

Preaching...to Nineveh?
Jonah 3

So brothers and sisters – today Jonah gets a second chance . After he fled from Yahweh the first time he was called to go and preach to Nineveh, this time when Yahweh says “Go and preach to Nineveh” Jonah obeys.

Apparently his near death experience in the belly of the fish has hit home and he’s learned his lessons.

We heard that last week in Jonah’s prayer – He admitted he had sinned in fleeing from Yahweh and He turned back towards Yahweh’s Temple in his prayer of repentance.

He vowed that he would go to that temple in Jerusalem and make a sacrifice – which was a pretty significant act for someone from the Northern Kingdom who did not worship in Jerusalem anymore.

And this week we see that Jonah had made good on his words.

We can safely assume that even though the text doesn’t mention it, Jonah made his way to Jerusalem and offered a sacrifice and sang a song of praise to Yahweh at the temple just like he said he would.

But brothers and sisters the real test of Jonah’s repentance is not found in his penance; it’s how he responds to the issue that started this whole story in the first place

That’s why no mention is made of his temple pilgrimage, it’s really not that important. BUT - how will Jonah respond when Yahweh tells him once more... to go to Nineveh!

And the same is true for us friends – it doesn’t matter what we do to show the remorse we feel when we’ve done something wrong, what really matters is how we handle the second chance to deal with what got us off track to start with.

Did you fly off the handle in anger and do things you regretted and apologized for and made up for? It doesn’t matter that you bought flowers and made dinner – though that is nice,

what matters is the next time you hear a snarky comment from that person you keep your cool.

The next time you're tired, the next time you're grumpy, the next time you're offended...how do you deal with it? *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt 6:13)*

So Yahweh approaches Jonah again and says "go preach to Nineveh" and this time Jonah handles it differently, he obeys. Jonah's talk becomes Jonah's walk – a long walk... a nine hundred and eleven kilometer walk all the way to Nineveh. Which is about the same distance as if you were to walk the Trans-Canada highway from Calgary AB past Regina to Whitewood SK

Now Jonah's journey over -land, all the way to Nineveh is often over -looked, because we generally view Jonah as a nautical story – but that's really only half the story friends.

The second half of Jonah's story – acts 3 and 4 are on land and take place in Nineveh, but often once the whale section is

done we just wrap it all up and consider it done because Jonah went the Nineveh and they repented... the end.

But the second half of the story is where the proverbial rubber hits the road – or, as it was for Jonah, where the leather hits the road because this is where we learn what obedience and following Yahweh is really about in everyday life AFTER we've experienced a change of heart through some sort of drastic or traumatic experience...

So brothers and sisters the issue for Jonah and us is not whether the change is genuine or not – rather it's about living out what that change of heart means in your normal everyday life afterwards.

You basically have to learn how to be a new person in all your old situations and that's not easy, because although maybe you've changed I'm pretty sure your context hasn't...

And success or failure in this is really determined by how you respond differently to the thousands of little things that come

your way – minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day.

And after a while it can wear you down... old ways of thinking and perceiving the world come back, old feelings return – and that traumatic experience which shook us up and changed our heart and mind seems to be distant and surreal.

We know it happened, but it is so drastic and surreal that it's hard to see how it's relevant to our normal everyday life.

Friends, on the long trip to Nineveh, Jonah is worn down.

Maybe as he passed through the Northern Kingdom of Israel on the way to Nineveh some of that old nationalist sentiment came back.

Maybe as he left the borders of the Northern Kingdom he felt a bit proud about how his relatively small nation had defied the might of the Assyrian Empire and had expanded their territory.

Maybe as he traveled through the outer reaches of the Assyrian Empire he noticed the graphic carvings and gruesome war monuments left to remind those of the brutal violence and torture that their conqueror was capable of inflicting upon anyone who opposed the Empire.

These could be anything from a huge mound of skulls to people impaled upon a stake alongside the road to more elaborate forms of cruelty.

One of the Assyrian Kings - Ashurnasirpal boasted of his cruelty and violence in one of his letters describing how he put down one particular rebellion in some city – maybe one that Jonah passed through on the way to Nineveh...

"I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round the about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I

flayed, and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled."

And the Assyrians were also known for leading their enemies off into captivity in chains... hooked through their jaws...

Maybe Jonah passed a group of captives being led away in chains on his way to Nineveh?

Friends, we can only speculate about whatever Jonah experienced on that long walk to Nineveh... but once thing is certain - by the time he arrives at that city any remnants of the grace and mercy and generosity he experienced from Yahweh in the belly of the fish have been worn out of him.

He's certainly not going to disobey Yahweh that's for sure, he will preach to Nineveh... but Yahweh wasn't very specific about what he should say to the Ninevites when he arrived... The text only says Yahweh would tell him what to say, but then it never mentions that anything specific was told to Jonah – it's a bit open ended...

And based on what Jonah said to them I'm thinking that Jonah was hoping Yahweh would punish them for their violence and cruelty and he felt their destruction was justified.

What's more if he could preach in a way that fulfilled his obedience to Yahweh - but also make them ignore him, maybe he could help nudge them towards destruction?

So Jonah presents himself to Nineveh as a forecaster of doom and gloom with a very generic message about a coming disaster. *"Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned!"*

Friends we know this type, we know this message – even after all these years we still have these kinds of “prophets” saying basically the same thing... 2011 will the end of the world... 2012 will the end of the world!

And we pretty much ignore them and go on with our day to day lives right? And that's exactly what I think Jonah was hoping they would do, ignore him and ignore the very real warning he was delivering.

Then they would all be destroyed for their cruelty and it would be their own fault for not paying attention, after all, he did warn them, technically speaking.

But it is Jonah's attempt to seal their destruction which gets overturned, the joke is on Jonah.

The entire city pays attention to the ranting of this crazy street preacher who has no credentials with them, who gives no reasons for their imminent destruction and fails to reveal which god they have angered and wants to destroy them.

Now the point of all this, is that we see the contrast... between how quickly *all* of Nineveh comes to a conviction of their evil and violent ways, and everyone from the least to the greatest simply and suddenly repents!

Compare that to length of time it took for Jonah to come around. He had to endure a violent storm, undergo a near death experience and have the laws of nature temporarily suspended before he would repent.

Consider what that comparison reveals to us about what is really wrong in this world friends, when the violent and brutal Assyrians who did not know about Yahweh or His law are so quick to believe and repent with so little information...

While gentle Jonah son of Amittai – which means “Dove”, who is a member of Yahweh's chosen people, whose history includes the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, manna in the desert, the victory at Jericho, the psalms of King David, the wisdom of King Solomon and so much more – can't recognize what He is doing wrong and needs to be drowned before he 'fesses up and realizes his own sin.

Really... we would think it would be the other way around, right?

But its not, and what this says to us about Sin friends is both a warning and an encouragement.

It warns us to take the power of Sin seriously.

It is so insidious that it can even find its way into our religious life and twist it around so that even though we believe in Christ, we know his Word, and we worship and pray to Him

we still resist what He calls us to do and where He sends us to go and we want to remain where we are and stay comfortable and we end up self-interested and self-righteous.

And Christ has to take a cattle prod to his church – to get us moving and help us to realize that the church does not exist for itself or for our preferences likes or dislikes.

That cattle prod is often things declining so much we realize that if we don't go were its not comfortable... our congregation will cease to exist.

Here's the reality brothers and sisters, like Jonah - we are called to bring the good news to others – even those who dislike us, make fun of us, politely dismiss us, or aggressively attack us – and truth be told we don't even have too many of those around us in our community.

And friends, this contrast between Nineveh and Jonah's repentance also **encourages** us that Yahweh's good news – the Gospel of Jesus Christ – can easily and quickly cause the most brutal and violent offenders – or disinterested neighbors to believe and repent and change – even when the message isn't delivered very well!.

Praise Yahweh – that's really good news! There is hope for the people in our community who seem to not care at all about the message of salvation that we are told to preach to them.

And we also learn from Jonah that we are only conduits for the power of the gospel – we can't manipulate its power for our own ends – bad or good.

As Modern people we need to hear that because we are so used to being able to harness the laws of nature to improve things that we are tempted to the same with the power of the Word.

Jonah tries to use the Word of Yahweh to seal the doom of the Ninevites and it fails.

Conversely friends we can't attempt to utilize the Gospel of Jesus Christ for our own ends – even good ones.

Anyone who naïvely thinks they can go out and clean up our culture and our society by wielding the Gospel is soon in for a disappointment – I know.

Anyone who thinks they can capitalize on the power of the Gospel eventually is exposed and falls as a hypocrite because they have prevented themselves from being transformed by that power...

We are only conduits for the power of Yahweh's Word – Jesus Christ – and He does what He wills when we deliver the good news about Him to wherever we are called to take it.

Heb 4:12 says *“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates... even to dividing*

soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

We don't do the judging or saving friends, the Word of God does – and it determines who perishes and who is saved – not us.

And the Word of Yahweh which Jonah delivers pierces the tough as nails exterior of the Ninevites, and they believe and repent and turn away from their violence and evil...

and Yahweh sees this and determines that it is sincere and that he will be gracious and merciful to them... just as He had been to Jonah when he was in the belly of the fish.

So friends, human nature being affected by sin as it is – I believe that this morning the Holy Spirit wants us to reflect back upon our own “fishy” experiences where He has taken us through some sort of drastic experience in which he has taught us some important lessons.

Maybe you had a scare with your health? Maybe it was something that helped you realize the importance of family? Maybe it was a narrow escape from an accident or a brush with the law because of risky or self-destructive behavior?

Whatever it was, we need to recognize and remember that we experienced Yahweh's grace and mercy in that situation, and that He taught us something important for our lives.

Whether it be that we need to take better care of this body and the life which He entrusted to us, or that we shouldn't take our children and our spouse for granted...

or that He has a better plan for us than we can dream up for ourselves... whatever it was friends...

And then we need to ask ourselves if the busyness of our everyday routine, the driven-ness of our corporate world, the skepticism of our society, or the cynicism of life's disappointments have crept in and worn us down?

And are we worn down to the point where, like Jonah, we are discouraged, even angered by the people we are to evangelize, instead of being filled with compassion and concern for them?

Has it worn us down to a point where we've forgotten what we've learned from our own experience of grace and we fall back into old habits and patterns of pride and selfishness?

Are we missing the essence of the grace and mercy in our day to day walk with Christ?

If that's the case friends – we need to be reminded of the power of the Gospel to break into people's lives in the places where it seems to be so resistant –

So that we can be taken back to that point where God's grace broke into our lives and we can say "yes... that's what it is all about!"

So I offer you these figures compiled by the late Chuck Colson back in 2008 about how God's grace is bringing many Muslims to faith in Christ – not in the West... but in places we wouldn't expect it like Iraq... and North Africa.

He writes that In Algeria, more than 80,000 Muslims have turned to Christ in recent years, In Morocco, newspaper articles are written by Muslims who worry about the fact that 25,000 to 40,000 Muslims have become followers of Christ in recent years.

In 1996, the Egyptian Bible Society sold just 3,000 video copies of the JESUS film. In the year 2000, they sold an incredible 600,000 copies.

In Iraq, "More than 5,000 Muslim converts to Christianity have been identified since the end of major combat operations," And when the first ever Roman Catholic church was sanctioned in Qatar and Christians were allowed to practice their faith openly... ten thousand people attended the opening mass.

And in spite of the fact that we don't hear this on the news this is still going on today brothers and sisters! Yahweh is on the move in this world bringing people to Himself through Jesus Christ and it is AWESOME!

Contrast that with how we might be feeling worn out and run down – with our grace tanks close to empty...

But examples like these, and stories about how all of Nineveh repented and turned to God, reminds us of the amazing power in the gift of grace that we have been given.

When we witness them occurring, or read about them we say "Yes! That's what it's all about!"

Which can take us back to that point, where for us as well, that gift of grace was new and fresh and amazing and life changing – and full of power!

So friends let us ask the Holy Spirit to do that for us this morning, to renew us so that we can face our day to day

routine in the power of God's grace and mercy – and bring the Word of God, the message of Jesus Christ, forgiveness and new life and... a new creation that is coming – to the communities and the people who live around us.

As Ps 51:12-13 says *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.”*

Let us make this our prayer and song this morning.

Amen.