

ARISE, GO TO NINEVEH

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard E. Bieber:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church; and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:13-18

We keep coming back to this passage because it conveys a vision of what we, as the Body of Christ, are ordained to be: ("You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.") ... is so real, so much a part of our lives, so central to everything we think and do, that with this confession we crash the gates of death and set the captives free.

Here Jesus gives us a picture of a church which has an impact on the world around it ... a church which is so full of the life of God that the;

- blind receive their sight,
- the lame walk,
- lepers are cleansed,
- the deaf hear,
- the dead are raised up,
- the poor have the gospel preached to them.

....a church which drives back the powers of Satan and shines as light in a dark place.

Surely anything less than this is a waste of time. If all we do is gather here each week and merely draw enough strength for our own spiritual survival in this absurd world, it's only a matter of time before we sink into the ocean of despair which surrounds us.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not an association of nice people who huddle together to try to survive in a wicked world. The Church of Jesus is the spearhead of the kingdom of God on earth ... its goal is not survival, but conquest...the overcoming of Satan and his kingdom.

But an honest assessment of our corporate life, as we now live it, shows us to be far short of this vision of a conquering church. To be honest, the idea of being a conquering church doesn't even appeal to us most of the time. It scares us. Corporately we're like Jonah.

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." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. Jonah 1:1-3

So God says to us,
"Go to Nineveh and call it to repentance." And like Jonah we take a ship to Tarshish.

Nineveh is the world ... the hard, fast, money hungry, power hungry, racist, narrow minded, unjust world. When you're in Nineveh, you mind your own business. But God says, "Go out there and proclaim Jesus and live Jesus."

Now if we really believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God, and that he overcame sin and death and Satan on that cross, that he rose, that he is alive, if we believe that, why are we keeping it such a secret?

The tendency to grab a ship to Tarshish has been with the church since its earliest days. The Church in Jerusalem was told that they were to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria...to the ends of the earth.

They started out great on Pentecost. They hit the streets with the gospel and stirred the whole city. But for too long a time they never got beyond Jerusalem. Nineveh is not just Jerusalem. It's Judea, Samaria and beyond ... it's the hostile, unfamiliar world. Spiritually the saints had boarded that ship to Tarshish, and those saints would have stayed on the ship to Tarshish if God hadn't dealt with them the same way he dealt with Jonah.

To turn Jonah around---to turn the Church in Jerusalem around, and to turn us around, God in his mercy introduces two things,

- disruption,
- death.

Jonah's ship is hardly out of the harbor before a mighty tempest comes to disrupt the voyage. The ship is in danger of breaking up. Jonah still tries to escape by crawling down into the bowels of the ship and withdrawing into sleep. They come down and wake him up and tell him to start praying.

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And whence do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

Jonah 1:7-10

On top of the disruption comes a form of death ... something to bring Jonah to the end of himself.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried to the Lord, "We beseech thee, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood; for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee." So they took up Jonah and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah

1:11-17

In a similar way storms came to the apostolic church to shake it out of its routine of preaching the gospel only to Jews ... only in Jerusalem ... when they had been commanded to go to Nineveh, to the world.

- First there is mild persecution.
- Then there's the death of Stephen.
- Disruption.
- Death.

And the Lord is dealing with us as a flock in a similar way. As a flock we often feel that we're doing more than most when it comes to outreach,

- we go out,
- we have an open door,
- we try to welcome all who come.
- What more does God want?

But we're talking about a thing of the heart, our heart as a body of believers.

Can we honestly say that our heart as a body is consumed with a desire to speak to Nineveh in obedience to our Lord?

"On this rock I will build my church and the gates of death shall not prevail against it."

... to crash those gates of death!

... to "Go make disciples..."

... to "Go to Nineveh that great city and proclaim the kingdom..."

If we have a message that can bring cleansing and hope and healing from God to Nineveh, and we sit on that message, then we can expect God to do two things: First, he will send disruption. Then he will send some form of death to bring us to the end of ourselves and help us get moving in his purpose.

Disruptions --- they've been really quite minor, so far. But these disruptions are the voice of Nineveh crying for help. Example: twice in the last month this building's been broken into. No major damage. No major

theft. The officer who came to take the report said it was probably some refugee looking for food or money. A week or two after the first break-in a refugee came with the electric fan he took, begging for forgiveness and asking for prayer.

"But Lord! What can we do for these people? We can't even speak their language!"

"Never mind --- arise, go to Nineveh! Just go out to them in my name. Just go to them... to the Cubans and to the world out-there... our neighbors, the people we work with, that long lost cousin."

Another example: a few weeks ago, near the end of the service, Leroy, who was confined to his house for so many years, got panicky up there in the balcony. He was afraid he was going to have convulsions and disA-rupted our already disrupted service by crying, "Help! Help! Help!" Leroy didn't have convulsions that day. And he was quite pleased with the whole affair as he left ... he got a little attention.

But isn't it worth reflecting on his words? It was as if God sent the whole city of Nineveh into our midst crying,

"Help! Help! Help!" And the Spirit keeps saying to us,

"Can't you hear the cry of Nineveh? Arise, go to Nineveh!"

The second thing God sends to Jonah, to the apostolic church, and to us, is some form of death. In Jonah's case it was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Listen to Jonah's description of this death.....

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice. For thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all thy waves and thy billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am cast out from thy presence; how shall I again look upon thy holy temple?' The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains." Jonah 2:1-5

It was this death which brought him to the end of himA-self. From this grave beneath the sea Jonah cries out to God. And the Lord speaks to the fish and it vomits him out on the dry land. Now God speaks to him again, Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah 3:1-3

....this time Jonah goes and

gets the job done.

In the book of Acts we see a similar thing. After the death of Stephen and the violent persecution which followed it, the church started moving out to Judea, to Samaria, and the Gentile world.

...And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ...Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Acts 8:1,4

It took a death to get them to go out to Nineveh. What kind of death will it take for us, only God knows. But in mercy he will bring us to the end of ourselves too, so that we get our minds off our own ways and fix them on him and cry out. And he will deliver us from our death too.

Then he will say,

"Arise, go to Nineveh,"

and we will go and get the job done.

Peter and the apostles went through a death as they watched Jesus die. And, on the third day they were spit out upon the dry ground as Jesus, alive from the dead, said to them,

"Arise, go to Nineveh."

ARISE, GO TO NINEVEH

"As the Father has sent me, so send I you." --- "Go; make disciples of all nations."

For us, this "death" might be a crisis of some kind. It might be an inner crisis of our hearts and minds.

- It might be a spirit of repentance that drives us to our knees...causes us to fall on our faces before God and give up our pride. Whatever this death is, we will know, as Jonah knew,

that we have reached the end of our own way.

And as Jonah did we too will abandon ourselves to the will of the Lord.

He will deliver us from our death ... then we will hear him say to us once more,

"Arise, go to Nineveh,"

and this time we will go and get the job done.