

Joppa-

A Shifting in Mission

Text: Jonah 1:2-3

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Text:

Jonah 1:2-3

Jonah Flees From the LORD

2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Greetings

Receive greetings from my home church where I began to pastor in September of last year, The Lamb's Manhattan Church of the Nazarene. It is a blessed morning, especially when I'm guaranteed heaven by the pastor of the house. I wrote that guarantee down in case I get into some trouble. At the Pearly Gates I'll tell St. Peter what Dr. Vassel said! I have it on good authority that heaven is guaranteed for me.

Let me say, "Thank you!" to Dr. Sam Vassel. He spoke at my installation service in October. Your choir came and I was not able to thank them appropriately. Thanks also to your wife Angela, and the children, David and Kara-Beth, for lending him to us.

I did my homework and visited your website this week. I saw you are all interested in growing deeper and going farther. Sometimes people go deeper, but not farther, and sometimes they go farther, but not deeper. But you're interested in that balance—that complimentary fusion of going deeper and farther simultaneously. It is the challenge of Jesus to the disciples by the seashore, when He says, "Let us go to the other side." It was a double-challenge because from one side to another it is both farther and deeper. This is the call of the mature Christian mission into which we're all entering.

Mission from Below: A Jonah View

God is really doing something in the global church, and the Church of the Nazarene is no exception. A shifting has started, and you and I are part of it. In the thirty-two year history of The Lamb's Church in Times Square, we are the first Latino pastors. My wife Jeanette and I just started pastoring there. Our sermons are bilingual, and God is bringing in many people from many different races. I think we continuously desire to be open to God's shifting in the 21st century. The third millennium started with a crisis in New York City, and no one can understand the repercussions and the profundity of that crisis unless they begin to analyze it from a spiritual dimension. I think it's important that we do that. The impact of 9/11 underlined for New Yorkers and the world our shared humanity and suffering—a difficult lesson that should not go unnoticed in the church.

I want to speak to you for a few minutes this morning under the theme, *Joppa - A Shifting in Mission*. The text this morning from the book of Jonah is a view from which to understand 21st century mission. Too often, Jonah is given a bad name: the recalcitrant prophet, the disobedient prophet. Somehow, Jonah got a bad rap. But if you unearth the text and do a historical, contextual analysis, you might identify with Jonah; you might empathize with Jonah. Indeed, you might call yourself Jonah. Consider the Word of the Lord and allow me to give you my contemporary translation.

"And the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amathia, and he said, "Go to the capital of Iraq (Ninevah is the capital of Iraq), and preach against it." Jonah had an interesting relationship with Yahweh, so when he heard that God told him to go to the capital of Iraq; he must have known something about God's intentions. You see, he had seen God work before, and he knew that maybe God had an interest in saving the Iraqis, not condemning them, but saving them. "Go to the capital of Iraq and tell them I have an opportunity for them. I'm giving them a second chance." It is exactly what you say in your vision and mission statement, "That all may have access to the grace of God." So here is the challenge: "Go to the

capital of Iraq—perhaps they will repent." But consider that Jonah had suffered from an Assyrian trauma. He was the colonized, and they were the colonizers. He was the victim, and they were the victimizers. He was the rug, and they were the feet that trampled on it. Now, the Word of the Lord is a bigger challenge. It's not just, go to a place you like going. It's not, go to Jamaica. It's not, go to Puerto Rico. It's this: go to the very center of the people who have treated you wrongly and overcome your hatred.

Jonah's hatred was serious. The Assyrians were vicious conquerors. When the Assyrians conquered people, they cut their ears off so they would never hear again; plucked their eyes out so they would never see again; and cut their tongues out so they would never worship again. That's why when Isaiah speaks prophetically of the post-exile, and you begin to hear this song, maybe you could hear it with a different ear if you understand the processes through which the Israelites journeyed. When the Prophet Isaiah, prophetically and eschatologically, begins to say, "And then the lame shall run, the blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, and the one who has no tongue shall sing worships to the Lord." What the Prophet Isaiah was saying was, "Everything that the Assyrians did unto you, I'm going to reverse it in one moment."

Jonah's mission and Isaiah's proclamation is the missiological and eschatological reversal of colonization. So, when you read Jonah, understand that it is a decolonizing text and that the oppressed person now becomes the missionary. The oppressed person now becomes the messenger. And, I say this prophetically, not in some mystical sense, but in a very concrete, historical sense. God is doing something in this world in which He's shifting the paradigm, and the least of us, we'll call it the Jonahs amongst us, are going to the capitals of the Assyrians to tell them, "Thus, sayeth the Lord." Jonah is mission from below. It is the two thirds world coming to the first world to do mission.

"Are you Jonah this morning?" Oh, for so long you've been under the Assyrian oppression. People have begun to say to you, "You are incapable of speaking to Assyria. You are unqualified. You do not have the credentials." For a long time the global-south has been seen as the recipient of mission. Mission is often done in a paternalistic mode, but know that there has been a shifting of global proportions.

When Rev. Ronald Benjamin introduced me this morning, he gave you a little bit of my CV, but let me pull the curtain and take off the mask. More important than where I went to school is who schooled me. I am the son of an ex-homeless man, a heroin junkie, who lived under bridges here in the Bronx and in Puerto Rico. His parents abandoned him, and his grandmother brought him up under all the powers of darkness that we often encounter in the peripheries of empire, but Christ found him. There was a woman on the corner preaching and singing a song. You may not know the song because it is in Spanish, but understand the spirit of this song, "Cristo rompe las cadenas, Cristo rompe las cadenas y nos da seguridad." When translated into English, the song says, "Christ breaks the chains. Christ breaks the chains and he secures for us life eternal." As this heroin junkie, fixed on a very serious dosage, begins to hear this song, he comes to that makeshift alter on the corner of Ponce, Puerto Rico. His chains are unshackled. His fetters are broken, and something happens in the life of an ex-junkie. And God pulls the bishopry right out of him, and out of his loins he pulls a pastor and professor. And everyone said to him, "He is unqualified. He does not fit the criteria." Yes, I am the son of a man who suffered from an Assyrian oppression, but the Word of the Lord came.

What I'm saying this morning, Church of the Nazarene, is that we are in a historical moment. Allow me to use theological language. We are at a *kairos* moment where God steps out of eternity and

into time, and your chronological time is split into a different moment. You have captured a glimpse of the *heilsgeschichte*, the movement of God in history. You have captured a glimpse of the *Zeitgeist*, the Spirit of God moving through history. You have understood that he who suffered from Assyrian trauma is now the mouthpiece of God to a lost generation.

Mission from Below: A Son of Jonah View:

To give you a parallel New Testament text, I'll ask you to recall Peter. The book of Acts, chapter 10, tells us that Cornelius was praying. Now remember, Cornelius is the colonizer. He's the Roman. He's an officer in the occupying army. And Peter is the colonized. He's the Jew. And he says now, "Why do you want to go to them? They're unclean." This is no easy call—a Jew going to the centurion. Perhaps for Peter there is the fresh memory of a soldier piercing the Master's side, or the cacophonous laughter of those who gambled for his clothes. This is at the forefront of those who are called to Cornelius' house—a lingering memory of what the centurion represents, oppression and occupation.

Sometimes when people dress differently we don't understand. And, what we don't understand, we label. What we don't comprehend, we have to name. Instead of practicing the discipline of silent comprehension, we speak out of turn and out of season. We don't understand, so they must be unclean. They are different, the *goyim*, the *gentilium*. They're different! So the Bible says that Peter went down to Joppa, and in Joppa the Spirit of God begins to wrestle with him. And he begins to see, you know, stuff he wasn't used to, four-legged creatures that violated kosher law. And God says to him, "Kill and eat." Now that is an offense to a Hebrew, to eat something unkosher. And God is saying to him, "Kill and eat." He says, "But it is unclean." He says, "How dare you call something that I clean unclean." Peter is shifted in Joppa, and finally you see you're either Jonah or Simon, son of Jonah. And in Joppa God begins to wrestle with you, saying, "I don't work according to your paradigm. I live outside time." God is the God that lives in the eternal today, and he is not subject to our human legalisms, narcissisms, nationalisms, racisms, sexism, and all the other -isms that distort human relationships.

Forty-million Latinos in the United States of America that the census could count! And people wonder, "How is the Lord going to teach the world what global Christianity should look like, and they're looking elsewhere, but they have not put their eyes on Joppa, where God is starting a shifting, where the Spirit of the living God is working in the hearts of men and women and saying in the words of the great Spanish poet, Miguel de Unamuno, "If not now, when? If not you, who?"

Joppa: Wrestling with Missional Bias

Joppa is the place where we wrestle with God, and we say, "Lord, do you realize who you're sending me to? Don't you know who these people are? You know what they did to my cousins and my aunts and my uncles." Joppa is the shifting of mission, where God pushes you further. It's cross-cultural mission. Often we think that it's people's prejudices that forbid us or prohibit us from reaching them, but perhaps if we look introspectively, it is not they. It's not the Assyrian prejudice that prohibits us from reaching them, but it's the Hebrew bias. And I wrestled with God. I know many of you perhaps have gone to the place of wrestling, but wrestling with God is a losing endeavor. Just ask Jacob. To wrestle with God is to lose and win. "Lord, am I the man? Lord, are we the people, people reaching out beyond ourselves?"

Our histories perhaps have not shown us any healthy relationships with this distinct people group. People around us doubt the efficacy of our endeavor, but we do not do things because they work. We do things because they are right, and because God called us. Noah did not build the ark because people would fill it. He did it because, "Thus, sayeth the Lord." You don't go to Ninevah because you expect people to respond to you; you do it because "Thus, sayeth the Lord." Whether people respond or not, that is not your issue; that is not your responsibility; that is not your task. It is the magnum opus of God to call people from every tribe and from every nation and from every corner of the earth. It is not your issue to fill the house, but to build the house that God will fill.

Joppa is the place where you wrestle with yourself. Can I do it? Should I do it? Will I do it? You see, because to do mission in the 21st century is to go beyond yourself. It is to transgress the boundaries of cultural narcissism. This is particularly true in a pluralistic society like the United States of America. We should strive to understand that the multi-formed manifestation of the grace of God is multilingual, multi-cultural, multigenerational, and multiclass. That's why Pentecost is so important. We must understand that God is inclusive. Churches need to be challenged prophetically that we are not the hubbub of middle class America, where only people in suits and nice cars come. If that is the vision of church, that is a myopic vision that suffers from the Jonah/Joppa syndrome. You need to see messed up folk, who don't have proper diction, who don't parse their verbs correctly, who don't conjugate in the appropriate manner, who have dangling participles. What is it that Paul said in the Corinth paradigm? "Not many wise, not many strong." But out of—I think we call it in my place—the riffraff.

When God called us to The Lamb's Manhattan Church of the Nazarene, we accepted the call in September. But, in February, March, April, May, June, July, and August we were wrestling with God in Joppa. "But Lord, they're not my people. They're not of my culture. Perhaps I do not fit the criteria." From February to September, we wrestled with the call and it wasn't about them; it was about us. It wasn't the enemy; it was the "in-a-me." I had to struggle with my bias and prejudices.

This is not to say that when Joppa begins to shift, you will be the only one with a bias. Moreover, some of Jonah's suspicions were historically grounded. When doing mission across cultures, races, classes, and continents we should not ignore a tragic history of oppression and inequality that causes many to act with a "hermeneutic of suspicion." Certainly the Assyrians did not think highly of Jonah. For goodness sake, he's a conquered person. For goodness sake, this is a prophet from the colonized place. Why should we listen to him? You've been there haven't you, at the board meeting? Your accent sticks out. You've got something to say, but people won't listen.

Joppa is where missionaries, missions' boards and entire denominations realize that in the third millennium, mission is also being done from below. Mission is being done from the heart of the colonies, not the capital of the Assyrian empire. As I speak, thousands of congregations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa are prepared to send missionaries to Europe, Canada, and the United States. The two thirds world (despite all of its challenges) is not the weak little brother or sister who is incapable of mission. The two thirds world is Jonah who has been victimized by a tragic legacy of "violent evangelism and mission" but hears the word of the Lord to speak to the first world. Jonah has come of age and is a fresh message for the world in crisis. Mission from these regions of the world have come to the global missionary movement as equals not lessers.

Now listen, some people have interpreted this text and have said, "Why, if you listen to God, you won't have to pay your own fare." That is not what the text says. He could have gone directly to Ninevah. He still would have had to pay his own fare, because part of 21st century mission is understanding that you are co-laborers with God. One part is, "Thus, sayeth the Lord." But the complementary response is, "Here I am." Any church which hears the call of God to do mission must pay their fare. There is a personal investment. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. You know some people when they don't pay anything, they don't appreciate it. Paying the fare is to understand that there is a price in mission, multicultural wrestling.

And finally, God asks of us, "Do you not understand my character?" I am reminded of the anecdote of the three children who asked their teacher. First, it is a Black child, and she says to her teacher, "Teacher, what color is God? Mommy told me God was Black." And the teacher says, "Yes Honey, God is Black." She goes back to play with the children in the playground. A young boy comes up, a young white boy. He says, "Teacher, what color is God? Daddy told me He was white." And the teacher says, "Yes son, God is white." And he goes back to play with the children in the playground. And then a young Latino girl comes up, and she says, "¿Qué color es Dios? Mi mamá me dijo que Dios es brown." Finally, these three kids are playing together, and they get into a theological conversation. (By the way, kids talk theology even though you may not think it). And one says, "God is Black. Teacher told me God is Black." The other one says, "God is white. Teacher told me God is white." And the other one says, "No, no, no, no, Dios es brown." They get into a debate. Finally, all three of them get the teacher in a corner. "You've got to make up your mind! What color is God?" She said, "Children, God is black, God is white, and God is brown. Have you not heard it? God is light, and light is the fusion of all colors."

In the 21st century if you're going to do church, you've got to do it in the light, in the fusion of all colors. And let me say this, when you do cross-cultural ministry, you will be pushed. It is the nature of confrontation of cultures. Samuel Huntington, in his thesis, *The Clash of Civilization*, says, "When civilizations meet, there is no other recourse but clashing." But Phillip Jenkins, in his counter-thesis, *The Coming of Global Christianity, the Next Christendom*, says, "Oh, no, one of the resources and one of the recourses is not clashing but synergy, but solidarity, but comprehension." Because as the *Zeitgeist* moves, as the Spirit of the living God moves through history, He's redeeming all things to Himself! But you're going to have to eat *pupusa*. You don't even know what I'm talking about! We're going to have to expand our diets! And in the process of eating, you are making a missionary statement. It's not in some pedantic, paternalistic thing; it's wrestling with yourself and even pushing your intestinal processes to the place of comprehension across cultures. In the process of mission you're pushing yourself beyond yourself, you're going further.

I began preaching at The Lamb's Church in English with simultaneous translation in Spanish. Ninety percent of my congregation was Anglo speaking when I started. Now we have a substantial increase of Latino and Asian, and someone asked me, "Pastor, Pastor why do you speak in Spanish." I said, "So God could understand." The reality is this: I preach in Spanish because it's who I am, and that's all that I am. I can only be who I am, and I have to be authentically me. I love my Puerto Rican self so that the Black person in my congregation can love her Black self; the white person can love his white self; and, the Asian person can love her Asian self. I've understood the multi-form manifestation of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the 21st century. After wrestling with myself, I've understood the words of the great poet, Gabriel Mistral, "I searched after God, and I could not find him; I searched after my brother, and all three of us

met. I searched for God, and I could not find him; I searched for my sister and we three met." In Joppa you go beyond yourself, and God begins to shake your ship.

You remember the theme song to *Gilligan's Island*, "*Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip that started on this tropic port, aboard this tiny ship. The mate was a mighty sailin' man, the skipper brave and sure. . . . If not for the courage of the fearless crew, the Minnow would be lost.*" There is a shifting going on and we need spiritual courage. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "everything that can be shaken will be shaken, so that which is permanent can remain." And God is shaking the ship of our understanding of mission. God is shaking us and saying, "The lot falls on you." The ship begins to shake, and people ask, "Pray to your God." To go farther is often to go deeper, because when you're stretched you begin to ask questions about yourself you may never have asked. What is it that Socrates says? He says, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And it is when you find someone who is totally foreign to you, you don't even understand their worldview; you don't understand their diet. They speak Chaldean, and you speak Hebrew. They speak Assyrian, and you speak Hebrew. In that encounter across cultures, you not only discover something about God, you discover something about yourself, because sometimes when you're stretched, the inner life is exposed.

I'm encouraged that pastors and leaders all over the world are willing to be stretched, that they have heard the invitation of the Lord to go further, farther, and deeper. But mind you, there will always be a Jonah. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Everything that is old is recalcitrant to the new." When asked, "Where do we go from here and how much time should we wait?" he responded, "How long? Not long." So God is beginning to shift, and he's saying there is a movement going on, but there will always be a Jonah that says, "I don't know." We need wisdom and courage to embrace this move of God.

Now, as you sit in the silence and you reflect on the Word of the Lord, the question arises from Isaiah, "'Who shall I send, and who will go for us?' The very doors and doorposts shook at the voice of He who spoke. I was overwhelmed, and I said, 'Lord, who am I? I am unclean, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, but mine eyes have seen the Lord.'" Pastor, the Lord is counting on you. It may not work early on. You may even ask yourself, "Why is it so hard?" Build the ark anyway. "Why aren't people coming?" Build the ark anyway. "But they're the Assyrians." Go anyway. "But no one's listening." Preach anyway! "But I don't see rain coming." Build the ark anyway, because it is a divine mandate! If the dew will cease, and the clouds will open up, and the rain will begin to fall down from heaven, the Lord has spoken it, and He will bring it to pass. God is not a man, that he should lie, nor the son of man that he should repent. If He said it and if He promised it, He will bring it to pass. And the Word of the Lord came to the Church of the Nazarene, and said, "Go down, and preach."

Understand where you sit this morning, at a prophetic moment where God is going to surprise people. But who is God calling? I mean, who is God calling to set a model to the nations? Jonah and Simon, Son of Jonah. But it is if you choose to go down into Joppa, and after you're wrestling, after you handle your stuff, after you get over your issues. You say, "Lord, in spite of myself. Even with all my shortcomings, I come to you." But remember, you don't only come to God with shortcomings; you come to God with virtue. A lot of people say, "Lord, use me in spite of myself." That's only half of the sentence. You should also say, "Lord, use me because of myself." We're not just people with vices; we're people with virtues. We don't just have shortcomings; we have things to offer. And as you come, Church of the Nazarene, to the moment, the *kairos* moment in Joppa, would you say, "Lord, here am I." Who knows if

even the king will repent, even the cows will fast; even the cattle will not eat? Who knows, if God has brought you to this kingdom for such a time as this? Would you pray with me this morning?

Lord, bring us to the Joppa experience. Challenge us where we are, but at the same time, because the lot has fallen on us. We didn't ask for it. We didn't volunteer. We didn't matriculate. But the lot fell on us, and we thank you for it. We worship you for it. We give you glory for it because although it is a responsibility, it is a privilege. The lot fell on us. Push us farther, deeper. Teach us to love beyond ourselves. Lord, wipe away that very sin of ethnocentrism, and bring us to the place where we understand your character, the way you work in the world. You who called us from every nation; you who called us from every tribe, you who used the little to confound the much, help us not despise small beginnings, because it is in a small house in Joppa that the rest of the world was opened. It is in a small place in Joppa that access to grace was opened to us, the Gentiles. It was in a small place in Joppa where you shook Jonah and the sons of Jonah. Push us further. Spirit of God, I ask for an anointing for cross-cultural ministry. I ask for an anointing of empowerment and humility. You who move these people, you who guide these people, faithful shepherd, an anointing that would shake ships of comfort, that would shake vessels. Spirit of God, do it now! Start now! Quicken our spirit. Thine is the glory, Thine is the honor, and Thine is the kingdom. Amen!