

"GOD'S FISH STORY"
November 11, 1990

TEXT: The Book of Jonah

Today is a very special day in the life of this church. It always is when we bring new members into our fellowship. And we want the men and women who join the church this morning to know that we care about them. That they are important to us. that we would like to be important to them.

That is why we have our reception of members on the second Sunday of the month --when we have our Coffee Hour. That is why we give them flowers and encourage everyone to greet them. That is why we have a New Member Dinner. We want to make them feel at home. That is one of the church's functions. To be "fishers of men" --to reach out to others and bring them into fellowship with us.

But there is more to a church than fellowship. And it is important for us to understand that. In his great high-priestly prayer, in the seventeenth chapter of John. Jesus prayed, "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth." And, in his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Not long ago I heard about a businessman who read a book called Men of God. He was so impressed by what he read that he wanted to buy a copy to give to each of his employees. He wired the publisher in Chicago: "Send 125 copies of Men of God." But the publisher wired back. "Chicago is out of Men of God; try Los Angeles."

Try Wauwatosa. Try Milwaukee. Try Brookfield or Elm Grove. That is what the church is all about --building men and women of God. But we sometimes forget that. Sometimes, perhaps without meaning to, we get so caught up in our own interests, our own needs, our own agendas, that we forget who we really are. We forget we are people called by God to do God's work and to serve God's will.

So I would like to do something a little different this morning. Usually my sermons are based on some specific text. One or two verses at most. Sometimes I preach on a topic, like faith, or love, or peace. But, even then, I usually have some key verse of scripture. This morning, however, I would like to talk about Jonah. Not just a verse or two, but the whole book.

Probably no other book in the Bible is so generally misunderstood. Any scholar will tell you it is one of the most

important books in the Old Testament. But, because we do not understand it, we often ignore it and, not infrequently, make fun of it. It is easy to see why. If you will pardon the pun, there is something "fishy" about Jonah.

Almost everyone knows the story, or at least they think they do. They know, for instance, that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, (most people think it was a whale), that he lived for three days in the fish's belly, and that he was then spewed out on dry land, apparently none the worse for wear. That is the part that has long been debated, disputed, discussed, and often laughed at.

People ask, "Is there really any creature, fish or otherwise, that is large enough, and has as big enough throat, to swallow a man whole? And, if so, how could anyone live in its stomach for three whole days?" For generations, such questions have turned the book of Jonah into a test of faith for the literalist, an embarrassment for many, and a joke for others.

In the famous Scopes Trial in Tennessee, Clarence Darrow, who was lawyer for the defense, called as a witness William Jennings Bryan, who was lawyer for the prosecution. Trying to show that parts of the Bible should not be taken literally, Darrow asked, "Mr. Bryan, do you believe that the whale really swallowed Jonah?"

To which Bryan replied, "I do. I believe it because the Bible says it did." "And, furthermore," he added, "if the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe that, too."

When we think about Jonah --if, indeed, we ever do-- that is what we usually remember. But the "fish story" is only a very minor --one might even say unimportant-- part of the whole. It constitutes just three of the book's forty-eight verses and has little or nothing to do with its main purpose.

Furthermore, it is not the only part that is hard to believe. Consider, for instance, the plant in chapter four which grows enough in one day to shade a full-grown man. Or the mass repentance of the Ninevites. Surely no other preacher in history ever had such phenomenal success, not even Jesus. And no other record --Biblical or otherwise-- suggests that such a thing ever happened. Or take the size of the city. Neither history nor archaeology indicates that Nineveh was ever three day's journey across.

When you look at the book as a whole, it is easy to see that it was never intended as anything but a parable. It does not matter whether it ever happened or not. No one ever asks whether there really was a Prodigal Son. No one ever asks whether there really was a Good Samaritan. A parable does not have to be true. It is not important in itself. All that matters is its message.

And the message of Jonah is certainly clear. Written in a time of extreme national exclusiveness, the book tries to show that God cares about all people and not just a chosen few. That He loves even the hated Assyrians. Like the story of the Good Samaritan, the book of Jonah seeks to stretch the limits we too often place upon God and God's love.

But, in so doing, it also makes another point. And that is the one I would like to stress this morning. From the very first verse of the very first chapter, we see that Jonah is a man called by God. "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'" (Jonah 1:1-2)

But Jonah did not want to do what God asked. Not because of the danger involved, or the inconvenience, or the time away from the job. But because Jonah knew that God was a "Softie." He was afraid that, if he preached to the Ninevites, they would repent and then God would not destroy them. And, more than anything else in the world, Jonah wanted them to be destroyed.

So Jonah "rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." It was as if you lived in San Francisco, and God called you to go to Denver, and you immediately caught the next boat for Hong Kong.

But, because it is a parable, Jonah is not just the story of someone who lived a long time ago and a long way away. It is the story of every man and of every woman --in every age and in every place. It is my story, and it is your story. For, whether we realize it or not, we, too, are called by God.

The Greek word for church is ekklesia, which literally means "called out." And, as a church, we are those who are called out to do God's will, not just our own. Our Congregational freedoms are not so that we can do as we please, but so we can do what pleases God.

The question is, what are we going to do with those freedoms? Are we going to be like our Pilgrim ancestors, who took all sorts of risks in order to follow what they honestly believed to be God's Will? Or will we be like Jonah and rise "to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." Perhaps not intentionally, but because we never even ask what God might want of us.

From a little after 4:00 on Friday until a little after noon on Saturday, some of us here this morning, members of the Congregational Home Board of Directors and our spouses, met with staff members and their spouses to struggle with the question of what the home should be like in the coming years, of what God is calling it to be.

Right now, the most active committee in this church is probably the Long Range Planning Committee. Meeting every other week at present, they are trying to answer similar questions about First Congregational Church and what its mission is.

From time to time, most of us ask ourselves some of those same questions about our personal lives. And, when we do, I hope we shall remember the story of Jonah and try to be more faithful than he was. For, truly, "We are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us."