

Sermon 2-28-2010¹
Luke 9:10-17
Jonah 1:1-17
Our Providing God

When we left off with Jonah last week, he had told the sailors on the boat to throw him into the water. Before that moment lucidity, Jonah was as stubborn as they come. As a prophet of the Lord, he knew what to expect with the job. But when God came calling and told him he was supposed to go to Nineveh, well, as we heard last week, Jonah tucked tail and ran the other way. Trying to escape God's call and claim, Jonah chartered that boat to take him to Tarshish, digging in his heels to resist his call to Nineveh. His stubbornness is almost laughable. I mean, if Jonah would have stopped resisting and followed God, he probably would have had an easier time with things. For starters, he wouldn't have been stranded out in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea in the midst of a swirling storm. Yet, the storm never really fazes Jonah. He was as stubborn as a mule and nothing was going to change that; that is, until, he realized that he couldn't run anymore, couldn't escape from God's call and claim, and, accepting responsibility for his actions, told the sailors to throw him overboard.

Part of Jonah's stubbornness was his inability to trust in the Lord's providence. I mean, if God calls you to Nineveh, you'd assume that God was going to provide for you along the way. Surely a prophet of the Lord would know this and yet Jonah would have none of it. How often do we act like Jonah? How often do we dig in our heels and refuse to trust in the Lord's providing?

Our Gospel reading for the morning opened with Jesus' disciples returning to him after he had sent them out on their first mission trip. If you'll recall, Jesus told them to take

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nothing with them, no provisions or extra materials for their journey. Rather, he assured them that God would provide. When they returned, they talked about the awesome things God had done. But when the crowds began to press in on Jesus, and nighttime fell, the twelve disciples told Jesus to send the crowds away. There wasn't enough food or provisions to go around and so they determined that it would be best if the crowd of five thousand people went away. How stubborn were these disciples who failed to trust in their God's provision; how little they had learned from their mission experience; how pitiful was their inability to see the mission and ministry of God's provision for the world standing there with them. Are we so different from the disciples or from Jonah for that matter? Do we stubbornly persist in where we think is the best place to go for our lives, for our church?

A few months ago I heard a story about a church. For the last couple of years their numbers dwindled. They already had a part-time pastor and they were not even sure they could afford to keep her around anymore. Every session meeting, the elders didn't think about what God was calling them to do as a church, they didn't take into account the new ministry opportunities God might have been presenting them, they didn't really seem to be too concerned that their church had slid rapidly into such an unhealthy position over the last few years. No, all that the elders were concerned about were which bills they could pay a particular month and which they could pass over until the following month. Rather than looking to God's call and claim, they stubbornly dug in their heels to see how much longer they could hold out until they would be forced to close their doors. This stubbornness was exemplified when they discovered that they had a gas well on a parcel of land adjacent to the church.

One of the ways the elders had hoped to gain revenue was through the sale of eleven acres of land that the church had owned for years. They had hoped that through the sale of that land they would be able to hold off the inevitable for a few years longer. In the process of researching the sale, they discovered a gas well on the property. What provision, what wondrous love and grace! Yet what was the church's response to God's provision? They stubbornly refused it, opting to sell the land and see how much longer the church could hold out. They didn't realize that God wasn't through with them yet. They couldn't grasp the great gospel reality that God would provide. Like Jonah, they stubbornly dug in their heels in the hopes that they could stay just where they were by trying to escape the call God had placed upon them. Like the disciples, they couldn't understand or grasp God's provision in their midst. We might wonder why God just doesn't let them go. For starters, it's not the reality of God's way with his people. Despite our stubbornness and resistance, we discover through God's Word that our Lord and God cannot not provide.

After taking responsibility for his actions, Jonah was flung out into the churning waters. The storm ceased and Jonah was left there bobbing. We don't know how long or for what length of time he was left there, but I imagine that it was a harrowing experience. Jonah might have taken responsibility for his actions, he might have realized that he couldn't escape from God's presence or call for his life, and yet, floating in the water, I imagine that Jonah had no idea what to expect. Despite Jonah's obstinacy, despite his attempts to flee and escape, despite his clear disregard for God's call and claim, God's gracious provision is known and proclaimed to Jonah. As we hear in verse seventeen of Jonah 1: "But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah."

Transition words are always important when we see them in scripture, and here in Jonah 1:17, this “but” becomes a really big but (no pun intended). Jonah had basically told God, “Forget you.” And we might assume that God would turn around and do the same to Jonah. We might assume that God would tell Jonah, “Fine, you want to be a child and not listen, go run away, go escape, go see how well you can do away from my presence.” Yet, despite these assumptions we hear the big “But” of scripture. “But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah.” Did Jonah deserve this provision? No! He didn’t. If anything, Jonah deserved to sit there in the water and drown after being so darned stubborn. But deserving is not the point of God’s provision and grace. Our conditioning of God into being gracious and providing is not the first word of the Gospel.

Do we deserve God’s provision? Absolutely not! Can we do anything to bring God around to us, to make God favorable to us? No! Our deserving has nothing to do with the undeserved grace of God. Rather, it was precisely because we were unable to do anything right that God penetrated into the depths of our brokenness and stubbornness to reveal his grace to us; a grace made known to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jonah didn’t deserve or choose to be swallowed by the fish; God provided it. The crowds and disciples didn’t deserve or choose to be fed by Jesus, and yet Jesus, as the Lord God enfleshed provided for his people, feeding the multitudes out of his compassion and grace. We don’t deserve nor do we choose to be saved by Christ; rather, as the Apostle Paul proclaims, “while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8), Christ was raised for us, Christ reigns in power over us, Christ prays for us, Christ stands in for us, Christ provides for us. Our “deserving” has nothing to do with it.

So does that mean we continue in our stubbornness and obstinacy? No! We turn to God in response to his great gift of his own making. In this season of Lent, we turn to our Lord and his cross, to see what he's up to even now—providing for us to the bitter end. We don't deserve God's relentless provision. But because of the cross, God's greatest provision of all, we have everything we need, even when we have experiences similar to Jonah's (being thrown overboard, being thrown under the bus by a friend or co-worker, being hot, being frustrated, angry, depressed, fed up with God, fed up with other Christians, fed up with our spouses or ourselves), even when we are callous and obstinate; Jesus himself reminds us of his grace, he is the shepherd who provides for our needs, who leads us beside the still waters and calls us and empowers us to respond to him with love and compassion. In Lent, we remember that apart from the One who is God's provision for us, namely Jesus Christ, we can do nothing in this life.

Our God provides, even when we cannot always see it; our God provides, even when we cannot hear it; our God provides, even when we cannot always sense it: Our God provides. And we can be assured of this each time we gather together in worship, as we see the cross; we can remember it as we turn the scriptures and hear the promises of provision; we can be assured of it whenever we turn to our Lord in prayer, not because we deserve it, but because our Savior has claimed us, has called us and has promised to abide in us just as we abide in him. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.