

## **“Jonah & the God of Second Chances”**

**Text: Jonah 3: 1-10; 4:1-5**

**Prayer: Ever-present God, sometimes we turn away from you because of fear and insecurities. Let me hear your voice again calling me to trust in your love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

A classic biblical story that young and old alike love to hear. In 2002 the veggie tale version of Jonah & the Whale hit the big screen and it was rated the number 1 best-selling biblical movie in North America. The story of Jonah can be summed up this way: "When God said ‘Go!’ Jonah said “no!”

Jonah is a good prophet. It is not like he gets God’s word wrong—in fact, he gets it right. God wants him to go to Nineveh and tell the people to repent. Jonah understood this first hand. But here is the problem - Jonah doesn’t want this to happen. He hates the Ninevites with every bone in his body. He doesn’t want to see them saved, loved, or embraced by God. He wants them punished. Jonah is an “old school” prophet— one that still believes in the dictum: “an eye for an eye”. The modern-day Jonah can be labeled as a first-class nationalist who believed in saving his people first. He is one who sees Israel as the chosen people and the rest of humanity comes in second. But let's not be too hard on Jonah, for here we can see the complexity of human nature. I’m sure we have people in mind that we resent, that we want to be smitten by God’s wrath, people we hate. Period. For Jonah, it’s the Ninevites. Jonah makes his point. He doesn't want to preach to them, much more convert them. He was this way because, in the context of our story, the Ninevites had destroyed his family. For Jonah, it was like crawling from the rubble of the Holocaust. God says to him, "Go preach my word to Nineveh." And Jonah says, "Anywhere, Lord, anywhere but Nineveh."

Nineveh, according to some scholars, is now the modern Mosul near Baghdad in Iraq, the capital city of Assyria. It was the largest city in the world in its day. It was a city of conquerors, with a strong commercial base, superior technology and a powerful war machine. The text says that its pagan sinfulness was legendary, as was its cruelty. Assyria was more than an enemy; it was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fame and fortune. Jonah is called out by God to go and prophesy to this particular place. For the story to work as it is intended, we

must look through Jonah's eyes. We should not stand-off on the sidelines and judge, but think of how we would feel in the same situation if we were Jonah.

Jonah's resume was summed up in one sentence. He was the son of Amittai. Nothing else about his birthplace or career or other credentials were given. But for sure, Jonah did not earn a degree in international diplomacy or missiology. Imagine yourself as Jonah, who was being sent to war-torn Gaza. God tells you to march through the hot desert and tell the leaders of both warring countries to repent, to stop the war, to release the hostages and respect everyone's civil rights for the good of all people. Do you think you would convince all the people, including their leaders, to dress up in sack cloth and ashes? For Jonah, going to Nineveh was a mission impossible.

When Jesus says follow me, fishermen are dropping their nets, tax collectors are forgetting about credit and debit, and others are leaving their parents and families behind. But not Jonah. Jonah stands on the dock with tickets for Tarshish – away from the Godforsaken Nineveh! He went alright but fled 750 miles in the opposite direction, took his chances with tickets for the exotic, adventurous Tarshish, probably located in southern Spain. And everything in that direction went wrong. As soon as he embarked on a ship, a terrifying storm came. No one tricks God, not even Jonah! And we know what happened next. The sailors throw him into the sea and, somehow, God catches him with the legendary Big Fish, famously known as “the whale”.

It was in the dark belly of the fish that Jonah prayed to God. Three days and nights of meditation and confession, a place of prayer and reflection. This part of the story, according to Eugene Peterson, is the central, pivotal place where Jonah turned himself to God. This is where he came to his senses and surrendered to what God called him to do. And it's where you and I become what God called us to be. Peterson continues – *what we want is a five-star hotel by the sea...an ideal place to commune with God. Quiet, restful, serene. What we've given instead is a sinking ship in an unrelenting storm, where we're tossed overboard into an unmerciful sea, where we're swallowed whole by a claustrophobic set of confining circumstances. In the hotel, we can call anyone we want for assistance... In the belly of the fish, there's only one call we can make – and that's to God.* Jonah prayed until he gave in. Until he calls out to God for help.

And on the third day, the big fish got tired of Jonah and spat him out! Here's a trivia. Why did the fish spit out Jonah? Answer – because the fish didn't like the taste of Jonah, who had not bathed for 3 days!

We now caught up with round two between God and Jonah in our text this morning. God, for the second time, commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh. But it appears that Jonah only learned a very small part of his lesson. He goes to Nineveh, but gives the wimpiest prophecy, the shortest sermon ever recorded. To be exact – only 5 Hebrew words. In The Message translation, make that 7: “In forty days, Nineveh will be smashed!” Jonah delivers God's message in just seven words and the whole city of Nineveh repents, which is kind of unbelievable and some scholars find it hilarious! The king declares that every human being and every animal should fast and be covered with sackcloth and ashes. Imagine the picture; all the people and all the cows and all the sheep and pigs and chickens fasting with sackcloth tied to their backs! The image of the enemy is transformed from one of fierce warriors to repentant believers. Just as God has transformed their hearts, their appearance is markedly changed. Jonah should be ecstatic; his career as a prophet soared to great heights! With just 5 Hebrew words, he turned a whole nation to God. He should be headed for the hall of fame.

This miraculous turn around, however, does not touch Jonah. Chapter 4 tells us his heart is not changed. He feels none of the mercy God feels. The point of the narrative is not about the conversion of an entire enemy population. It is about Jonah's reaction to that amazing conversion. Chapter 4 verse 1 says: "Jonah was furious. He lost his temper" (4:1). The Hebrew reads roughly, “his anger burned.” Jonah's anger is the heart of the matter. He tells God why he ran, “I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!” (4:2). God speaks to Jonah, trying to explain, but the book ends without resolution and Jonah goes away mad. The end of the story has him throwing a temper tantrum, after which the book closes with a question God asks: “Why shouldn't God care for Nineveh?”

Jonah is like us: reluctant, withdrawn, stubborn, never quite ready to go to places like Nineveh. Our values may tell us we need to head down to Nineveh, but we turn around to the

other direction and get on the boat because it is just too hard to understand God's forgiving ways. We spend some of our precious time in the belly of a big fish, out of touch with our calling, our sense of meaning and purpose. Every one of us is called by God to go to some sort of Nineveh, and we fight it. Our Nineveh might be a place; or a job-change to a distant city that we don't want to go to. Our Nineveh might be other people. Perhaps there are neighbors who moved in, or workmates that have just joined the company, and they don't seem like the type of people we want to associate with. Maybe they are people of color, or people of a different faith, or people who have obviously different lifestyles than our own. Or our Nineveh might be an idea, or a way of thinking. God might be calling us to open up our minds to change our position on ethical matters. Or maybe Nineveh is some personal habit, some kind of indulgence that has crept into our lives and while we sense God is calling us from it, we don't want to change. Every time God calls us to Nineveh, we get on a boat and head toward Tarshish.

Today, I ask you to ponder these questions. Will we go and choose to follow God's call to face our Ninevehs and take a leap of faith? Who are we to question God's forgiveness and grace? How willing are we to let God be God? Grace is a gift and Jonah's story reminds us that we do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish. God will be forgiving because that is very nature – the very heart of God. God is a God of second chances. God is merciful even to the most unforgivable human being or a community who truly repents. So, the story of this Jonah is much more than a whale tale. His message is meant for those who understand the ways of God, and to face the ways we try to lay claim to God and God's gift of grace. If I may be blunt, it is Jonah who needs to repent of his concept of God, because he was limiting what God's grace could accomplish in life. God's forgiveness is at work in this world, including people and places like Nineveh, seeking its salvation, offering healing of renewal and harmony. Our God seeks to change lives day in and day out. We need to open our eyes and our heart to see what great things our God is already doing in the world. That is what I call radical faith – the faith that tells us over and over again that there is wideness in God's mercy. Thanks be to God. Amen.