

TITLE: "A Battle of Wills"

TEXT: Jonah 1:1-17 (OT pp. 859-860)

Introduction – When you're down in the mouth...

I used to have a cartoon on my desk that depicted Jonah emerging from the mouth of a whale. The caption read: "When you're down in the mouth, remember Jonah; he came out alright." Well, I've been studying Jonah this past week. It's true that he did come out of the whale alright, but he didn't seem to come out of the attitudes that put him in the whale to begin with.

In this morning's text, Jonah gets into a battle of wills with God. This morning we will:

See how easy it is for US to get into a battle of wills with God;

Discover how to find God's will for your life; and

See what happens when we don't follow God's will.

1. A battle of wills

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

There are two strong wills here. First there is GOD'S will. God saw the sins of the people who lived in the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians had defeated Israel's Northern Kingdom in 797 BC and the Southern Kingdom, where Jonah preached, were aware of how vulnerable they were to the overwhelming power of Assyria.

Jonah, along with the rest of those who lived in the Southern Kingdom, feared and hated the Assyrians. Jonah wanted God to destroy Nineveh. Jonah did NOT want to go to his enemies and preach repentance.

God had a plan for the world in the 8th century BC when Jonah was preaching. God has a plan for the world today. Each person on the face of the earth has a part to play in that plan. That boils down to the fact that there are things God wants you to do, and me to do, each and every day.

Christians have an advantage in this regard. If we have accepted Jesus as Savior, the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, lives within us and we can check with God anytime we are willing to stop, pray and listen. If we don't listen, chances are good that we will do our own thing rather than God's. Or, as in Jonah's case, we WILL hear God and then decide to do our own thing instead. ...But, when it comes to a battle of wills with God...
...guess who's going to win?

I once knew a lady in her late 80s. She was in a nursing home and her niece called me because she kept telling her family that she wanted to die. After several visits, I asked if she had ever accepted the Lord as her Savior. She said, "No, and I don't want to!" ...To make a long story short, after a year or so, she asked me why she didn't die. I said, "It's my fault. I have been praying that you would not die until you have faith in Jesus Christ. So, if you REALLY want to die, accept the Lord."

Well, she didn't. Later she went into a coma. I went to see her. People who are in a coma CAN sometimes hear what people say. I told her, "Edith, when you get tired of fighting, let yourself slip into the loving hands of the Lord." She died a day or so later. I believe she finally accepted the Lord.

An old retired minister said to a young pastor, "When I was your age, I battled with Satan. Now ...I battle with God." ..."Do you ever win when you battle with God?" asked the young man. "Oh no," said the old man, "I hope to lose. ...When it comes to a battle of wills, God is going to win. It's better to let God win sooner rather than later, as Jonah found out..."

2. How to discover God's will for your life

So, how DO you discover God's will for your life?

Most people, this includes most Christians, seem to just do what they THINK they should do, or do what they FEEL they should do, and then go ahead and do it. ...Several years ago, a woman who was in the middle of divorce proceedings said, "And I was so SURE he was the one." She had been sure with her first three other husbands, too.

Someone said to me just last week, "I do what I think I should do, and I can usually tell right away if I've made the right choice because things either work out or they don't." The problem with that system is that Satan ALWAYS makes it seem as if something will work out and he often insures that it starts out great. The more important the decision the more true it is.

To discover God's will for your life, you must first and foremost want what GOD wants MORE than what YOU want. If you don't, you will not discover God's will for you. For me, this always involves discovering MY will in the matter and then being willing to give it up.

Next, go to God in prayer and ask God what you should do. When I do this, I picture myself experiencing the various possibilities and then I usually know which path God wants me to take.

If I don't, then I try to wait until the right path is clear. And let me just say that it seems that the more important the decision, the longer I have to wait. Why IS this? God sometimes has a new possibility I have not even imagined and I need to change in order to consider it. Sometimes God is still getting the right path ready for me to take.

When we go on vacation, we eat most meals at our cottage, but we do go out to eat once at a nice restaurant. As we were packing for vacation last month, I found that I didn't have pants that matched the shirt I wanted to wear when we went out. I looked around here and couldn't find one.

I was going to leave the shirt home, but I when I pictured leaving it in the closet or bringing it, I had the sense I should bring it. On Friday, we went by an outlet mall and stopped. While I was waiting for Carol, I wandered into a store. They had a sale on pants, they had the color I needed and they had my size. When we got to the cottage, Carol ironed them and I was able to wear the pants and the shirt I had brought.

3. What happens when we don't follow God's will?

4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'

7 The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' ⁹'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.' ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ...¹⁷ But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Jonah didn't want to do what the Lord told him to do, so he decided to go on a cruise. A few years ago, a couple told me that they went on a Caribbean cruise. They both got the flu and spent the whole time taking turns in the bathroom throwing up and having diarrhea. Instead of a nice vacation, they thought it was the worse time they had ever had.

But, getting thrown into a raging sea and being eaten by a whale has to be worse. Some have suggested that the gastric juices of the whale may have bleached Jonah's skin so that when he finally showed up in Nineveh, his visage was so awful, it scared the people into repentance. What his WIFE said when he got home THAT business trip, we will never know....

Now, each of us have a means of escape, most more than one. Watching sports, shopping, playing cards, golf, yard work, sewing, vacations, various sports.... God understands the need we have for a break from the pressures of life. HOWEVER, when we choose to escape rather than do what God wants us to do, we will not enjoy it.

This is a lesson I have had to learn more than once. Last Monday was supposed to be a day for me. When I prayed I had the sense that I should go to the office. I overrode that inner sense. I hadn't been fishing this spring yet and I said to myself, "You deserve a break today."

I bought some bait. On the way to the stream, my cell phone rang. A member of a family I knew in town had died, so I prayed and agreed to do the funeral. Like the storm in the text, that SHOULD have been a SIGN to me, but I kept going.

Then, when I came to the stream I planned to fish it was posted with no trespassing signs. So was next stream. I finally found a place with no signs, so I started off. I SAW one trout, but couldn't get him to bite. All I kept catching was little suckers. That was probably another sign.

But I kept going. Finally, my phone rang for about the 5th time. In the sun, I couldn't read who was calling and thought it might be Carol or one of the kids. It was someone in my extended family who told me about a family member who was in crisis. That did it. I headed home, showered and went to the office.

I don't tell you this to get pity or sympathy. I love what I do. I rarely have a day when I am not happy to go to the office. And there ARE times when God gives me great fishing experiences. In this particular case, I should have trusted God and gone to the office. Once I did, once I got back into God's will, things went fine and they went fine all week.

Conclusion – What's the lesson?

So, what's the lesson?

Jonah learned that when it comes to a battle of wills, GOD is going to win.

When it comes to us, it saves a lot of time and aggravation to find out God's will before we make a decision, especially an important one.

What was MY lesson? Joy and peace come from staying in the will of the Lord, NOT from going fishing.

Amen.