

V.O.C. - August 2016

August 7, 2016: Jonah's Mandate

Dear Listeners,

For the messages of "the Voice of the Church" this month I would like to take you to the book of *Jonah* in the Bible. As most people know, *Jonah* is a well-known prophet, perhaps even the *best known* of all the prophets in the OT. Indeed, who would not know this remarkable though peculiar drama?! Children already know him as the prophet who was swallowed up by this *big fish*. For adults, on the other hand, this same event makes the story and its miracles into an unlikely event. Perhaps for that reason it will be good to have a closer look at this unique event in which *God* revealed Himself as the God who *governs all things*, all powers in *nature* and the *hearts of the people* in this world!

Jonah, dear listeners, was just the average man from a small village in Zebulun. Already he had been a prophet of the LORD God among his people *Israel*. He was God's servant during the time of *King Jeroboam II*, a wicked king, as were the prophets *Hosea* and *Amos*. Jonah, however, was different from those two in that he was called to bring a *good message* to Israel, a message of *prosperity* and other blessings. Hence, Jonah was well-respected and much appreciated as prophet. Even though God's people did not deserve it, and were called to *repentance* and return by the *other* prophets, the LORD God had called Jonah to show His people God's *longsuffering* too and a delay in the judgments their unfaithfulness had provoked! That's why Jonah was the *favoured* prophet by king and people alike.

Now it is this Jonah, dear listeners, this *deluxe* prophet, who received a new word from the LORD to announce. Can you imagine his excitement as he senses that the word of the LORD is coming once more? Perhaps he had been very concerned about the absence of repentance among the people as well; they continued in their idolatrous worship. The goodness of the LORD that should have led them to repentance only fostered *more selfishness and greed*. All people could think about was *more money*, political power and pleasure. "So what will the LORD say now?" Jonah may have thought. Would He increase His blessings on Israel even more as a way of making them recognize His goodness and mercy and faithfulness? Or would it now become the difficult task of *Jonah* to announce that the LORD would bring *chastisement* on them for their sin in order to bring them to repentance? "Jonah," the LORD says to him, "Pack your scrolls and your bags; I want you to go to *Nineveh*, the capital of Assyria!"

The *mandate* the LORD gives to Jonah, dear listeners, is no small feat: *preach against Nineveh*, the capital city of the Assyrians! The measure of their sin and wickedness is full! God's *judgment* is coming over them! These Assyrians were known for their wars and cruelties, the Nazi's of ancient days! Now Jonah has to preach *against* them; as if those Assyrians in Nineveh would be waiting to hear from a *foreign* prophet what they are doing wrong and should do?! Who does *he* think he is, they'll say most likely, this critic from Israel?! Besides, isn't this a mandate just to preach *judgment* to them? Well,

no, it isn't; every *mandate* and *message* from the LORD is a message of *salvation* at the same time: repent and the LORD will be merciful and you will live, *that's* its purpose! That's the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel *today* as well, also through this media of the "Voice of the Church!" Then we must observe as well that with the lawlessness and godlessness that's evident in much of *today's culture of death* that's increasing, preaching against this process means too: repent and live, find life in Jesus Christ and you will be saved! That's how God is: He doesn't take pleasure in the death of men but that they repent and live!

Jonah does *not* want to execute this *mandate*! He refuses to serve God in this *new mission*. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh, so he makes travel arrangements to go the exact *opposite* direction, to Tarshish in Spain. He's going to the other end of the world, so to speak, as long as he's away from the LORD! Why? Well, because Jonah knows what God is like; Jonah was afraid that God would be merciful and gracious. Jonah, also, is *hard* and *cold* towards Nineveh: let them get God's judgment, they deserve it, these people that kill and destroy! What do we think of that? Well, isn't that what we are inclined to think *today* as well, when we hear of atrocities and destruction: let the *judgment* of God come upon them! We don't realize too easily that God came to *us*, to save us, while we were *sinner*s, even *enemies*, as well! And when people point out our sins, or our lawlessness in today's society, we don't appreciate it either when they hold up God's impending *judgment* to us. Yet, that's done for the purpose of *repentance*, that's done to show His *love* and *compassion* for them in Jesus Christ! It's done for you and me to find salvation in God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ!

Jonah, dear listeners, became a *deserter*. The LORD, however, didn't accept it just like that. The LORD throws *a violent storm* onto the Mediterranean Sea, moving heaven and earth in order to have His message proclaimed *when* He wills and *where* He wills and *by whom* He wills! There is some *divine irony* involved yet too though: the LORD stops Jonah in his track and stops his flight from duty, but He does so by having Jonah preach the Word and reveal the Word anyway, willy nilly! The LORD first forces Jonah to bring the gospel to the *heathen sailors* on the ship! Though the sailors are used to some storms, but nothing like this; this must be from the gods, they suspect, and so they urge each other to call upon their god! That's when Jonah is awakened from a deep sleep in the belly of the ship, awakened by a *heathen captain* and urged to *pray*! Of all things! Yet, Jonah does not repent, doesn't change his mind, even though *he* knows God, *he* knows God's power over the sea, and *he* knows that he is the cause behind this storm! It takes the sailors' plan to expose this by way of casting the lot!

Then, finally, Jonah opens his mouth and has to speak: "I worship the *LORD*, the God of heaven," Jonah says, which means to say, the God who is above all gods, "who made the sea and the land." His words arouse a deep *respect for the LORD* in those sailors on the ship, and they come to rest; their anxiety subsides. At least, *now* they know what's happening and why. Jonah reveals that the only true God has arisen and manifested Himself in the storm. Jonah, who had thought so small of his God, now has to testify of Him as the heavenly Majesty, the LORD God Almighty! As I said, this is

God's divine irony: the LORD *forces* Jonah, His unwilling servant, to confess Him before these *heathen sailors*!

How necessary that is today too, dear listeners, that *you*, that *all people* get to hear this! In this time of uncertainty and anxiety, of terrorist threats and tsunamis, of hurricanes and mudslides, people need to hear: there is a *God* who governs the world; there is a *Saviour* who is leading the world to His day of return and judgment! There is only *one security* and assurance in the midst of anxiety and uncertainty: "Our *help* is in the Name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth!" "If you but let the *Father* guide you, relying on His faithfulness, he will be evermore beside you in all your sorrow and distress." *That* assurance gives rest and peace, which we may share with those who hear this message through us, also via "The Voice of the Church." Then such a message should drive you out to *God*, and to His *Son* our Saviour, and to His church where this message is heard in all its riches and nuances from week to week!