

Valedictorian Speech
St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
May 17, 2025
Fr. Matthew Wiley

Your Beatitude, Your Graces, reverend clergy, esteemed members of the board, faculty, and staff:
 Christ is Risen!

What a privilege it is to be the one, among such a sea of talent, to deliver this valediction.

I would like to thank first all those who serve in the Antiochian Archdiocese, from our esteemed hierarchs, to my fellow seminarians... those who have supported me materially and spiritually, during my studies here at St. Vladimir's. I would also like to thank the entire St. Vladimir's community, particularly my professors—without you, I could not be standing here today.

I give special thanks to two of you. First, Dr. Bouteneff, who had the faith in me, to allow me to assist teaching his “Film and Spirituality” class for two semesters, helping me rekindle a deep love for cinema, and a renewed appreciation for its capacity to so powerfully convey spiritual truths.

Second, Dr. Legaspi, who showed a similar degree of faith in allowing me to assist teaching his Hebrew class, and for guiding my academic development over the past three years through a sequence of intellectually-demanding Old Testament classes that have truly pushed me to wrestle with the Sacred Text, culminating in my thesis, which I simply could not have completed without him. So thank you, both of you, for your guidance and friendship.

I give a very special thanks to my family, my parents, and my parents in marriage. And, of course, my wife, Diakonissa Christina, who had the faith to marry me while I was still in seminary. Who, with such patience, endured many long days alone, while I labored away at the library, and yet, also with such understanding, always greeted me at the end of those long days with warmth and love... a love I didn't realize was missing in my life... until I found it in you, Christina. I love you.

Asher naDARTi ashaLEYmah, y'ShUatah layAdonay. “What I have vowed, I will perform.
 Deliverance is the LORD's!”

The book of Jonah opens with a divine command: “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.”

Now, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which completely destroyed the Northern

Kingdom of Israel, and threatened Judah as well. But whereas some prophets, like Jeremiah, show just a little reluctance before going forth to perform what God commands, Jonah... flat out refuses. He “flees from the Lord’s service.” He goes down to the port, pays a crew of sailors to man a boat, and sets sail for Tarshish, in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh, where God has commanded him to go.

But God is the one who provides. And the first thing God provides is a “great storm” that upsets Jonah’s travel. But Jonah... he just descends, deeper, and deeper, and deeper into his denial. First, he goes down to the port, then down to the ship, then down into the hold, and... in the middle of a great storm—God’s wake-up call—Jonah goes down into a deep sleep.

But God provides something else in which Jonah goes down further: the storm-tossed sea. And then, God provides something else: a great fish. And Jonah goes down even further into the belly of this fish... for three days and three nights. Now, Jonah has lost all sense of time. It might as well have been... three years... stuck in that fish’s putrid innards. Three years of being slowly dissolved by sea water and stomach acids. Three years of perpetual gloom and abject darkness. But it was only three days and three nights... right?

And what should Jonah do during this time... but recite the psalms. And not the psalms for deliverance, but the psalms for thanksgiving... from deliverance. “In my trouble I called to the Lord, and he answered me.” Psalms 19, 118, and 120, to name a few.

“You brought my life from the pit, O Lord my God.” Psalms 30 and 71.

“I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You.” 42, 50...

“What I have vowed, I will perform. Deliverance is the LORD’s!” Psalm 3, verse 9: “L’ayAdonay y’SHUah.” To The Lord is y’SHUah: Deliverance, Salvation! But... but... is Jonah really ready now... to perform... what he has vowed?

And so God once again provides, and the fish vomits out Jonah onto dry land, half-eaten, covered in bile and seawater and all matter of rejectamenta from the fish’s stomach. And God commands Jonah a second time... and Jonah finally performs what he vows. Proving, as our Lord Jesus Christ teaches, that it is the one who says he will not... and yet, somehow—against all odds, against even his own desires—does... this is the one who does the will of The Father. And so Jonah goes to Nineveh, which is called “IR g’DOLah leyloHIM,” a great city belonging to God, because it is God, after-all, who provides.

And Jonah, this so-called “prophet” of God, hits the people of Nineveh with such terse and clumsy words: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The Hebrew verb

nehpaHETH can mean either “to become undone,” ruined, or “to be turned over,” reformed. So which is it, Jonah? Will Nineveh be destroyed... or will it repent? And why aren’t you following the example of the great patriarch and prophet Abraham, who bargained with God to spare the city of Sodom? Just what kind of prophet are you?

But God provides... and He provides His prophets. And at His prophet’s inelegant words, the people immediately trust in God, and they hold a fast, and they don their sackcloths—and even their animals join them! And so, Nineveh, that great city, is spared!

But Jonah is angry at God’s mercy. Angry that God does not behave... as He said he would, or at least how Jonah thought He would. “Would He speak and not act, Promise and not fulfill? ... for He is not a man... that He should change His mind.”

But again, God provides... a “gourd,” a fantastical plant, like Jack’s beanstalk, which provides Jonah with shelter even in the midst of his anger. And then, God provides a worm that eats this plant, and a “sultry east wind” that hits Jonah, with the sun’s heat, causing him grief to the point of wishing his own death.

“You cared about the plant, [Jonah,] which you did not work for and which you did not grow...And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city...” where neither the people nor the animals “know their right hands from their left?”

And so, in the final verse of the book of Jonah, God provides us, brothers and sisters, with a dilemma: Will we trust in God’s dominion over all people, animals, plants, and things... of the sea, the land, the air, the entire cosmos? Or... will we falter in dumbfounded amazement when our own preconceived notions are shattered, time and time again?

We kick, and we scream, and God provides. We say we will not, but we do... and God provides. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

“But,” we tell ourselves. “I am no Christ! I am no prophet!” But brothers and sisters, you are Christ’s, and you are His prophets. Go forth, then, to Nineveh, to a hostile land. And what you have vowed, perform. And God will provide.

To Him belong all glory, and honor, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ is Risen!