

“Nineveh Repents”

Jonah 2:1-10, Jonah 3:1-10

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02/12/2023

Opening Prayer

When we left off last week, Jonah had been cast into the sea and had been swallowed by a fish. Running from his calling to the Ninevites, Jonah had fled as far away as he could think to go. On his way from Joppa to Tarshish, the Lord had sent a great storm, and not willing to return, Jonah had told the frightened sailors to cast him into the sea. The sailors, you may recall, had more care for Jonah and the Lord’s commands, than Jonah did for an entire city, let alone his own personal connection with God. As he enters the deep, the Lord called a great fish to come and swallow him whole. Jonah chapter two is his prayer from the belly of the great fish. Unlike his previous actions, Jonah here is repentant and heeds God’s commands for him. It will result in many who were spiritually blind to come to the light, and an entire metropolis (perhaps the biggest city in the world at the time), will come to know the Lord.

“I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice. For You had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me. So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple.’” Even for a prophet who has fled from God there is hope. Even for someone who has rejected God’s calling and has turned their back on the Father, they can still repent and come home. Jonah still knew the Lord, he still had faith, and there was still hope for him... he had only to return to the Lord and His command. Ironically, in many ways here Jonah’s prayer mirrors the repentance that comes just a chapter later in the great city of Nineveh. It also mirrors the same kind of repentance and mercy that Jesus espouses throughout his ministry. You may recall that the disciple Matthew, for example, was a Jewish tax collector who repented and followed Jesus. You may also remember some of your most beloved of all parables such as the parable of the prodigal son, which highlights both repentance and the immense mercy of the Creator. Beloved, I would have us notice the wonderful mercy that the Lord shows to all who would receive it. The Lord does judge, the Lord does do justice, but He is as merciful as He is mighty.

In just a few days we will enter the season of Lent. Every year since I have been here we have walked through a different Gospel with a different focus. This year we will return to the Gospel of Mark, and in our reading through it we will highlight Christ's immense mercy within. Mercy, Beloved, is the opposite of grace even though the results are usually comingled for us as Christians. Grace is receiving that which we do not deserve, most importantly eternal life. Mercy, though, is not receiving what we do deserve, such as eternal death. Practically there are some good examples of mercy in our world that can help us understand the concept. The cop who lets off the speeder without a ticket is being merciful. The parent who does not punish for wrongs committed is merciful. The most merciful act in all of history takes place on the cross and in the tomb, when the Lord relents from punishing us for our sins, and instead takes that punishment upon Himself. After three days Jesus rises from the grave, triumphant over sin and death, having done for us what we could not for ourselves. Beloved, I don't know if you caught this in our reading today, but Jonah's account has a lot of connections with the death and resurrection of Jesus. While Jonah is not Jesus, his emergence from death to life out of the fish bears many of the marks of our own movement from death to life. Let's go over this curious and absolutely intentional connection.

Jonah prays to the Lord in the fish, when his life is on the line. He calls out in his distress, well aware that his predicament is his own doing. There is no blaming of the Ninevites here, no qualms with God. He is calling to the Lord in repentance, claiming hope that the Lord would deliver him. Beloved, for those of us who call Christ as Lord, that is our prayer too isn't it? Whether you have been a Christian all of your life or can recall the very moment your heart was changed, there is the recognition that we have been saved out of the belly of our sins by the Lord's hand. For the Christian who is living in repentance, there is no blame, but a recognition that we are sinners in need of salvation. Our vows, prayers, and sacrifices are to the Lord. The acknowledgement for us, just as it was with Jonah, is that salvation is from the Lord alone. That salvation is found in the one who arose out of the grave for you and me after three days, One who had been put to death in our place. Jesus, our Savior, made a way for you and me to be delivered from our sins. We don't earn it, it is given as a gift to us. Jonah, for his part, was delivered by a great fish commanded by God. In both Jonah's case and in ours, those being saved are saved for a purpose. This is in addition to God's mercy, which He freely gives to

those who receive it regardless of their following actions. (Namely, even one on their deathbed can receive forgiveness... again, we don't earn His mercy, but we do have a job to do with the life that He gives us.) Our job after being saved, is to preach the Good News. You and I are called to go and share the wonderful mercy shown to us to others. It isn't about continuing a specific church structure. It isn't about earning God's extra grace. It isn't about finding more butts in church seats and more deep pockets to line church coffers. It is about sharing the most important gift given to us with those whom the Lord has placed in our lives, both out of love and because our Creator has commanded it. For Jonah, that specifically meant he had to go to Nineveh, even though he wanted to do anything but. After three days, the fish vomits him onto dry land, and he goes where the Lord has commanded.

It bears reminding that the city of Nineveh, the capitol city of the Assyrians, was potentially the most hated place on earth at the time for a Jew. Filled with idolatry, evil, and sin, it was the last place a Jew would feel comfortable. The Assyrians were the Israelite's awful neighbors, who would come and destroy their country just a generation later. It would be similar to a Ukrainian missionary being called into Moscow. Or if you want an even more intense example, it would be the same as a Jewish Christian being called to go to Berlin in 1939. Yet, this is where Jonah has been called, to preach the message of coming judgement. "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." Jonah goes, finally, and does just that. "Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'" Jonah still was not real keen on having the Assyrians come to repentance, as we will read in chapter four, but he did preach the message given him by God. Unexpected by everyone except Jonah himself, the city repents and God relents from judgement.

It would have been an amazing sight, to see the city of 120,000 people and their animals, the king himself down to the poorest child, all clothed in sackcloth and ashes in repentance. To see the vast number of people calling upon the Lord, outside of Jerusalem mind you, would have brought any of us to tears. There are speculations about why repentance was so readily accepted, especially by the king and his court. One thought is that Jonah being vomited up by a fish might have been witnessed by many, who then went and spread the news to the whole city.

There is some speculation as well that Jonah's appearance would have been greatly altered, his skin bleached by the acid in the fish's stomach. It is likely that he would have proclaimed this great message in addition to recalling his trip to them in the fish's stomach. While that may all have been true, the greatest reason for the city's turning to the Lord is unquestionably that the Lord had prepared them. The Lord loved these people too, and He had prepared it so that even the horrifically lost and evil Ninevites might hear and believe.

It is a good reminder for us Beloved, to keep in mind the fact that Evangelism and belief happen only with His work within us. If you have ever been blessed to see someone come to know their Savior, to watch as someone moves from dark to light and the heavens rejoice at that person's salvation, then you know the joy of the Lord's work through you. But just as we don't take credit for the great things the Lord has done through us, we shouldn't take the credit for things the Lord has done in our fellow man. We rejoice, rightfully so, and we call ourselves blessed, rightfully so, when we get to share in the amazing grace given to someone, but at the end of the day it is the Lord's work. The people in Nineveh didn't come to know the Lord because Jonah was the best prophet who had ever preached. As amazing as his story may have been, as forceful as his word could have been, a whole city comes to know the Lord because He has prepared those hearts. Jonah's job was to be the instrument by which they were to be saved... even if he hated the thought of just that happening. You see Beloved, the Lord can even use an unwilling instrument for His glory. While I pray that each and every one of us would be willing to be used by our Lord, the wonderful reality shown in this account is that we don't have to be perfect to be used.

I was having this very same conversation with Caleb, our missionary in Thailand, a few weeks ago. There is the perception that often accompanies those who have heeded the Lord's calling to share the Gospel, that we have to do everything right or we thwart God's plans. No doubt we are called to be wise and diligent, to be ready in season and out of season as Paul tells his protégé in 2nd Timothy. That is a given. But because we are not the ones who make the heart change in another, we cannot look at ourselves in disgust if our ministry outreaches don't go as we hoped. You can do everything right ministry wise, at least as far as human possible, and still not have it go as you hope. You can answer every question well, you can do all of your prep work ahead of time, you can spend all of the hours and days and weeks, and still not have what the world looks at as "success." If you want

something close to home to think about, I would have you consider our two churches. By an earthly business model, we are not successful. A company CEO might ask why we aren't brimming with thousands of new believers? Why doesn't the whole of Dodge County worship at one of our two churches? Is it because we have been unfaithful? Is it because our outreaches and ministries haven't ever been pertinent, they have always missed the mark? Is it because there is some hidden sin or problem that prevents us from being what God has called? Is it incompetent pastoral leadership? Maybe it could be those things, but infinitely more likely, it is because that isn't what the Lord has planned for us here.

KUMC and PCUMC are actually unmitigated successes in many ways. We are family churches, oriented towards people who know each other and love each other. You cannot disappear in our sanctuaries, and that is a good thing. You cannot go unnoticed by your pastor, which is probably a good thing. We mirror the overwhelming majority of faith communities that have existed for two thousand years. Small, family churches, of less than 80 have been and continue to encompass the vast majority of believers the world over. Clearly it isn't usually the Lord's plan for thousands to come to Him at once. More often, it is individuals and families who, I would argue just as miraculously, hear God's calling. The Holy Spirit, at work behind the scenes in the individuals and openly through His faithful servants, changes hearts and minds and eternal outcomes. Beloved, rest and take encouragement that successful outreach happens as a result of His work and not ours. Yes, we should still be diligent in all we do, being as faithful as possible to our Creator (which includes actively and openly proclaiming the Gospel), but if the doors aren't being blown off the hinges that doesn't mean we are being unfaithful. It is the Lord who sets that kind of growth in motion, and it is He who changes the hearts and minds of those around us. If you are wondering what role you then play, let me say it plainly. You are called to share the truth in faithfulness, pray diligently, and leave the rest in His hands.

For Jonah's part, since the Lord had ordained it even though Jonah didn't want it, the people of Nineveh repented and the great city was not to be destroyed for another 150 or so years... long after this generation had passed away. For you and I, the Lord has given us a command and a calling to share the great mercy we have received with others so that they might repent too. The prodigal sons and Ninevehs and even the Jonahs of the world are not lost and can receive His free gift of mercy. The strength of that outreach and ministry is not in our hands, but in

His. Go and be faithful Beloved, you don't have to be the perfect person to proclaim the Lord's truth and have folks hear His call. You just have to do it. Go, preach the Good News, and recognize that the Lord has called you for just such an occasion... just like Jonah. Let's pray.

Closing Prayer