

**Goal: That the hearers would repent and believe and share the Gospel.**

***“Arise, go to Nineveh.”*** That was God’s calling to Jonah. Today, Nineveh is an archeological site in Iraq, but in Jonah’s day it was the capital of Assyria, a brutal savage empire. Isaiah quotes one of Assyria’s kings as bragging, ***“My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples, and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gather all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing or opened the mouth or chirped.”*** (Isaiah 10: 14) The prophet Nahum described Nineveh as a ***“vile place”*** (1:14), ***“a bloody city, all full of lies and robbery”*** (3:1), ***“who betrays nations (as a prostitute), and the peoples with her charms”*** (3:4). Not a place you’d want to visit.

But God calls Jonah, whose name means *“dove”* to go and effectively de-feather the vulture’s nest! ***“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has (piled) up before me.”*** (Jonah 1: 2) And rising up is exactly what Jonah did. He arose, and jumped on the first cargo ship to Tarshish, which modern day Spain. That’s across the Mediterranean in exactly the opposite direction of Nineveh.

Now, I think all of us are familiar with the series of unfortunate events that the Lord used to get Jonah back on track. The storm and waves were so strong that the crew determines that if they didn’t throw Jonah overboard, the entire ship would be lost. So, down goes Jonah; down and drowning. But God sends a great fish to rescue Jonah by swallowing him whole. Then three days later, the fish spits Jonah up on dry land, no worse the wear, and it brings us to our text today.

Now, notice something here. Jonah is the only prophet to have God call a second time. ***“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message I tell you.”*** (Jonah 3: 2) Our God is a God of second chances. What does Jonah do with his second chance? ***“Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the world of the LORD. (Jonah 3: 3)***

So why does Jonah NOW make this 500-mile trip through the desert to Nineveh? We might initially think he’d learned his lesson. Those three days being fish food must have been enlightening, right? I mean, he had spent enough time wallowing that he now realized that he had to be obedient to God’s law. That’s reasonable. But there may be another reason. Maybe Jonah realized that the fish was God’s way of rescuing Him from his poor decisions and his own death. The Lord was giving him a second chance.

The first time Jonah ran away, he just about died, drowning, when God sent the fish to rescue him. And Jonah prayed from inside the fish, experiencing God’s grace and thanking Him for His deliverance. Then Jonah sang a song of God’s ***“steadfast love”*** and

that ***“salvation belongs to the Lord.”*** (2: 8 – 9) I think Jonah realized that he owed his life to the Lord, so Jonah goes to Nineveh because he knows that the Lord loves him. It wasn't the fear of the fish but it was faith in the God of second chances that led him there.

Why do you go to those people that God has put in your life? Some have serious hurts and they need to hear that Jesus cares. Some are Assyrians hurting others or even threatening you. They all need to be warned of their sin. So, when God brings them into your life and lays them on your heart, why do you go?

You could be driven by God's law, demanding that you speak up. Let's be honest, the law does get things done. Or, you could be driven by God's grace, knowing that God loves you and forgives you in Christ's death and resurrection and that He loves the ones to whom He sends you, just the same. God is one of grace and second chances.

So Jonah goes to that Nineveh. I would compare it to Gotham City in the Batman comics. It's huge and powerful and corrupt, full of crime and evil. At the end of the first day he calls out, ***“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*** (Jonah 3: 4) That's the shortest sermon ever; only 5 words in the Hebrew. But it paints a picture of digging deep under the foundation of each building, picking it up and flipping it over. Thus, this massive city is to be rooted up, thrown in the air, flipped over, and come crumbling down all over Assyria. This is the same verb is used to describe destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

What's even more shocking than that image is the response of the people Nineveh. (***“The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”***) (Jonah 3: 5) They believed God and they called for a fast, begging Jonah's God for mercy. They put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least. Imagine wearing that itchy, burlap bag material as shirts, as a way to feel on their skin the guilt that was clawing at the heart within.

Remember, the Assyrian Empire dominated the world with unrivaled cruelty. The artwork that has been unearthed from that time showed kings of various nations, in their native dress, paraded like slaves, shackled together in a long line each connected to the next by a fishhook through the lips. And there's images of children being flayed in front of their parents, and of the Assyrian king gouging out his captives' eyes with his spear. These people, led by their king, had a lot to repent of.

But why did they listen to Jonah? I mean, they could've smashed this little *dove*.

One theory is that the acid of the fish for 3 days had bleached Jonah's skin to the point that he looked like a ghost and these superstitious people were spooked by the spirit in the streets. But that ignores our text. The text doesn't say that the people believed Jonah's words. They believed God. Nineveh reasons, *"Who is this God who sends the prophet, and makes Jonah fearless? Who is this God who dares threaten us with our sin? God is right! God sent Jonah! We didn't deserve warning, yet Jonah's God gives us 40 days. We have a second chance! We have hope."* For some reason the lectionary leaves out the king's proclamation, but listen to how hopeful he is? ***"Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."*** (Jonah (3: 8 – 9))

Did Nineveh listen out of fear or because God creates hope for mercy? A cartoon in the book *Judaism for Beginners* puts it like this, *"A good prophet is the one who is wrong."* That's the hope of preaching the law by the prophet, that sinners would be left with no excuse but to throw ourselves, in repentant faith, at God's mercy, which is in turn followed by the Gospel. ***"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** (Romans 6: 23) That's how God dealt with Jonah and Nineveh back in the Old Testament because He already saw His Son, Jesus, hanging on the cross for them, and for you, and for me. Already for them, and for us today, Jesus' death has taken the wages of our sin, and He has given to us life eternal. Because of Jesus, God does not give us what we deserve, but He gives us His Son, and Jesus is life.

Jonah's words couldn't change Nineveh, but Jonah spoke and that wicked empire heard God. Deeper than that city's foundation, the Holy Spirit ***"overturned"*** Nineveh and cleansed them deep within. Honestly, your words and my words don't change anyone. But God's promise is that, ***"the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."*** (Luke 12: 12)

Jonah's God lives today. We speak His Law and He hammers sin. But we also speak His Gospel, that Jesus was hammered to the cross for all, and that in Jesus God forgives the sins of all. Even the hardest hearts can be overturned by the Holy Spirit.

It's interesting that of all of the prophets, Jesus compares Himself to only one. ***"For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."*** (Matthew 12: 40 – 41) The One greater than Jonah is the one who is responsible for all of the surprising grace-filled turnarounds and over throwings God has effected in this world. That makes each of our lives a whale of a tale, and it makes every witness we give to the world a potential for God to work miracles. May you speak His Word confidently to those He calls you to today. In Jesus name. Amen.