to him.

that's getting to be the generally accepted thesis about religion in our society you can choose your own God and when you get badly enough frightened you can start praying to him.

But it was they were crying out to God loud and long and they didn't know what was going to happen because of the terrible storm that had caught them in their boat.

Now I like to look at the boat as one of man's technological accomplishments and we tend to surround ourselves with technology by which we think we can survive almost anything and it's an interesting picture that this technology that they devised in building this boat would not stand up to the storm that they were in and so fear took over and they began to cry out to the Lord each to their own religion and the captain of the boat was anxious for everybody to pray to whatever God they knew thinking that with a vast crew like that they must have a whole lot of gods and one of them surely was powerful enough to deal with the storm they were in and so he was very indignant at Jonah sleeping in the ship and so he went down and woke them up and told them to get praying and when they were doing that the religion of the sailors found expression in saying we can solve this problem we'll cast lots and see whose fault it is that we are in this trouble and so they cast lots religious superstition provides all sorts of quite brilliant ideas so they had a lottery and

[14 : 54] Jonah won the lottery the trouble is they weren't sure whether they could trust that or not and they didn't see that Jonah was any worse than any of them so were they really sure that the right man had been appointed well there was one thing about Jonah that marked him off from them and that was that he knew who the storm where the storm came from and you remember that they were very curious about this man and asked who he was and what country he came from and what people he belonged to and he said I am a Hebrew I worship the Lord my God has a name capital L capital O capital R capital D that's the name he gave to Moses he told Moses what his name was

Jonah had the name of the God in whom he believed and he passed this on to the ship's crew and then he gave them the information that this God whom he worshipped was the God of heaven that is of the infinite night sky and that he was not only the God of heaven he was the God who made the sea and the land and then they were properly terrified because obviously they had found a God who could be responsible for this storm because he had created the sea and the land so they became very fearful and they went and they all went back to their stations and they took hold of the oars and tried to pull for land it didn't work they were in a situation which was totally beyond them and that's quite an interesting place to be in a situation over which you have no control there's control freaks as we call them who are sure they will never get into the situation and try and guarantee that they will never get into a situation where they are not in control but these people were not in control and so they went back to

Jonah and Jonah said to them the only way you're going to still this storm is if you take me and throw me overboard well they weren't prepared to do that but Jonah as you know had had this encounter with the word of the Lord now he isn't exactly a missionary in this first chapter he's a very reluctant and disobedient servant of the Lord but God was using him as a missionary anyway and so when they took him and threw him overboard then suddenly calm and they came here to the land and they worried about what they had done and so they became exceedingly religious and they made sacrifices they did what most religious people do generally to no avail they made vows and they were terribly impressed by and came to believe in in a sort of fearful rather than faithful way they came to believe in the

God of Jonah well the Jonah's conscious disobedience of God and his attempt to run away from the word of God God said I want to talk to you about this some more and so when Jonah went overboard they the crew became in a sense believers in the God of Jonah and the sea was settled and they made their way to the land and Jonah was swallowed by a great fish that's why nobody reads Jonah because they think it's fatuous nonsense it's interesting though that the story of someone being swallowed by a great fish is apparently a myth that is found almost all the way around the world and this apparently was a myth that in this instance came true and

Jonah found himself in the belly of the whale come back next week to find out what happened in chapter two but just let me conclude with telling you one or two things about this the the the important thing I think is Jonah's conscious disobedience his departure from the presence of the Lord is attempting to run away from the presence of the Lord and if you were to turn quickly to Psalm 139 you will see how difficult that is it's over on page 552 when the question that Jonah was asking whither shall I go from thy spirit or whither shall

[21 : 17] I flee from thy presence if I ascend to heaven thou art there if I make my bed in Sheol thou art there if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the outermost parts of the sea even there you can't escape from the presence of God you can't escape from the purpose of the word of God remember I told you God's word always fulfills its purpose now it took the Lord a long time to get Jonah into line this story is the story of Jonah giving up on God but it more wonderfully is the story of God not giving up on Jonah and in chapter 2 3 and 4 which you'll hear over the next three weeks it's the story of how

God didn't give up on Jonah now just to conclude I want to tell you something more one more thing and that is that that concerns the people that asked Jesus for a sign remember this in the midst of his ministry they said give us a sign and I wonder if you are such a person as waiting for a sign from God if God would come to you and give you a sign then perhaps you would do what he wanted you to do but you're still waiting for the sign now Jesus answered that question by saying there is going to be no sign there he says there was a sign given by

Jonah and you have that and as a result of that sign the men of Nineveh will stand up and condemn you because they accepted the sign that God sent to them which was Jonah having come out of the whale and he says there was a brilliant wealthy woman who they call the queen of the south the queen of Sheba and she came in the time of Solomon to his courts seeking wisdom from him and the queen of Sheba will condemn you because she found what is available to you but primarily what these people who were asking Jesus didn't see was that they were asking for a sign from him who was the sign he was the sign that had been given to them and they were treating him as though he were not they had to come to terms with that reality and he is the word of

God so my plea to you tonight is that confronting as you do in the scriptures the living reality of the word of God which will not be frustrated you confront that living reality and you come to the place where you submit to that reality and you reluctantly maybe obey the direction that that reality points you in and you do what that reality calls upon you to do and if you are like Jonah you will go on arguing with God and Jonah's big argument with God was you don't need me you can do this by yourself leave me alone to go on my trip to

Tarshish without interfering God doesn't argue with him about whether he could do it alone but he does say I want you to do it I want you to fulfill my purpose lots of people say I'm free to live my life and do my thing and let God live his life and do his thing but the purpose of the love of God is revealed to you in a sign and that sign is Jesus Christ and God's purpose for you is that you come to terms with him and learn to walk in the peculiar and unique and miraculous circumstance of your own life your own personal and particular life learn to walk in obedience of faith in

[27 : 06] Jesus Christ Jack A. Lull has written a commentary on Jonah you could do nothing better in my mind than to spend the next three months working through Jonah with the commentary from Jack A.

Lull it's an amazing story somebody said that the prophets give you a window on the mind of God the most startling thing about that window on the mind of God which the prophets give you is in that window on the mind of God you see what God's mind is towards you and that's what Jonah reluctantly discovers over these four chapters I commend to you that you may acknowledge the sign that is given you that sign which is Jesus Christ bird who became flesh among us let us pray together