God’s Call and Jonah’s Response

Jonah 1:1-16

Key Verse 4:11

 Not long after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas last week, the more powerful hurricane Irma slammed the Caribbean islands this weekend and is now heading to Florida. The Florida governor warned all the residents to evacuate instantly, and so millions of people are running away from the monster hurricane Irma. Two days ago, a magnitude 8.2 earthquake hit the west coast of Mexico leaving hundreds casualty of people’s lives and destroyed many cities. Why did such catastrophic natural disasters occur more frequent than before? The scientists said that the frequent and powerful hurricanes were caused by global warming. The hot air over the sea caused more and powerful hurricanes than before.

Anne Graham Lots, the author and evangelist, the daughter of Rev. Billy Graham, said a few days ago, “God always warns a nation that judgement is coming.” She continued. "He does not want any to perish. But if a nation does not heed His warnings, then He will unleash His anger and there is nothing—no one—who can prevent it." She quoted Romans 1:18, which says, “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness*…” Of course, we don’t say that all natural disasters and human tragedies are caused by men’s evilness and wickedness. But God often intervenes in human history and destiny to reveal his will and power for his good purpose and for men’s salvation. Let us pray for those who suffer from hurricanes, flood, earthquakes, and other natural disasters around the world. Let us respond to God’s message of repentance for this nation. Amen.

From today we will study the book of Jonah. The theme of Jonah’s story is not his stay in the belly of a big fish, but God’s broken heart for the lost world. (Jonah 4:11) Jonah was a prophet for Northern Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, son of Joash. God wanted to use Jonah to deliver the message of judgment on the Assyrian Empire because of their wickedness. The Assyrian army was known their cruelty and inhuman acts against even children, the aged and pregnant women. But Jonah was a patriotic prophet who loved to see God’s restoration for N. Israel. It means that he wanted to see the destruction of the enemies of Israel including the Assyrians. So, when the Lord called him to go and to preach against Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, (Mosel at the present), he was angry and fled by the ship to Tarshish (Spain). Through the story of Jonah, we learn about God’s call and our response, and find some pictures of Jesus Christ through Jonah’s story.

Look at verses 1,2. “***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 upon before me***.” The word of the Lord came to Abraham. The word of God came to Moses, and the word of God came to Samuel, to Hosea, and to Jeremiah. God called his chosen servants with his words. God also called us with his words. Many UBF missionaries responded to God’s calling when the word of the Lord came to them. They accepted God’s call to Abraham written in Genesis 12:2,3 as their own call, and left their countries to go out as missionaries. Personally, the word of the Lord, John 21:15 came to me when I was in college. While I was seeking for life direction, God called me to be a shepherd for God’s flock of sheep on campus. In this way, when the word of the Lord came to his people, they responded to God’s call and God blessed them.

But, Jonah was different. Look at verse 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***.” Jonah did not appreciate God’s call, rather he ran away from the Lord. He headed for Tarshish, the opposite direction from Nineveh. At that time Tarshish was, now Spain, known as the end of the earth. Jonah rebelled against God and ran away to the end of the earth. Here we learn that human rebellion comes from the disobedience to the word of the Lord. Adam failed Satan’s temptation when he did not obey the word of the Lord. Cain killed his brother Abel when he did not repent and listen to God’s word. The tragic history of Judah and Israel repeated when they did not listen to God’s message which were delivered by the prophets. In human history, humanistic philosophers and atheistic thinkers rejected the sovereignty of God over human history and removed the absoluteness of truth from the Bible.

How did God respond to Jonah’s rebellion? Look at verse 4. “***Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up***.” God did not give up on Jonah even though he ran away from Him. God sent a storm to Jonah’s ship so that Jonah might repent. The category 3 hurricane hit the ship which Jonah was on board. 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.** (5) Freedom of religion was allowed for all the sailors that they cried out to their own gods. Some prayed to Poseidon, the Greek god of ocean. But the storm didn’t go away. Others prayed to Tiamat, the sea god of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Still, others prayed to Gong Gong, the Chinse god of the sea monster. But the storm did not calm down, instead it became the more powerful hurricane with category 4.

The sailors threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. All which they had accumulated for their trip, business, security, and future, were thrown into the sea for the sake of their lives. All which they put their hope and trust had to be thrown into the sea before their eyes. Here we learn that all which we have accumulated on this earth for our security and pleasure will be burden to us when we are about to leave from this world. Some day we may throw all of them into the sea of death in order to gain eternal life.

 What did Jonah do while all the sailors were struggling for their lives? He was sleeping in the deck below. Look at verses 5b. “***But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into deep sleep***.” Jonah wanted to forget about everything including the storm and even his life. He meant that it would be okay if he died. His rebellion against God reached to even suicidal indifference. His rebellion against God reached to the deepest place in the ship which was heading for the farthest land of the earth. But God did not let Jonah die in this way. Look at verse 6. “***The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.***” The thing seemed to be reversed. Jonah, the prophet, must have asked the captain to pray to God. But the captain rebuked Jonah and asked him to pray. When God’s people rebelled against God and lived godless lives, they will be rebuked by the people of the world. Jesus said in Matthew 5:13. “*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for any thing, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot*.”

The sailors did not give up. They did their best to save their lives and others. They cast lots in order to find the cause of the storm. In ancient days, they believed that casting lots determines God’s will. Proverbs 16:33 says, “*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord*.” Look at verse 7. “***Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.***” God’s work is more accurate and precise than computers. The lot fell on Jonah, who ran away from the Lord to the end of the earth. Jonah was caught, rebuked, and investigated. The sailors began to investigate Jonah. “***So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?***” (8) Jonah was investigated like a criminal, who was caught by the police. The servant of God Jonah was humiliated and investigated when he did not follow the will of God.

What was Jonah’s answer? Look at verse 9. “***He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land***.” This terrified the sailors because they knew that Jonah was doing something wrong against the God of heaven, the Lord of creation. They continued to ask him, “**What have you done? (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so).**” While they were talking with Jonah, the sea was getting rougher and rougher. The storm became a category 5 hurricane. The stronger the storm was, the more the sailors were frightened and frustrated. **So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?**” (11) They knew that the only way for their survival was to do something with Jonah, who ran away from the Lord of creation.

What was Jonah’s answer? Look at verse 12. “***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.***” Jonah asked them to throw him into the sea as sacrifice offering to appease God’s wrath. He knew that it was his fault that the great storm came upon them. Jonah knew the cause of the storm and the solution for the storm. His idea and suggestion was suicidal, not sacrificial. He must have sought another way for solution than being thrown into the sea. His suggestion did not come from his love for the sailors, but from his unrepentant heart toward God. He would rather die than see his enemies’ salvation. Many rebellious people end their lives with death. They will not repent, but give up their lives. Instead of repentance they choose eternal destruction and separation from God. How wicked and evil people become when they rebel against God!

The greatness of King David was not his courage who fought against Goliath, the giant. His greatness was not his wisdom and knowledge who wrote many psalms and hymns. His greatness is his humble repentance when he sinned against God. He sinned against God by committing adultery with Bethsheba, the wife of his subject Uriah. He also murdered Uriah in order to cover up his sin. David was an adulterer and murderer. But when he was rebuked by the prophet Nathan, David repented his sin with many tears. Psalm 42 describes how David repented his sins before God. God forgave David and restored his kingship. Later David had to pay for the price of his sins. His daughter Dana was raped by one of his sons. David was chased by his rebellious son Absalom, who was later killed by one of David’s general. Despite all these tragic events, David’s faith was not shaken. He accepted all these as God’s divine discipline for him. He accepted all these in his body as the price of his own sins.

But David is the only shadow of our Lord Jesus, who took all our sins in his body and died on the cross. David suffered for his own sins, but Jesus suffered for our sins. Jesus was a sinless Son of God, but he bore all our sins in his body and hung on the tree. He gave his life as a sin offering for our salvation. Jonah and David suffered for their own sins and they bore its consequences in them, but Jesus suffered for our sins and bore all our iniquities and transgressions. The Prophet Isaiah said about this, “*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, …he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” (Is 53:4,5)

The sailors knew that the motivation of Jonah’s suggestion was not right before God. Jonah’s suggestion was suicidal, not salvational. So, instead of answering Jonah’s suggestion, they did their best to row back to land. They did their best to save Jonah’s life. But they could not, for the sea grew even wider than before. There was no other way than throwing Jonah into the sea as Jonah had suggested. But they prayed to the God of Jonah before they did. Look at verse 14. “***Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life: Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.”*** (14) It is surprising that the sailors had faith in God. They lived according to their conscience even though they did not know the God of Jonah. We Christians often misjudge unbelievers and criticize their ignorance and unbelief. But we must know that there are many unbelievers who live according to their good conscience and moral value. God often use them to shame our hypocritical life so that we may repent of our sins and come to Him. The believers must live according to God’s word so that we can be light and salt of this world. At the same time, we must preach them the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Look at verses 15,16. “***Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him***.” It usually takes time for the storm to calm down. Hurricanes also begin calming down slowly to lower level. But, the perfect storm suddenly calmed down as soon as Jonah was thrown into the sea. The sailors and all people in the ship were terrified by the power of God, and they worshiped Him. Now they are sure that this calamity came from the rebellious person Jonah. Now they believe that the God of Jonah is the true God, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Even though Jonah was thrown into the sea, many people came to believe in God the Almighty.

In today’s passage, we learned God’s call and Jonah’s response. God never gives up for his plan for salvation. Once he calls, he does not regret or cancel. He keeps his promise and accomplishes it according to his plan. So, Paul said in Romans 11:29, “*for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable*.” God fulfills his will despite our unfaithfulness. Even though Jonah did not obey God and ran away from him, God was patient with him. Romans 3:3 says that men’s unfaithfulness cannot nullify the faithfulness of God. God’s calling is not a burden, but a blessing. Let us respond to God’s call with gratitude and sincerity so that we may become a blessing for the world like Abraham, David, Peter, John, Paul, and many saints in church history. Amen.