



Sermon delivered by  
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III  
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
January 21, 2018

## "What *Some* People Are Willing to Believe"

(Jonah 3: 1-5)

It's not a long trip, but it isn't a hop, skip and a jump, either. The trip from Newark, New Jersey, to Tel Aviv, Israel, takes about 10 hours, and that begs the question: *How to use those 10 hours?* The options are obvious: you eat you sleep, you read, and you definitely pray. I prefer to read, sleep and pray (which may become the title of my new book, but I digress). In case you do not know, airline food has changed and not for the better, which is fine by me because I use those 10 hours as a form of aeronautical "Weight Watchers." I decline the hospitality. My preference is to read, and one publication I always enjoy reading is the in-flight catalogue of "things" you don't find anywhere else; gadgets that can be purchased during the flight by using one's credit card. When you read what is available, it is easy to understand why some people will not only believe but will purchase almost anything at any price.

I read the description of at least 25 products that are guaranteed to make our earthly life easier. I read each description carefully and with interest. I purchased none of them, yet. One product did tempt me to reach for my credit card. It is a device that guarantees you to be able to park your car in your garage no matter how narrow the door, no matter how cluttered the garage. If you have been to our home, you may have noticed that our two-door garage allows little margin for error. There have been times when I have come close to making our two-door garage into a three-door garage. But something called "Park-Right" guarantees a perfect parking job every time, and the price is right for "Park-Right." I wrote down their 800 number. Another ad caught my attention, and it shouldn't surprise you. The ad spoke of becoming licensed to officiate at weddings. Now, I know people who have answered that ad. They are the ones who are taking food off of my table. Nonetheless, it costs a mere \$35 to obtain a lifetime-ordination. That's all; \$35. No seminary education. No wrestling with Greek or Hebrew. No counseling courses needed. Interesting detail: the address to obtain your lifetime-ordination is Columbia, SC. That's where the competition lives. But, there was

another ad no less intriguing to me. Did you know you can earn thousands of dollars by raising earth worms? I may consider that for my retirement years.

Isn't it amazing what some people are willing to believe? The Bible talks about what some people are willing to believe. Matter of fact, the Bible warns us to be on our guard against such claims because those claims pull us, they separate us from God. What the Bible says and what some people are willing to ignore is that Jesus Christ is the *only* guarantee. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and apart from Him there is nothing, *nothing*. When we visited the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born, the entire world was in line with us. People from Asia, Africa, the Americas, people from all 4-corners of the world stood in line with us waiting to see, wanting to touch the spot where Christ was born. Those people are not easily fooled by other claims that you can get something better than what Christ has to offer. They believe, like we believe, that Jesus Christ is the only game in town, even after 2000 years, and after all earthly guarantees have faded away, Christ remains THE guarantee. St. Peter understood that about Jesus, which is why our Lord commended Peter for his faith.

What caught my eye not in that in-flight magazine but in the Holy Land is that we Christians come in so many shapes and sizes and colors and languages and backgrounds. It dawned on me: the real sin for many of us Christians is believing that the gospel is not for everyone. Our sin is believing, is assuming, is thinking the gospel is only for P.L.U. – people like us. That was Jonah's sin. He was convinced that some people were worthy of God's blessings and some people were not. It took the Almighty a couple of tries to get Jonah's attention, but even after Jonah got the message, he still had a hard time accepting God's will. Jonah's mission was to go to the capital of Assyria, a grand metropolis called Nineveh, a huge urban city that took three days to cover by foot, a location populated by people who were known for their wickedness. One of you once had a meeting out in Las Vegas, and when you got back to Charlotte you told me what you saw, the people, the nightlife, the daylife, the sheer wickedness that is very much characteristic of Las Vegas. Imagine a city like Las Vegas but 10 times, maybe 20 times, maybe 30 times the size, and all of it if not most of it characterized by wickedness.

Jonah was bothered that the Lord loved those people in Nineveh, that the Lord wanted the best for them. It bothered Jonah a great deal that the Lord did not want those people to perish because of their poor choices. Thus, God sends Jonah on a mission to tell the people of Nineveh that the God of heaven and earth, the only living God is a gracious and merciful

God, a God slow to anger, a God overflowing with steadfast love. That was Jonah's mission, but he didn't think those Assyrians were worthy of such news, and he said as much to God. And yet, and yet, those Assyrians listened to Jonah, and the people of Nineveh believed. They proclaimed a great fast, which was their way of saying how sorry they were for the lives they were living. Amazingly, those people listened, they heard Jonah's message. The name "Jonah" means dove, as in peace. No matter, Jonah didn't think those people deserved God's peace. That's why he hesitated to share with them the good news of God's grace, love and mercy.

Truth be known, some Christians in our day feel the same way. Some Christians are still willing to allow some people to believe whatever they want to believe, and some people are willing to believe the most amazing things. I once knew a man, an Elder in the church, who kept a rabbit's foot in his pocket. I asked him, *Why do you carry that rabbit's foot?* He told me it was for what? Good luck! Show me in the Bible where Jesus ever talks about good luck. I can't find that chapter and that verse. What I can find in the Bible is where the God of Jonah, the God of Jesus Christ, the God you and I believe in is described as gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love, not luck, but love. That's in the Bible, and the guarantee for such grace, love and mercy is Whom? Jesus Christ!

Our mission on this corner is fairly obvious, and it can be stated this way: we want to prevent people from believing what is not true. As followers of Jesus Christ, we care a great deal how people live their lives, and we do not want anyone, and I mean anyone, to miss out on knowing the truth found in Jesus Christ. I hope you are as proud of our Elders as I am. In response to being now a debt-free congregation, your Elders are planning a whole new approach to being the church on this corner, and especially when it comes to our newcomers. Your Elders want to make it very clear to everyone who steps foot into this sanctuary that we care what they believe, and if the Lord leads them to us we will tell them the truth about God's love and how such love is made real through faith that Jesus Christ is the risen Son of God. We don't care how you park your car or how many earth worms you are raising. What we care about is how you live your life, what you believe, and that Jesus Christ is not just a part of your life. Jesus Christ IS your life.

That's our mission. That's why we have been on this corner for over 50 years, a mere drop-in-the-bucket, I know, but time enough to have changed many lives, lives not so unlike those lives once lived in a city called Nineveh. Even the king of Nineveh rose from his throne and wanted a better life than simply being king of Nineveh. Let me put it this way: if you and

I could be king or queen for a day, it would be tempting for us to believe we had made it. What more could we want in life? But we would be so mistaken. There would be a huge absence in our life, wouldn't there? Without Jesus Christ, no life is well-lived. No life is *worth* living. With Jesus Christ, there is life, the kind of life you and I would die for, if we could; the kind of life which Jesus did die for and all for our sake, and that is why our gratitude is immense. For our sake, the Lord did not want us to miss out on such grace and mercy and steadfast love. The Lord cares, the Lord cares deeply what we believe, and the Lord will stop at nothing to make sure we know that about Him and about God's love for us.

Those people in Nineveh had everything a people could want. They had everything, and in Jonah's eyes they didn't deserve or even need what God had to offer. But God had other plans for the Assyrians, even the Assyrians, who are not people like us, but they are God's people, and that's why Jonah was sent to them, and now Jonah's mission is whose mission? It is *our* mission. The God of Jesus Christ has entrusted to us a mission of good news, a mission so needed in our day as it was in Jonah's day, a mission I am grateful someone once took on for my sake and for your sake, so we, even you and I would not miss believing in a love that will never let us go, never, not now, not ever.

**Let us pray:** Gracious and merciful God, You have given us great joy in Jesus Christ, and our mission is to make His joy known to others, so together we may come to live as You have called us to live in Jesus. Inspire us by Holy Spirit to take on with new courage our mission and witness so no one is left in doubt as to Your undying love; revealed fully and joyfully through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.