

Our first reading is taken from the book of Jonah, which is my favorite prophetic book in the scripture. I presume that most of you know the story. Jonah is told to go and preach to Ninevah, but Jonah takes off before the Lord finishes telling him what to do. He heads the exact opposite direction, for a ship toward Tarshish, which was considered the remotest part of the earth.

The author provides an interesting way of showing that Jonah is running away from the Lord. Jonah goes "down" to Joppa. Then he goes "down" to the ship. Then he goes "down" into the hull of the ship. Jonah, then, is running "down, down, down," away from the Lord. Thankfully, however, the Lord stays close to the prodigal prophet.

God stirs up a storm, and in response, the sailors throw Jonah over the side of the ship where he is swallowed by a great fish. Jonah prays for deliverance and is spit up on the seashore. The verses today pick up at this point in the story.

Our reading today begins, *"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."* Jonah gets a second chance. I am not sure about you, but I am very grateful that God gives second chances! We worship a God of "second chances."

After getting to Nineveh, Jonah preaches, *"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed."* It's not exactly a great homily, only eight words long (five in Hebrew). Forty days is a grace period – an opportunity to repent. Oddly enough, the Ninevites believed him!

We are supposed to see some irony here. Whereas God's own people rarely listened to the prophets, the Gentile pagans actually do. Nineveh basically has its own Ash Wednesday in that they cover themselves with ashes. Even their cattle and sheep receive ashes.

Jesus, for his part, contrasts His generation with the Ninevites. Whereas they repented, those listening to Jesus seek a sign (they doubt). Of course, they *will* be given a great sign. Just as a fish swallowed Jonah for three days, so Jesus will be swallowed by death and buried in the belly of the earth for three days. And just as Jonah was spewed out alive, so will Jesus in His Resurrection.

For us today, if we are honest we all have a little Jonah in us. We need second chances. Additionally, we need to give others second, third, and fourth chances. In doing so, like Jonah, God can work through our own imperfections and sins to evangelize others. We don't have to be perfect for God to use us. May we allow God to convert us more deeply in order to evangelize others.