

Hope For The City

Last week we ended with Jonah having been given a second chance and having been vomited out of the belly of the fish. I want to visit the rest of his story this morning and just share a few observations with you. The bible says, **“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.” Jonah 3:1-3.**

Wouldn't this have been a great idea from the beginning, if Jonah had just obeyed the word of the Lord? He would have been spared a lot of time and trouble. Running from God, disobeying his word, thinking you know better than God about the path you should take in life, those are bad choices! May I suggest to you, **It's a lot easier to just obey God and his word!**

Given a second chance, Jonah is on his way to Nineveh. He has several hundred miles to walk (500-600) and plenty of time to think. He is obedient but not happy. Just a reminder about Nineveh. The bible calls it a very important city. “A visit required three days” the bible says. Quoting from *Twelve Prophetic Voices* by Mariano DiGangi, “Situated on a plain along the left bank of the Tigris, Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian kingdom, was surrounded by walls that rose to a height of 100 feet; they were so thick that three chariots could run abreast at the top. The Assyrian people were noted for the engineering expertise, aggressive attitude and military might. They also were notorious for their cruelty to captives.”

God saw the wickedness of these people, their immorality, injustice and cruelty and so he sent Jonah to warn them that judgment was coming. It wasn't a message of salvation he was preaching. In fact, that wasn't Jonah's assignment. The prophet is sent to warn of judgement. It's the missionary or evangelist that's sent to preach salvation. Jonah only has one sermon, one message, just eight words. **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”**

Imagine this prophet, after three days in a fish and weeks on the road to Nineveh. He must have looked pretty rough to say the least. Walking around the city, to every public place and business telling them, “40 days and then judgment is coming.” Would you believe him? Remember he was an Israeli and they were Assyrians. They were enemies. It would be like God telling you to go to Iran or Syria or an ISIS camp and warn them judgement and destruction was coming in 40 days. You wouldn't want to go and they wouldn't be likely to receive you. But something extraordinary happened in Nineveh!

Jonah may or may not have appeared believable, but it didn't matter because, **“The Ninevites believed God. Jonah 3:5** They decided to take God's warning seriously and right belief led to right action. They didn't just give mental assent to God and his warning, they repented of their sins and turned from their evil ways! The bible says, **“They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.” Jonah 3:5-6**

This was an Eastern sign of contrition, of humility, of repentance. From the least in the kingdom to the king, the people believed God and repented. The king issued this proclamation. **“Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” Jonah 3:7-9**

This king and these people were serious about repenting and they had enough sense to believe in and trust in the mercy of God. The bible says, **“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” Jonah 3:10** Some quick observations.

No one is beyond God's mercy. No one is without hope. The Assyrians had this reputation as being the biggest and baddest, the cruelest, enemies of God and enemies of God's people, yet even the people of Nineveh, as wicked as they were, were not beyond the reach of God's mercy. He warned them, giving them 40 days to repent. He gave them a reason for hope. The same applies to you. You are not beyond God's mercy, regardless of who you are or how far you've run from God or how deep into sin and disobedience you've plunged. There is still hope if you turn to God in repentance and faith and trust in him.

The God who judges sin also forgives sinners. God wasn't giving the people of Nineveh a pass. That's the way Jonah thought about this. “God's just going to let these wicked people off the hook.” God judges sin and if they hadn't repented, destruction would've come to the city. God doesn't excuse sin, he doesn't wink at sin and let you get by with it. There are consequences, but he will forgive anyone who calls on him in faith. **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9** Even though judgement is coming, if you will turn to Jesus today, he will forgive and

cleanse, he will rescue you and save you. That's what he did for the people of Nineveh and that's what he will do for you!

Repentance means turn and return. It's a call to action! "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways." Repentance means more than praying a prayer, it means we turn away from sin and we return to God, the one who saves us and makes us a new person in Christ. We turn around and go a new direction. Repentance means action. Don't just think about it. Do it. Repent and turn – return to Jesus and start following him!

There is hope for the city. As I prepared this message, I kept coming back to the idea of hope for the city. I couldn't imagine there was hope for the wicked city of Nineveh. It was too far gone! I can't imagine there is hope for Tulsa, or New York, or D.C. But God offers hope for wicked cities and people. He doesn't give up on anyone. That's why he sent Jonah.

God is still ready to forgive and show mercy so that means there is still hope for our city, for your city. We need to start viewing our neighbors and neighborhoods, our city, our world, the way God does. You see, **"God's not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."** **2 Peter 3:9** Regardless of how hopeless it looks, regardless of how wicked or violent or sinful, God didn't give up on Nineveh and he hasn't given up on Tulsa or your city or community. He hasn't given up on West Tulsa, he hasn't given up on the students, the children, the adults. He hasn't given up on you! There is hope for the city!

The city of Nineveh repented and turned to God. You would expect that to be good news but the bible records, **"But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry."** **Jonah 4:1** Jonah, what's your problem? Why was Jonah angry? He tries to argue with God. "This is why I fled to Tarshish. I knew you were merciful and you wouldn't destroy them. It was a waste of my time. Besides, I hate those people. They deserve judgment."

Jonah was angry about God's mercy and grace. That means Jonah forgot he was a recipient of God's mercy and grace. If you're angry because God seems slow in judging the wicked or because he has shown mercy to someone you think deserves punishment, you've forgotten that you too were a sinner and lawbreaker deserving God's judgment. Hello! You've forgotten where you came from. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God the bible says. All of us, democrats and republicans, white, black, brown, rich, poor, legal or illegal, we all have sinned, we all deserve God's wrath and we all need salvation and God's mercy. Jonah forgot where he came from. He forgot God's mercy towards him. Don't forget where you came

from! “Those people aren’t acting right. They ought to know better.” Did you know better before you met Jesus? Do you remember how you acted and how you talked and how you treated others before you met Jesus and he saved you and changed you? Remember how merciful he was to you. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.” Are you judging like Jonah or showing mercy like Jesus?

Jonah sits in his anger, pouting because God hadn’t destroyed the city like Jonah had hoped. And look at the question God’s asks of Jonah. **“Have you any right to be angry?”** **Jonah 4:4** God asks him twice and essentially Jonah says, “Yes. Yes I do. I’m angry because things aren’t turning out the way I wanted them to.” If you read on, God caused a vine to grow up overnight, a gourd plant that provided shade and then God allowed a worm to chew the vine that caused it to die and the shade was gone. God then asked him again, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine dying?” Jonah said, “I do. I am angry enough to die.” Jonah’s prejudice produced a warped sense of justice. It always does. And the bottom line seems to be, Jonah thought he knew more than God. He was right and God was wrong.

Let me give you another little tip. **Anytime you decide you are right and God is wrong, you need to revisit the situation.** You need to look again. Look at it from a different perspective. Do you have a right to be angry if God doesn’t do what you want him to do? Wouldn’t you admit God knows more than you, sees further into the future and understands more of your past. He is working all things for your ultimate good. His ways are above your ways, his thoughts above your thoughts the bible says. Then it seems to me there’s something you’ve missed. Think again. Look at your circumstances from heaven’s perspective.

Jonah had come to Nineveh in obedience to God’s will, but it looks like he still wasn’t reconciled to God’s will. He wasn’t completely surrendered to God’s will. Jonah was angry about the vine dying, but he didn’t care about the people facing death in Nineveh if they didn’t repent. He didn’t even care about the children. I think you would have to say Jonah was a racist. He didn’t want to even be near these people. He wanted God to come around to his way of thinking rather than Jonah coming around to God’s way of loving the lost. Look at what verse 5 says.

“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.” **Jonah 4:5** He didn’t want to stay in town near them. He waited to see what would happen, hoping God would

change his mind and destroy the city after all. There was no mercy, no compassion for the people, just compassion for the vine that had provided shade for him. Jonah's priorities were messed up. He cared more about his comfort than the lives and souls of the people of Nineveh.

Let me wrap this up by going back to this idea of hope for the city. Jonah had no hope for the city. In fact, he was hoping against the city. What about us? What about CAG?

Are we like Jonah? We could move our church out of harm's way, build ourselves a nice church on a hillside, sheltered from "those Ninevites". We figure to watch and cheer God's avenging angels as they destroy all those sinners. That's the church of Jonah. I don't think I want to be part of Jonah's church. Jonah should have been back in Nineveh, encouraging them in their repentance, discipling them and showing them how to serve God with all their heart. It's messier in Nineveh, but it's where God called him to be! It's where he calls us to be.

We live in world without hope. God hasn't called us to be prophets of doom like Jonah, he called us to be messengers of reconciliation, telling the world that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, that you can come in repentance and faith and be saved and restored to a right relationship with God! He sent us to proclaim hope, to announce the good news. Jesus took your place and bore the penalty for your sin on the cross so you can be saved and have eternal life. He sent us to bring hope to our neighborhood, hope to our city, hope to the world! We can't do that hiding in a church or in a shelter on a hill. We have to do that where the hopeless are, back in Nineveh, calling them to repentance and a new life in Christ.

DiGangi wrote, "The scribes and Pharisees portrayed in the gospels were Jonah's heirs. They could not understand why Jesus mingled with publicans and sinners, cleansed the victims of leprosy and welcomed into the fellowship of His company penitent prostitutes and transformed thieves. Surely, we need to look at the world through the eyes of our compassionate Lord. When we begin to do this, we will see that [as the hymn says] there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. Such a vision will renew our sense of mission and send us to our own Ninevehs with fresh zeal and tenderness."

There is a wideness in God's mercy. James Boice wrote, "**The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is that of the outstretched arms of the Lord Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross to die for our salvation. That is the wideness of God's mercy. That is the measure of the length to which the love of God will go.**" James Boice. There is hope for us and for our city because of the mercy of God. Let's look at others with those eyes of hope.

Are you feeling hopeless today? There is hope for you. Put your trust, your hope in the Lord. Call upon him, just as the people of Nineveh did. Turn away from sin and turn to Jesus and he will forgive you. He will cleanse you. He will give you a new life, a new heart, a new direction. Call on him today!

As the church, are we willing messengers of hope to the hopeless or are we like Jonah, hiding in a shelter on the hill, just waiting for God's judgement to come on the world? That's not who he has called us to be. Remember the Apostle Paul writes. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." 2 Corinthians 5:20