

29 January 2012

Reading: Jonah 2:1-10 (OT pages 927-928)

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Background to the reading

The story of Jonah is one of great significance for all Christians today? Why? Well there are so many elements we can learn from like we find in chapter 2.

Jonah was called by God to prophesize to the people of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh was off course the enemy of Israel and deemed by the Jews as unclean, unholy and not part of the covenant with the Almighty God. Jonah decided not to go and to run away from His calling. But then a heavy storm broke out at sea which made all the crew on the ship very nervous and frightened. When Jonah convinced them to throw him into the sea, the storm faded away. And then just as Jonah thought everything is over, the Lord sent a fish to swallow him.

In chapter 2 Jonah has a near life death experience. He says he find himself in the place of the dead, according to the Jews the “sheol”. But despite his predicament he prays to God saying: that he realizes that he has been unfaithful to God but that he will once again serve

the Lord and obey Him. And then unlike Jonah would later do, the fish listened to the Lord and released him on dry ground.

The last bit is quite ironical; while the fish listened to the Lord the whole story often portrays the unwillingness of Jonah to obey.

Jonah spoke to the Lord from his heart and did not use big words or long phrases. He is honest and sincere, wishing to be in the presence of God once again. The other irony of the story is that the fish obeyed God more readily than Jonah had.

It can be seen as if the Lord listened to Jonah just because he prayed but we know that is not true. God is not bounded to listen or obey the wants of his children. Later, although Jonah wanted the opposite, the Lord spared the lives of all the people of Nineveh – again after they honestly repented and spoke to the Lord in prayer.

What is the message?

Well God does listen to the prayers of his children but He has the last say. We cannot expect God to grant us all our wishes, and wants. God will provide what we need when He thinks it is the right time. In Jonah's case: the Lord wanted Him to rethink and regret his unfaithfulness so that he can continue to do His will namely to

preach to the people of Nineveh. And when the Lord God heard the honest cry for help of the people of Nineveh and He saw their repentance, He showed them His forgiving mercy!

Amen

Song Jesus be the centre

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 2: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the Sheol, I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”

What is prayer? Communication with God is called prayer. It is like today’s mobile phones except with one difference: God is always available, always listening to not only what we say but also what we do not say at all. He even sees the words that are not even formed on our lips. He sees all our inner emotions right before we experience them. He is so in touch with us that He sees all the things we are trying to hide. Yes He knows of every cry for help just like Jonah realized that God heard his cry!

So prayer is not just communicating with the Lord – it involves all our senses and all our emotions and it happens after we have taken notice of what God says in His word. It is after reading a passage in the Bible that we are moved to talk to God or even not to tell Him

anything at all, which off course is also absurd because He knows the desires of our hearts.

Prayer is also the result of our faith and trust in the Lord. Jonah knew that he was wrong to run away from the Lord. But he knew that God will help him when he was in distress. He knew that he could trust in God not only to help him but also to forgive him and bring him to life again. We know that God has forgiven us all our sins and we know that we belong to Him in life and death. There is no reason why we cannae speak to God knowing that He is listening. There is no reason for us to think that God will give us what we want. We must trust Him enough to know that he knows better.

And when we cannae pray then we must ask others to pray on our behalf. We have so many brothers and sisters in our fellowship that will be more than willing to speak to God on our behalf when the going gets tough and life is rough. Martin Luther, the great Reformer made prayer his daily practice and constantly reminded all his friends to pray for him. He was of the opinion that no Christian can survive this world without praying to God as many times as possible.

Shortly after the death of his young daughter, Magdalen, Luther wrote a touching letter to friend Justus Jonas. He tells his friend that he knows he should be able to thank God for the fact that she has

gone and the manner in which she has gone to be with her real, eternal Father. Yet even though he is aware that he should be able to pray thus, still he and his wife cannot do so without crying and grieving. As a result, he adjures his friend, “You, therefore, please give thanks to God in our stead!”

But when we do speak to the Lord we must learn from Jonah to speak to God with reverence and honesty. God is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, who knows and sees everything. He is also the Lord of mercy and love whom we meet through Jesus Christ. We can talk to Him about everything. We can tell him all our desires, our dreams, our hopes, our fears, our struggles, our frailty and our anxieties. He knows us better than we know ourselves. We do not have to hide or run away from Him. He is there to help, and to lead us in faith, hope and love through His Holy Spirit. He promised us His support when we talk to Him.

I want to conclude with a wonderful evening prayer of Martin Luther:
“I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands, I commend myself, my body and soul, and

all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

May we go from here and fill our houses, workplaces and our fellowship with words of prayer to our Lord and Saviour and may we remember His words when we speak to Him!

Amen.