

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SEPTEMBER 24, 2023

“JONAH---THE ANGRY PROPHET; SEPTEMBER 22”

Every so often, instead of preaching on the gospel and epistle lessons of the day, I will talk about a Saint. I am going to do that today and preach about St. Jonah, whose day is September 22.....

The British writer, Somerset Maugham, in his autobiography, tells about his grandfather who had a temper problem. He was a wealthy man who lived in a mansion with servants. One day, when a boy, Somerset was at the grandfather's, along with his family, for dinner in the formal dining room. The waiter was bringing in the dishes of food, starting each one off with the grandfather. At first all went well....but it turns out the new chef had made a mistake that day. The waiter presented to the grandfather a platter of baked potatoes and there was a problem. The grandfather only liked peeled baked potatoes....and these were not peeled. First, the grandfather seethed with anger. Then, saying nothing, he stood up and proceeded to pick up one potato at a time and, one at a time, hurl each one against the wall! And then, when he was done, he ate the rest of the meal in silence. (in *The Summing Up*, Somerset Maugham, Penguin, 1946, p. 10)

Anger is a tough sin and hard for many to keep under control. That can be true even for a prophet, even for a Saint! Two days ago, September 22, was St. Jonah Day when the Church commemorates the famous prophet in the little Old Testament book of Jonah. It's a great little book! And if you have never read it, or it's been quite a while, read it this week—it won't take long at all as it's only a few pages long. Today we will look at the story of Jonah----and at his problem of anger. He got so messed up by his anger we could call him “the angry prophet”.

Jonah was very angry at a great amount of people----the entire population of the massive Assyrian Empire. It was based in what today is Iraq. It's capital was Nineveh. To be angry at a large group of people, people one doesn't even personally know? It's common. To dislike whole groups of people---nothing more common. Some people dislike all blacks. Some people dislike all whites. Some people dislike anyone from a different country. Some people dislike anyone who has a different accent. And I've noticed that people who are angry at big groups of people are commonly angry at individual people they know, too! Some people are angry at lots and lots of people. My guess is that Jonah was like that---angry at lots of people, not just Assyrians.

All this anger many have? It's a sin. A great Saint from the early Middle Ages, St. Isaac of Nineveh (interesting coincidence that he himself was a Ninevite!) said that Christians should have only one enemy---the devil. ("On Admonition and Repentance", Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, Vol. 13, p. 333).

Jonah certainly wasn't like that. And I'm afraid the Assyrians were easy to hate. Their empire was a wicked empire. They conquered huge areas, killed horribly large numbers of people---sometimes they are compared to the Nazis of our own time in history.

But our loving and forgiving God hadn't given up on them. And so God wanted to give them one more chance to repent and change and follow Him. And so he picked a prophet for the job of preaching to the wicked Ninevites. And in what we may see as an expression of divine humor, God picked Jonah for the job---the man that very much despised the Ninevites!

We may be amused that God chose Jonah! Jonah was not at all amused! He got angry and he defied God and refused to go. Nineveh was east of Israel, so Jonah ran west! But a problem---if you run west from where Jonah lived, pretty soon you run right into the ocean. But that didn't stop Jonah---he paid for a ride on a ship headed west, perhaps as far as Spain. You may know the rest of the story---God sent a storm on the ship. It was in great danger. And God allowed the sailors to find out the reason for the storm---Jonah's being on board. So they solved the problem ---they threw Jonah in the ocean. The storm immediately was stopped by God and they sailed happily away. But Jonah---he was left flailing in the water, about to drown.

But God hadn't given up on the angry prophet. He sent a miraculously huge fish to swallow Jonah whole and God allowed him to survive in the miracle fish's stomach for 3 days. And during those 3 days, Jonah changed his mind! He prayed to God for forgiveness, for deliverance from his situation, and decided he would go preach in Nineveh after all. So God had the fish spit Jonah out on dry land and Jonah headed on the long trip to Nineveh on foot.

And when he arrived there he now obeyed God---and he preached hard to the Ninevites, warning them that if they did not repent of their wicked ways and turn to believe in the one true God, they would all be destroyed. To Jonah's surprise, they listened and they obeyed. And all of them, from the king on down, turned to God and repented of their evil ways! They even put sackcloth on their cows to show how sorry they, as a nation, were for how evil they had been.

Now we would think Jonah would be happy. When we preachers find out someone obeyed what was said in a sermon, it makes us happy. But Jonah didn't get happy; he got mad! Because he was hoping they would not turn to God....and then while he was there in Nineveh watching, God would destroy them all! So the angry prophet, although so successful, was still angry---angry at the Ninevites and, worse, angry at God. And he goes into a big sulk, and just sits outside the city, moping in a dark mood---probably hoping the Ninevites would turn bad again and still get destroyed by God!

But God, who didn't give up on the evil Ninevites, didn't give up on angry Jonah, either. And as the book ends, God is trying to convince Jonah to repent of his hatred and get out of his bad mood. The book ends with Jonah still angry! Tradition tells us that Jonah did eventually

repent of his sins, and turn back to God, and become a holy prophet, not an angry prophet. If he hadn't done that we wouldn't call him "St. Jonah" but perhaps "nasty Jonah".

And now, the moral of the story----don't be like Jonah. Don't waste your life away being angry and disliking people---whether they be people you personally know or whole groups of people as with Jonah.

Are you upset with someone? Pray for them. Act kindly towards them. Even a simple "Hi, how are you?" can be a start. That person you don't like, that group of people that angers you---they, like you, are made in the image of God. Maybe it's someone who has hurt you, maybe it's someone in a group of people that are different than you---still, they are made in God's image like you are. So ask God to help you get over your anger and dislike.

With God's help, you can do better than Jonah. So don't be like him! Instead, be like a later Saint, St. Maximos the Confessor. He was a brilliant Church Father and holy man who lived in the 600's A.D. At that time, many in the Church were pushing a false teaching about who Jesus Christ is, a false teaching that said He wasn't fully human. This heresy became strong for a while because the emperor was in favor of it. In some areas, the bishops went with it, too. A council of bishops met and Maximos was called on the carpet in an attempt to get him to go along with the false teaching. The bishops said to him something like this----"Maximos, look at all the bishops here meeting with you. We all agree---except you! Don't you see that you must give in because the whole church believes this way?" St. Maximos refused to leave behind the truth about Christ and said to the bishops----"If I am the only one who stays with the truth about Christ, then I myself am the church!" This greatly angered the bishops and, in their anger, they did a horrible thing. They cut off Maximos' tongue because he would not give in to them!

Did Maximos become a bitter man, going through life angry at those men? No, he didn't. He lived a joyous life, because he forgave them. He wrote about the importance of forgiving others, instead of being angry at them. Hear his words---"We find the forgiveness of our own sins when we forgive others. God's mercy comes to us when we show mercy to our neighbor." (in *Light From the Christian East*, James Payton, InterVarsity Press, 2007, p. 151).

Read the book of Jonah—it's short and fascinating. But don't follow the example of the man who had so much anger and disliked so many people so much! Ask God to help you instead to be like St. Maximos. Do not have enemies---and if you do, forgive them and pray for them.

And I'm sure if you become like St. Maximos, old Jonah looking down from above, will say---"Thank God, they are not following my example!"