

Let Freedom Ring!

1. Captain Kidd's Greatest Buried Treasure (Claim Your Share!)



Scripture Reading: Luke 11:29-32

Introduction

During the hundred years before the thirteen American colonies won their freedom from the British, pirates swarmed the Atlantic. They anchored ships in New England's harbors. They drank rum in seaside taverns. They mumbled drunken tales of pillage and plunder. Along New England's coastline and among its islands, the pirates buried treasure chests. They spoke of wild, exotic places--like Madagascar, Malabar and the Caribbean. Names like Blackbeard, Henry Morgan and Ann Bonny brought shudders of fascination and horror to seamen and landlubbers alike.

But of all the early American pirates, William Kidd was most famous. He was born in the seaport of Greenock, Scotland in 1645, the son of a Presbyterian minister. His father died when he was five years old. He felt the call of the sea in his youth. By his early 20's, Kidd came to America

and began a brilliant career as a seaman and a merchant. For a time he lived on the island of Manhattan in New York. He married a rich widow. He was a friend of the governor. Appointed by King William to capture pirates in the beginning, Kidd later joined their lawless ranks.

According to 1700's *The Pirate's Own Book*, before first setting sail as a pirate, Captain Kidd buried a treasure in the sands of Plymouth Sound. That treasure was the Bible his devout parents had given him. He knew its Divine principles condemned the wicked course he intended to pursue. So he sought to silence the Word of God that spoke of a better life than he was choosing. Perhaps he intended to reclaim that Bible, along with God's favor, at some future date. This would never be.

Tonight we hold Captain Kidd's first and greatest buried treasure in our hands. In the course of our *Let Freedom Ring!* presentations, we will discover what Kidd lost forever: The voice of God speaking from the pages of His Word—the Bible—offering us a better life.

This evening, we turn to the greatest high seas adventure ever told. Like Captain Kidd, the hero of our tale turned his back on the Word of the Lord. He too boarded a ship and set sail for the far side of the world to escape the claims of conscience. This man's name is Jonah, and his is a whale of a tale!

Jonah had even less of an excuse for turning from God's Word than did Captain Kidd. Jonah wasn't a pirate. He was an ancient preacher of sorts—a prophet called by God and given the special duty of speaking God's message to others. The great central truth from his story is this:

The Word of the Lord brings freedom

to all who will receive it.

Chapter One

In the Bible, the book bearing Jonah's name is divided into four chapters. Each teaches something new concerning the Word of the Lord. The first chapter reveals this:

Rejecting the Word of the Lord

brings distress and trouble both to us

and to all whose lives touch our own.

Jonah, chapter one. We will be following the wording in the New International Version of the Bible. Let's begin!

The Bible says:

“The Word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before Me’.

“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.”

When God's Word comes, we are faced with a decision: Will we accept the Word of the Lord? Or will we reject it? Our answer affects us

Immediately, as it did Jonah. It also touches every person connected with us—whether family, friends, neighbors, or fellow citizens.

When the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, he rejected it. He refused to go to Nineveh. Its inhabitants were arch enemies of his people. These Assyrians swept helpless nations before them like a bloody broom. Atrocities connected with their predatory military exploits were legendary. Where they marched, the Assyrians left rotting heaps of their enemies' heads behind to strike terror. They were the Nazis of the ancient East--a nation of bloody pirates who built Nineveh by plunder. Everyone hated and feared them.

When the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, he should have gone east by land toward the Assyrian capital. Instead he went west by sea—going down to the nearby port city of Joppa, buying a ticket for Tarshish, and setting sail for the far side of the world. When the Word of the Lord comes to us, we cannot stay the same. Either we will obey and step toward God, or we will refuse and step away from Him. Jonah turned on his heels and ran!

Captain Kidd buried his Bible in the sand before sailing as a pirate. Jonah buried himself, deep in the hold of the ship, as soon as he left port. He went below deck, crawled far back into a cubbyhole among the bales and barrels of cargo, and fell into a deep sleep.

The Bible says:

“Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.”

We can refuse the Word of the Lord. We can ignore the voice of conscience. We can hide ourselves from people, and think to escape even the gaze of God. We can lull our hearts to sleep—deadening them with alcohol, drugs, sex, pleasure, ambition, fame, ambition, money, and many other things. We can bury the Bible like Captain Kidd.

But we cannot hold back the hurricanes of life. Sooner or later, something we cannot handle will strike while we sleep. Not only will we be affected, so will those who had no part in our decisions. What we do impacts those around us. For every two smokers who die from cancer, one bystander dies from second hand smoke. Parents’ moral choices directly affect not only each other, but their children and grandchildren. Go to prison, and your whole family feels the shame. Drink and drive, and others’ lives may end. Our choices affect others.

Jonah’s shipmates were quickly entangled by his decision to flee the Word of the Lord. A sudden, violent storm arose that threatened to sink their ship. Perhaps they dug Jonah from his nest while removing cargo to throw overboard. When the ship’s captain discovered Jonah was fast asleep, he shook him awake.

“How can you sleep?” he roared. “Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish.”

Desperate trouble drives even unbelievers to their knees. Every sailor aboard cried to his own god, but none came to rescue. The seamen cast lots to see who among them was responsible for the storm. Jonah drew the short straw.

“So they asked him, ‘Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’ He answered, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.’”

They had found the problem. A run-away-from-God preacher was aboard! Their gods claimed bits and pieces of reality—rivers, wind, fire, the sun, moon, or certain stars, parts of the countryside, stars, bugs, sex, birth, death, frogs and such. These were the little gods, who didn’t make heaven and earth. Jonah’s God was the True Maker of all. Now this great God held their fate in His hands. Billows roared over the rails and tore at them. Briny foam flew across pitching decks and stung their faces. Wind screamed through the ragged rigging.

“What have you done?” the frightened sailors cried. “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

Jonah made poor choices up to this point in his story. So have some of us. Now he did something right. He accepted full responsibility for the harm his decisions caused others.

“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

The sailors didn’t want to do this. They tried to row to land, but the hurricane howled even louder. Finally, they cried to Jonah’s God:

“O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.”

Then they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea.

Jonah sank into the green gloom—down, down, down into the silent heart of the sea. A strand of kelp, torn loose by the violence of the waves, wrapped itself around his head. Through blurred eyes he peered upward. The first time the huge form swept over, Jonah mistook it for the shadow of the ship. Then the great sea creature turned easily, and surged directly toward him. Jonah’s eyes opened wide. A long, bubbling

scream emptied the last air from his lungs. The monster's great jaws gaped before his face.

The Bible says:

“But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”

On the surface, the sailors were frightened, too. The tempest's fury has been snuffed as suddenly as a candle's flame. Storm-torn sails hang limp. The raging sea is dead calm. Stars dance and spin on the smooth surface. The sudden change strikes the seamen with awe. What kind of God does this man Jonah serve? They sacrifice to Jonah's God, taking vows and offering worship. The runaway prophet has converted his first boatload of heathen to the Bible's God. But he isn't there to see it. He's been eaten alive. Now he slides deeper and deeper into the ocean's midnight depths inside the belly of the great fish.

Rejecting the Word of the Lord brings distress and trouble both to us and to all whose lives touch our own. So ends chapter one.

Chapter Two

Chapter two contains the second great truth concerning the Word of the Lord:

Remembering the Word of the Lord

brings hope and help into the

most desperate and difficult situation.

What is your storm tonight? What is your sea monster? What situation threatens you? What force crushes your soul with tombstone teeth? Did your choices cause the problem? Did someone else's actions impact your life? However long the ride, all this life's journeys arrive at the same destination: the cemetery. What then?

Tonight, remember the Word of the Lord, that the Lord may remember you. You are still breathing. There is nothing wrong with you that God can't fix. Nothing touches you He cannot handle.

Jonah remembered the Word of the Lord in the belly of sea beast. He prayed, quoting freely from the Psalms--the hymnal used in worship in God's ancient temple in Jerusalem. The same Word of the Lord Jonah rejected at the beginning of his journey was on his lips once more--the very words contained in our Bibles now.

Jonah prayed:

**“In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.**

**“From the depths of the grave
I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.**

**“You hurled me into the deep,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers swept over me.**

**“I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight,
yet I will look again toward our holy temple.’**

**The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me,
seaweed was wrapped around my head.**

**To the roots of the mountains I sank down:
the earth beneath barred me in forever.”**

All around Jonah the great deep pressed in. The monster sank down, down, down into the black depths—down into the midnight deep sea trenches, down to the very toes of the mountains. Jonah’s ears screamed, popped, then cleared, as the pressure increased. He sensed the slow thunder of the monster’s great heart. He sucked the stench of its foul fish breath in, and gasped out prayers borrowed from the Psalms. A slimy strand of half-digested seaweed wrapped itself around his head. Maybe he sang a few ragged bars of those old hymns he could remember. Every hour, the air seemed heavier, and Jonah grew weaker.

After a midnight day and a half of sliding ever deeper into the inky depths of the sea, Jonah noticed something. His devourer stopped descending. The great fish was headed for the surface again.

The Bible says God casts our sins into the depth of the sea. The only question is, “Will we still be attached to them?” Jonah sank into the depths along with his sin. But he confessed his wrongs. He called on God for help. Now not only were his prayers rising. He was rising too! The sea monster was going topside.

Jonah lifted his face and prayed:

“But you bought my life up from the pit,

O Lord my God.

When my life was ebbing away,

I remembered you, Lord,

and my prayer rose to you,

to your holy temple.”

“Those who cling to worthless idols

forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

But I, with a song of thanksgiving

will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.

“SAVLATION COMES FROM THE LORD!”

The only way Jonah could fulfill his vow of making a sacrifice in Jerusalem’s temple was to escape the great fish’s belly. Then he might offer the lamb that represented the then future Messiah who would die to pay for mankind’s sins. Jonah’s situation was unchanged, but his faith looked up. By rights he should have been dead three days ago. Yet he was still alive. There must be a reason.

Some here should be dead, too. You’ve faced illness, danger, and the threat of death—either to yourself, or to someone you love. Yet you still live. God preserved your life for a reason, as He did Jonah’s. He has something important for you to do for His glory and the good of others. Your story isn’t over. Tonight He leans down, not simply to rescue you, but to remind you of His plan to bless others through you. His Word not only comes to you, but goes through you to others.

Jonah’s story is your story, too. You have remembered God by listening to His Word, and God remembers you. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of the Lord. Nothing may have changed outwardly, but the sea monster is sick of you. You are no longer sinking. You’re on your way up!

“Salvation comes from the Lord!” Jonah cried from the fish’s belly. Can you say it with him? Will you take the Word of the Lord on your tongue and speak it, as he did? Shout with me now what Jonah prayed just before the monster opened its mouth and spat him onto the beach.

“SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD!”

Once again together:

“SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD!!”

And a third time, everyone:

“SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD!!!”

Tonight the Word of the Lord is on your tongue, even as it was on Jonah’s tongue long ago inside the belly of the sea beast. God plays no favorites. He doesn’t change. What He did for Jonah then, He will do for

you now. When the Word of the Lord gets inside a person life, things begin to change. Nothing is impossible with God.

The Bible says:

“And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”

**Welcome to the beach! Welcome to fresh air! Welcome to sunlight!
Welcome to trees, flowers, clouds, and grass! Welcome to life!**

Tonight God remembers you, as He remembered Jonah. He speaks again. You cannot still the storm. God can. You cannot convince the monster to spit you out. God will. Remembering the Word of the Lord brings hope and help into the most desperate and difficult situation.

Tonight your life is no longer going down, down, down into darkness. Instead, it billows up, up, up toward life and light. Tonight God troubles the monster of the darkness and the deep. Tonight He speaks to all that swallowed you and gnawed your soul—that great secret evil that has blighted your life, that perplexing situation over which you have no control, that addiction you cannot escape, that crippling past you cannot change. Tonight God beards the sea monster Leviathan in his own lair!

Salvation belongs to the Lord. Salvation has a name. That name is Jesus. When you accept Bible truth, you accept Jesus—who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As Jonah was in the belly of the sea beast three days and three nights, so Jesus was three days in the heart of the earth. He died to pay the penalty for every sin you’ve ever committed against yourself, others and God. Then the tomb spit Him out alive! His story can be yours, too.

Up top where God lives, sin’s great storm is already over. Satan has been kicked out of heaven. Jesus has paid man’s ransom and risen from the dead. He is in heaven’s temple at the right hand of our Father’s favor to represent our interests. Jesus holds the keys of death. His empty tomb is our open door. Tonight Lord Jesus unlocks the strong jaw of the sea monster. Let freedom ring! Let freedom ring!

Chapter Three

We've seen rejection of God's Word brings distress and trouble both to us, and to everyone whose life touches our own. We've seen remembering God's Word again brings hope and help, even in the most desperate and perplexing circumstances.

Chapter three of Jonah's story adds another great truth concerning the Word of the Lord:

Responding to the Word of the Lord

frees us from its threatening and brings great good

for God's glory and the benefit of many.

Jonah's been belched onto the beach. He rinses the anchovy pulp from his hair and beard in a stream running down to the sea. He shakes a

strand of kelp from around his ankle. He dries well-bleached robe in the sun and warm breeze. He squints toward heaven. Then God speaks again.

Chapter three says:

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.”

Some people turn from the Word of God. They mock it as a Book of mere myths and fables. They say it is not fit for the modern world, that it has been disproved by the wise men of our age. They refuse to give it heed. Yet the Bible says of its Author:

“He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.” Isaiah 33:6 NIV

Many have never given serious attention to the Bible's claims personally. They don't realize it is the only functioning time machine in existence—a Book with the demonstrated ability of seeing backward and forward through time. They've never claimed any of its three thousand unbreakable promises for their own life. They don't know the riches of its literature, the breadth and reasonableness of its moral code, the

grandeur of its poetry. They have never met the incredibly varied cast of the heroes and villains that appear in its stories. They've not read its descriptions of dinosaurs that once walked earth with men. They are largely ignorant of the single Book that has had the greatest impact on human civilization of any ever written. The saddest thing of all is they have never met the God of the Bible. The name of His only Son, Jesus Christ, is no more than a curse word to them.

For these, the Bible is a buried Book. The greatest treasure chest ever given humanity lies abandoned in the quickly sifting sand of their lives. The key to open its riches is lost. They turn from it, and sail off on a crooked course of their own devising. Perhaps they know enough of the Word to understand that it stands over against their life choices as surely as it did Captain Kidd's. So, like the pirate captain, they avoid God's Word at all costs. They may even make open and learned mockery of its claims and its teachings. Considering themselves wise, they become fools. So do all who praise them.

Some ignore the Bible for years, decades, a lifetime. Then the storm strikes. Some mutant monster gulps them down. Life shatters and humbles them. They look for something better. They turn their ears to God's Word again. It still speaks the same things. It hasn't changed. It never will.

That Word told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Now he heard and obeyed. He walked for weeks across the sweltering sands before the hundred-foot high walls of the fearsome city loomed across the river before him. Its battlements were so broad three chariots could ride abreast around their tops. Massive stone scorpions, coiled serpents poised to strike and great horned bulls guarded its gates. Jonah knew real monsters from stone imitations by now. He hardly gave the great idols a glance as he passed into the city.

Through the streets of Nineveh swarmed the dreaded enemies he once feared. Now they seemed mere puny mortals, like him. Why should Jonah fear anything they might do? He stared Death in the face for three dark days and nights. He used up his lifetime's supply of adrenaline down there in the deep. He'd already faced a ship load of storm-crazed seamen. They'd thrown him overboard mid-ocean into the teeth of a hurricane. He'd passed through jaws more fearsome than these gates and all the swords and spears of the Assyrian army. He'd walked 800 miles across the blistering desert to arrive here and say exactly what

God told him to say. Nobody in this great, stinking, sinful, bullying city was going to shut Jonah up now! They might be stronger than him. But they didn't stand a chance against his God.

Jonah came to the first corner, and stopped. He lifted up his voice in a strange, mournful, piercing wail:

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!”

Merchants stopped cheating customers in the stalls of the market to listen. Soldiers froze in their tracks and turned their heads toward this stranger. The sacred prostitutes from the shrines peered out through temple doors, searching for his face. Nineveh, overthrown! In forty days. Each person's conscience stabbed him in the secret place of his heart. Nor was it merely private sins that troubled. There were the public sins, too—the national sins, those horrible atrocities committed in Assyria's predatory wars. There were the scenes of senseless maiming of the citizens of entire cities, of cruel slaughter for mere sport, of entire nations uprooted, families torn apart, mixed with other peoples of other languages and sent into forced exile.

Wherever Jonah raised his voice, the memory of old and recent wrongs surged up like a great dark fountain, sweeping all before him. No voice disputed the prophet's message. No hand lifted to stay his course. Everyone knew why Nineveh must be overthrown. They weren't good people. They had done great evil, so many wrongs they had lost track of them. So have we.

“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.”

It is time to seek God. It is time to hear His Word and find His presence.

It is time to declare a fast like the people of Nineveh, did. Not a fast of food and water, perhaps. But maybe a “media fast” for the duration of

these meetings. It is time to turn off the T.V., the radio, the video games, the internet. It is time to put aside the magazine, the romance novel, and the newspaper. It is time to clear a quiet place in our lives so we can hear the still small voice of Almighty God speak to us. If we will engage in such a fast, we will have enough time to do what must be done, then to come from evening to evening to hear the Word of the Lord. We will have hungry minds to understand, and hungry hearts to love what we learn. How serious are you about seeking God's face? Will you give up something in order to do it? Will you fast in this way?

The wearing rough woven garments called "sack cloth" was the custom anciently in times of grave calamity, disaster, and mourning. The people of Nineveh believed the Lord. They knew they deserved to die. They dressed to mourn their own funerals. Their king dressed in sackcloth, too—like his lowliest subject. He sat in a heap of old ashes, humbling himself heartily before the God of this strange foreign prophet who had come among his subjects. The Assyrian King conquered men by the might of his armies. Now he conquered God though the humility of his prayers. So may we.

The king called his nobles together in council. Throughout the Assyrian capital the royal heralds lifted the cry:

"By decree of the king and his nobles:

"Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

God doesn't change, nor does His Word change. They are the same yesterday, today, and forever. But when we accept the warnings of the Word of the Lord, when we change the course of our actions—things are different than they were before. New possibilities occur. When we remember God, He remembers us. When we listen to Him, He listens to us. It is not that the prophecy fails, or that God has lied, or that His Word of judgment against our evil is withdrawn. Instead, the change in us means a change toward Him—and a change in our future.

The Bible says:

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”

The same God who forgave Jonah forgave the people of Nineveh. There is no sin too small for God to ignore, even among His own people. There is no sin too great for God to forgive, even among those who have never known His name. Whether you have heard of the God of the Bible before tonight, or not, He will accept you. If you will receive His Word, He will receive you.

Chapter Four

What have we seen so far?

- *Rejecting the Word of the Lord* brings distress and trouble to us and those whose lives touch our own.**
- *Remembering the Word of the Lord* brings hope and help into the most desperate and difficult situation.**
- *Responding to the Word of the Lord* frees us from its threatening and brings great good for God’s glory and the benefit of many.**

To these the final chapter of Jonah’s story adds a fourth truth:

Receiving the Word of the Lord

allows us to see ourselves and others

through God’s eyes.

Jonah left Nineveh before the fortieth day--the most successful preacher of all time. His ministry converted a ship load of seamen earlier—right after they threw him overboard! Now the Word of the Lord on Jonah’s lips had won the entire population of Nineveh. Every knee bowed. Every

tongue called on the true God of the Bible to pardon past evils, and grant mercy. A hundred and twenty thousand former pirate-like plunderers and murderers laid down their cutlasses, emptied their cannons, threw their kegs of gunpowder overboard, hauled down the Jolly Roger and burned it mid-deck. They turned from their former crimes with a will and a passion that was truly remarkable.

Jonah might have been delighted. But his eye was not as pure as God's eye. His heart was not as broad as the heart of the One he served. Jonah was happy the God of mercy forgave his sin in refusing the Word of the Lord earlier. He was overjoyed to be rescued from the great deep and the monster's belly. But when on the fortieth day the sun rose and fell again--and Nineveh remained—Jonah was outraged. He was furious with God for forgiving the enemies of his people, who accepted the very Word of the Lord God sent Jonah to proclaim among them.

The Bible says:

“But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.’”

God, You are too good! You are far too good! Must You really save everyone who asks You? I told these “pirate marauders” their Evil Empire would be overthrown, because You told me to preach that. But they all repented. The appointed time has passed. You have made me look like a false prophet—a fool! You've embarrassed me before the heathen! I will be counted a liar!

I know You: You forgiving Father, You gracious God, You merciful Master, You patient Parent, You kindly King, You loving Lord. You're forever letting sinners off the hook when they give You the least excuse to do so. After all these nasty Ninevites have done, You didn't punish them at all! Why? Simply because they turned from their wrongs, and asked You to save them. You've always been a Sucker for a sorry sinner. The really rotten thing, Lord, is that I know You'll do exactly the same thing anytime, anywhere, for anybody. Even those folks at the *Let Freedom Ring* meetings!

It's not fair, Lord! I'm all washed up. My credibility is compromised. Who will ever believe anything I say again? You sent me crawling out on a long, wobbly limb, Lord. Then you sawed it off behind me! I knew You'd do something like this. Why do you think I fled for Tarshish? This whole affair is sheer disaster. It is a personal calamity of enormous proportions. I'm in free fall here!

“Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Just because a person is a Christian doesn't mean he views matters as God does. Just because he's a preacher, or even a prophet, doesn't mean he represents God well on all occasions. Don't blame God for how His people act! That includes preachers, priests, and prophets. Remember Jonah. His ministry saved a ship load of sailors. Then he was God's own man for the saving of an enormous city filled with heathen. Yet Jonah's attitude stank like those week-old, monster-munched anchovies tangled in his beard. Jonah stomped and stormed. He shouted at God, “I wish I were dead, dead, dead! So take Your pick, Lord. Either kill them, or kill me!”

Jonah hoped God would change His mind again and destroy Nineveh. He didn't want to go home knowing the news of what he'd predicted and how things had actually worked out would be making the rounds. He was profoundly embarrassed. He didn't mind death by drowning. He didn't mind being killed in the line of prophetic duty later on, if necessary. But what the pious-proud prophet couldn't stand was looking stupid. Jonah was furious! He appointed himself a one-man picket line protesting God's over-gracious treatment of vile offenders—and His lack of support for faithful preachers of His Word.

“Jonah went out and sat down at the place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.”

Now if we were God, we might have simply left the petulant prophet to pout while everyone else went to the party. After all, the big job was over, wasn't it? The city had been warned, and saved. Scores and scores of thousands had turned from sin to God. Who really cared how Jonah felt about the whole thing?

God did.

It is just here that the kindness of God takes a long, close step toward each of us tonight. His patient understanding and gentle hand reaches to touch your heart, your mind. It was true Nineveh had been saved. But there was one person who was still very lonely, and very lost. It was Jonah. His heart and the heart of God were at odds. Jonah didn't see as God saw. He didn't feel as God felt. He didn't realize God could never be satisfied with simply saving a city. He didn't know God loved him, too. So God came back again, the second time. He came looking for Jonah.

Tonight God comes looking for you. You matter more than worlds.

He cannot be satisfied with saving everyone else, if you are still lost.

He doesn't care what an ornery, twisted-up, religiously-smug, church-going stinker you are. He doesn't care about your past partying, boozing, fornicating, cheating, gambling, molesting, stealing, lying, stink-talking and adultery. He doesn't care about your spiritual vanity, your denominational arrogance, your petty one-up-man-ship, your self-centered "the universe revolves around me" fixation. He doesn't care how wrong-headed, racist, bigoted, profane and stubborn you are. Or how much jail time you've done—or should have done!

There's nothing wrong with you God can't fix. He loves the folks sitting in church as much as those drinking in taverns. His heart embraces the cathouse as surely as the cathedral--the pusher, the pimp, and the prostitute as surely as the politician, the policeman, and the preacher. God loves us too much to leave us blind to His feelings toward us, and toward the others He also loves. He won't willingly leave one behind. Not me. Not you. Not anybody.

The same God whose Word saved Nineveh worked again to woo and win a single, stubborn, narrow-hearted soul. The God who sent the storm and the great fish again employed those things He had made.

The Bible says:

"Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.

“When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’

“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die!’”

O Jonah! Your hot, hard, hateful heart is so different from the great heart of the God who spoke His Word to you, and through you. O Jonah! Can’t you agree with your Maker? Can’t you step out of your smallness and your bitterness into His greatness and compassion?

“But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’”

God’s eye is on the sparrow. He loves kittens and puppies. He cares about the spotted owl and three-toed salamander. He pities former Chicken Mc Nuggets--and those bellowing, sad-eyed burrito-fillers, plodding patiently toward Taco Bell for your dining delight. If God even cares for His critters, He cares for you, too. You are worth more than many sparrows.

Jonah’s story ends with a question: Won’t we love as God loves? Won’t we be happy with Him when people are saved?

The Word of the Lord comes to us in Jonah’s story. It shows us our great God’s heart. That heart can hold a city. It can bear a world. It can contain the entire universe. Yet there is an empty place in His great heart of love until it holds you, too. Because God loves us like that, we can love each other. We can even love our bitterest enemies. As we receive the Word of the Lord, we begin seeing things differently. We are given new eyes, new lives, new hearts, new hope, new help. In the treasures of His Word, God gives us Himself--and His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Through these pages, Jonah’s God comes looking for us again—and nothing is impossible.

Conclusion and Call

Will you receive the Word of the Lord tonight? If you will, the Lord of the Word receives you. Will you come to hear more of His Word tomorrow night? Will you bring your family? Will you bring a friend? Will you invite an enemy? In the evenings just ahead, there is no more important place for us to be than right here, hearing more of the Word of the Lord.

Do you remember the pirate, Captain Kidd, who buried his Bible and went to sea? He experienced a short-lived career as a pirate. But during it he managed to have a great many innocent people killed. Some he personally murdered in cold blood. In the end, Kidd was captured, bound in 16-pound leg irons, and sent to England to face trial.

After two years in prison, on May 9, in the year 1701, Captain Kidd was found guilty of murder and piracy. Along with nine other pirates, he was taken in an open cart through the squalid slums of London to the place of execution. The gallows were built, according to custom, at the low tide mark. A great crowd gathered on the shore and in boats to watch.

Of the ten pirates sentenced to be hung, six received last minute pardons. Captain Kidd was not among these fortunate ones. All his efforts to escape failed--including pleas of innocence, an attempt to bribe officials with treasure he had hidden, and the final recourse of attempting to drink himself into such a stupor his execution would pass without his knowledge. Some say Kidd's noose broke once that day. Others say it broke twice. All agree that by the time he faced the noose for the final time, the pirate captain was stone cold sober. He had already looked up at the twitching bodies of the three pirates who hung with him.

Captain Kidd saw his end clearly. But it was too late. There was no whale to spit him onto dry land. There was no rescue. No pardon. No pity. He refused to listen to the Word of the Lord. Now no man alive would hear his pleas of innocence. He had buried the Bible his mother had given him in the sand. Now even the earth refused to accept his body.

When Kidd quit kicking, his body was cut down and chained to a barnacled mooring post at ebb tide. Three tides were allowed to rise and fall over his corpse--in keeping with the English law for dishonoring the

remains of pirates. Then the pirate captain's water-bloated body was coated with ship's tar, fastened inside an iron cage, and suspended for public view at a point where the Thames River flowed into the sea. For several years, every ship that navigated the river's mouth had a clear view of Kidd's ugly end for an hour's travel in each direction along one of the busiest waterways in the world.

Burying the Bible is unsafe and insane--both for men and for nations. It brings misery, shame, ugliness, horror, and death to all who turn from its pages. Yet for those who will receive the Word of the Lord--as did Jonah in the belly of the sea monster, and as the Assyrians did in Nineveh—that same Word brings great good. It brings hope and help in life's most distressing circumstances. It prevents personal and national disaster. It frees us from God's justice toward our past wrongs. It enables us to bring God glory and to bless many around us. The Bible allows us to see ourselves and each other through God's eyes, and to share His great heart of love even toward our enemies. And most of all, it points us to Jesus—who is Salvation. The Word of the Lord brings freedom to all who will receive it.

Let freedom ring! Let freedom ring!

Tonight we urge you to consider a “media fast”. Turn off the T.V. Pull the plug from the wall on your VCR and radio. Put a note on your computer not to go surfing the web. Don't listen to your headphones or car radio. Put your video games, your magazines, the newspaper, your recreational reading in a drawer until these meetings are finished.

This entirely voluntary restriction will provide many added hours in most of our schedules. This “media fast” will allow us to get everything else finished might prevent us from being here from evening to evening. Understand, PARTICIPATING IN THE “MEDIA FAST” IS NOT A REQUIREMENT TO ATTEND FUTURE MEETINGS. It is only a strong recommendation to ensure the greatest value for the time you spend here. Are you serious about seeking God? Will you accept this fast with us?

Tonight, if you will receive the Word of the Lord, you need to do something to let God and others know. You can do this by simply standing now as we pray. We also have a sheet we would like to give to all who have attended this evening. It contains a genuine copy of a Captain Kidd treasure map, along with some verses for your own

treasure hunt in the riches of God's Word. On the opposite side of the sheet are the words to a 250 year old ballad that tells Captain Kidd's story—of his burying his Bible, his evil crimes, and his sad end. If you want your genuine Captain Kidd treasure map and your Media Fast button, be sure to pick one up before you leave this evening.

You'll want to be here early tomorrow night. The topic is "Brave New World: Pilgrims in Paradise".

* * *

Let's pray:

O God of Jonah,

Grant us ears to hear Your Word. Grant us hearts willing to receive its riches. Calm our storms. Fight our monsters. Show us Your great heart, so that we may see ourselves and others--and that we may become like You.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Captain Kidd

**My name is Captain Kidd
As I sailed, as I sailed.
Oh, my name is Captain Kidd as I sailed.
My name is Captain Kidd
And God's laws I did forbid,
And most wickedly I did as I sailed.**

**My father taught me well
To shun the gates of hell,
But against him I rebelled as I sailed.
He shoved a Bible in my hand,
But I left it in the sand
And I pulled away from land, as I sailed.**

**I murdered William Moore
And I left him in his gore
Twenty leagues away from shore as I sailed.
And being crueller still,
The gunner I did kill.
All his precious blood did spill, as I sailed.**

**I was sick nigh to death,
And I vowed at every breath
Oh, to walk in wisdom's path as I sailed.
But my repentance lasted not,
My vows I soon forgot.
Oh, damnation is my lot, as I sailed.**

**To the execution dock
Lay my head upon the block,
Laws no more I'll mock as I sail.
So take warning here and heed
To shun bad company—
Or you'll wind up just like me as I sailed.**

(to the hymn tune "Wondrous Love")